

It's Not a Routine Matter: Preschool and Elementary School Communication About Kindergarten Transition



Introduction

In 2020, the Michigan Department of Education's Office of Great Start received federal continuation funds for the Preschool Development Grant (PDG) by the Administration for Children & Families at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. To further the state's goal of making Michigan the best state to raise a family, the Michigan Department of Education contracted with the American Institutes for Research® (AIR®) to launch a statewide assessment to understand the needs of families with young children that are currently unmet by the state's mixed delivery system. For more information see the [full Michigan PDG Needs Assessment report](#).

The 2020 Michigan PDG Needs Assessment report focused primarily on the state's mixed delivery system, with a special focus on services for infants and toddlers, transitions among and between the birth to age 5 (B–5) and K–12 systems, and barriers to parental choice. A key finding from this initial assessment was that families needed more information to support their children as they reached the critical transition from preschool to kindergarten. The kindergarten transition is a pivotal adjustment period for children's academic and behavioral development that can have impacts for their entire school career. As children enter kindergarten, the academic and behavioral expectations change, and nearly half of students experience challenges in meeting those expectations (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2000). Although the academic and behavioral demands in kindergarten have increased in the last decade, kindergarten transition practices have not shifted to meet those changing expectations (Bassok et al., 2016; Little et al., 2016). Additionally, traditional transition assessments used in schools have not adapted to look beyond just academic skills (Gill et al., 2006). Last, while educators and programs acknowledge that communication is an important aspect of a successful transition, dialogue between preschool and kindergarten programs is often limited (Gill et al., 2006).

The purpose of this study was to expand on the 2020 Michigan PDG Needs Assessment by gathering more information about how elementary schools partner with early childhood care and education (ECCE) programs in their community to support the transition to kindergarten. The American Institutes for Research® (AIR®) solicited feedback from five elementary school principals (through two focus groups and one interview) from the Upper and Lower Peninsulas of the state. Data collection took place between May and December 2022.

The study's research questions included the following:

1. To what extent do elementary school principals communicate with preschool programs in their community about the kindergarten transition process?
2. Which types of preschool programs do principals communicate with (e.g., publicly and/or privately funded programs)?
3. What is the purpose of communication with local preschool programs?
4. What strategies do elementary school principals use to communicate with local preschool programs? And how could they be improved?
5. What are the barriers to communicating with local preschool programs?

Findings

The following sections describe key findings from our focus groups and interviews with elementary school principals.

Communication between elementary schools and preschool programs is not common.

Principals reported understanding the value of increased communication with preschool programs. One principal noted, “We definitely have a need. If we can get a heads-up on some of the students and their needs prior to coming on into the classroom, we’re just so much more prepared.” However, principals indicated that communication with community-based preschool programs is limited, even when a preschool program is housed within their own school building. When communication with a preschool program does occur, principals reported that it is usually with publicly funded programs affiliated with the school district or the intermediate school district (ISD) as opposed to private, community-based programs. One principal explained, “When it comes to outside programs, the religious-based program and then the other private childcare centers, there’s not really any concrete communication at this time as far as I know.” Principals also noted that the COVID-19 pandemic limited communication with preschool programs and communication has yet to resume to pre-pandemic levels.

Communication between preschool programs and schools is typically focused on kindergarten enrollment information and the needs of incoming kindergarten students.

Principals said they engage local preschools for two primary reasons: to share information about kindergarten enrollment and to learn about the needs of potential and current students.

Communication with preschools regarding the needs of children was reported to occur both informally and formally. For example, informally, a principal and kindergarten teacher might reach out to a child’s former preschool program based on need—usually to problem solve about challenging behaviors. Other communication is more structured, based on formal systems to gather detailed feedback on children prior to kindergarten. For example, principals described using a shared Google doc with

preschool teachers to disseminate information about the needs of incoming kindergarten students in order to support elementary school staff. Other strategies included in-person visits wherein the school’s social worker and kindergarten teachers visited local preschool programs to learn more about incoming students and to transition individualized education programs (IEPs) for children whose needs have already been identified. It should be noted, however, that these processes were reported as only occurring at publicly funded preschool programs affiliated with the school district or local ISD or regional educational service agency (RESA).

“Communication with outside preschool programs is generally based on having challenges we’re trying to solve. It’s not a routine matter.”

– *Elementary school principal*

Annual events, preschool program check-ins, and initiatives such as First 10 contribute to more effective kindergarten transition processes.

Several principals said that their schools engage in formal, annual activities with local preschools to share kindergarten enrollment information and support kindergarten transition. Examples of communication and collaboration between elementary schools and preschool include the following:

- Collaborating to coordinate kindergarten classroom visits for preschool children.
- Asking teachers to provide information (e.g., complete a questionnaire) about incoming kindergarten students.
- Inviting local preschool teachers to informative events for kindergarten teachers and elementary school administrators (e.g., one school holds an annual “Kindergarten Summit” that includes a focused topic, speaker, and opportunities for dialogue among participants).
- Collaborating with the local Great Start to Quality to identify local private programs and sharing the dates of Kindergarten Roundup with those programs.
- Collaborating with the local ISD-created “kindergarten team” to communicate kindergarten enrollment information with the school district and ISD/RESA-affiliated preschool programs.
- Informal check-ins with preschool directors and/or parents actively involved in local preschools to maintain strong relationships that facilitate ongoing communication.

“Our district’s kindergarten team visits the preschool programs that are affiliated with the ISD. Our enrollment takes place online and then the kindergarten team set[s] up screening and testing for children as well.”

– *Elementary school principal*

One principal reported that their district is one of Michigan’s First 10 pilot sites. The First 10 approach promotes collective efforts to strengthen partnerships between early childhood and early elementary

programs. First 10 strategies include providing play and learn groups linked to elementary schools, coordinating collaboration between health and social services, connecting childcare providers (licensed, license exempt, and informal care) with elementary schools, coordinating kindergarten transition activities, conducting joint prekindergarten and kindergarten professional development, and improving early grades curriculum and instruction. That principal reflected on their engagement in the initiative, and summarized it in this way:

As part of the [First 10] initiative, we bring together educators from as young as our three-year-old program all the way up to our first-grade program. We've just had one meeting so far. [At] the one meeting, I asked them to highlight their program and what their standards were for each level, what resources they're using and what are the expectations and the outcomes by the end of the year. We talked with teachers from classrooms of three-year-olds, fours, young fives, kinder and first [grade], and it was pretty interesting. There were a lot of gaps and some overlaps. For example, the kