

FACTSheet

Serving the education community in Delaware, the District of Columbia, Maryland, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania




Supporting School Transitions for Young Learners: Considerations in the Era of COVID-19 and Beyond

Transitioning to school is just one of many milestones to celebrate and prepare for in a child's life. Children may need support when they enter kindergarten and first grade, because difficulty adjusting to these new environments can put them at academic risk.¹ And children from economically disadvantaged families are at greater risk for poor kindergarten transitions than their peers.²

Transition supports have shown larger benefits for children in poverty, but there are inequities in who receives support.³ Schools in high-poverty districts use fewer transition supportive strategies, with the children most in need of support less likely to experience them.⁴ Supportive transition strategies are associated with improved academic achievement and social and emotional competence as well as fewer behavioral problems.⁵ One study even found that schools using more transition strategies had higher achievement scores at the end of kindergarten than schools providing fewer transition strategies, regardless of family income.⁶

This fact sheet highlights promising practices and research-informed strategies that districts and schools, with support from states, can use to successfully and equitably transition young learners to the next school year. It covers strategies applicable in the COVID-19 era and beyond.

Transition strategies should support:

-  **Educators** to collect and share information with each other about children's learning and development.
-  **Families** to become partners in their children's early learning.
-  **Children** to feel comfortable and confident in their new environment.

Supporting educators



Collecting and sharing information about children's learning and development before they enter school is important so educators can understand the diverse needs and skills of the class and adjust their teaching accordingly.⁷ **What can districts and schools do to support educators?**

- **Align learning standards and goals; form teams of pre-K and kindergarten leaders and educators to oversee transition efforts; and share information between early childhood programs, schools,**

and home to facilitate smooth transitions.⁸

Teachers can discuss children's development, skills, and learning experiences with previous educators.⁹ Schools and districts can encourage educators to cooperate on curriculum and learning goals in pre-K to kindergarten and share information with one another.¹⁰ States can oversee and support this work. For example, the Alabama Pre-K–3rd Grade Integrated Approach to Early Learning program coordinates standards, instructional practices, environments, and professional development across the learning continuum.¹¹

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One study found that when educators collaborated in this way, students adjusted socially and behaviorally to school and developed reading, writing, and math skills more quickly than their peers.¹² However, this collaboration is used less frequently than other practices.¹³

- **Talk with parents and families whose children were not in child care or pre-K settings.**¹⁴ During the registration process, schools and districts can gather information from parents and guardians on topics such as the family's goals for their child's learning. This can help build relationships with families.
- **Determine when and how to share data and perform assessments.** With support from state or intermediary agencies, districts can collaborate with local Head Start programs, private pre-K child care, and elementary schools to gather and share assessment data and progress reports, with permission from parents.¹⁵ Formal memorandums of understanding and data-sharing agreements will help coordinate data and records sharing.¹⁶ Because these efforts can take time, districts should think about when to start these partnerships.¹⁷ The Office of Head Start Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center [provides resources for collaboration](#).¹⁸

Supporting families



Having parents involved and engaged with their children's schooling is critical to children's development and academic success.¹⁹ **What can districts and schools do to support families?**

- **Call or video chat with families before the school year.** Let parents know what to expect for the new school year and the value of their engagement.²⁰ During a call or video chat with families, educators can discuss how to prepare for this transition and address any questions or concerns families have.²¹ If time is limited, consider a virtual back-to-school night with the class of incoming parents and families, and schedule follow-up calls to build rapport and answer questions.

Studies on educator home visiting programs that engage parents and support school transitions show that these visits are linked to promising outcomes.²² One study found these visits led to improved social-emotional and cognitive skills and classroom participation, as well as better student-teacher relationships.²³

- **Hold transition events in the spring and early summer.** Transition events such as kindergarten registration or orientation are opportunities to share information about learning objectives and ways

COVID-19 considerations

Educators and schools report that the pandemic limited their ability to conduct standard entry assessments and surveys.²⁴ Pre-K and kindergarten enrollment also decreased.

This means information on children's knowledge, skills, and growth when they enter the classroom will be more limited for those who begin school in fall 2021, making it difficult for educators to prepare for and support students' diverse needs. Brainstorming ways to get the information they need from either the pre-K program or parents and families can help prepare educators to teach effectively.

For information on equitable continuity of learning plans, see REL Mid-Atlantic's [Keeping Pace: Strategies for Ensuring Equitable Continuity of Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#) fact sheet. [The Comprehensive Center Network has developed and collected several resources on continuity of learning.](#)

COVID-19 considerations

Many parents and families have experienced stress in facilitating their children's learning at home. To foster a good relationship and promote continuous engagement, consider ways to alleviate that stress and build relationships with incoming families.²⁵ Educators can expand the range of contact methods offered to parents, including virtual options such as video conferences, which educators have reported worked well to engage busy parents during the pandemic.²⁶

families can support learning.²⁷ Ask parents about learning goals for their child, emphasizing the importance of partnership and helping build relationships.²⁸

- **Provide information and share resources.**

The National Association for the Education of Young Children's guidance on [Transitioning to Kindergarten](#) recommends topical children's books, ideas on developing routines around getting to school, and ways to address separation anxiety.²⁹

- **Offer educators professional development and allot time for building relationships with families.** Training and support on engaging and interacting with families can be done during the school year or during the summer.³⁰ Consider giving educators their class lists as early as possible so they can begin to contact families.³¹ Ensure educators can weave strategies to engage families into their schedules, and support them so they do not feel overburdened. As children transition from early childhood programs to school environments, family engagement typically decreases due to less individualized and more regulated communication.³² By supporting educators to partner and communicate with families, schools can smooth the way for continued engagement.³³

Equity consideration: To build relationships, schools should recognize that some parents want the school to initiate involvement. Some might be hesitant to become involved based on previous experiences of feeling unwelcome or because they feel unable to help their child with schoolwork.³⁵ Attitudes, biases, and cultural differences can create mistrust and barriers, which can be exacerbated by language differences for non-English speaking families.³⁶ Schools should invest in culturally grounded and inclusive activities and communication so all families feel valued and comfortable getting involved.

- **When financially possible, fund family liaisons or coordinators to support educators and parents.** Family coordinators can partner with educators on children's learning and connect families with needed resources.³⁴

Supporting children



Kindergarten and first grade transitions mean big changes for children: teachers, peers, environment, and expectations.³⁷

Building strong, trusted relationships between children and educators is key to easing these big changes. And studies have shown that children with close relationships to their educators across the early years have stronger social skills and fewer problem behaviors over time.³⁸ **What can districts and schools do to support children?**

- **Pre-K programming can feature guidance and supports to prepare students for what to expect in kindergarten.** Discuss kindergarten activities, what the kindergarten classroom looks like, and how it is similar to or different from pre-K.³⁹ District and school leadership can encourage and inform these discussions.

- **Set up in-person or virtual tours of the school and classrooms to prepare children for learning.**⁴⁰ Scheduling these meetings over the summer allows children to meet their future educators one on one (for example, with story time). Educators can also meet children in person in small groups in parks or playgrounds.⁴¹
- **Welcome children in stages by setting up individual and then small group visits before meeting as a whole group.**⁴² For example, half the class could come to school on the first day and the other half on the second day before the full class assembles.
- **Make classrooms as inviting as possible when teaching in person.**⁴³ Designating spaces for each

child to store personalized things can remind them of home and their family. Sharing these activities helps children get to know each other.

- **Support social and emotional learning and resilience as part of a comprehensive curriculum or integrate them with daily routines.** Ask children to discuss their feelings or engage in calming exercises. Set aside a [designated area for children to reflect and calm down](#).⁴⁴ Talk to parents if children experience [ongoing separation anxiety](#) and implement support strategies, such as goodbye routines or role-playing activities.⁴⁵ School counselors can support educators in these efforts.⁴⁶



COVID-19 considerations

The pandemic decreased enrollment in pre-K and kindergarten. Children enrolling in kindergarten and first grade in fall 2021 might have less experience being in classroom settings and interacting with peers.⁴⁷

Building warm, supportive relationships can be more challenging during a pandemic with face coverings obscuring expressions, social distancing guidelines preventing physical contact, and health considerations requiring different instructional delivery.⁴⁸

By scheduling virtual check-ins with each student, educators can ensure quality one-on-one time. School leaders can also offer professional development and coaching on building relationships with students, including considerations for the pandemic such as ways to show warmth while wearing a face covering.⁴⁹

The pandemic has increased stress and trauma for children, educators, and families. Districts and schools should consider developing a trauma-informed plan to help students transition to in-person schooling. For information on trauma-informed transition strategies with crisis response guidance, check out our fact sheet on [Trauma-informed planning strategies to help students transition back to school in the era of COVID-19](#). For more information on trauma-informed practice in general, the REL Southwest offers a [webinar series on Research-Based, Trauma-Responsive Education Practices](#). REL West also developed [a list of trauma-informed practice resources](#).

Endnotes

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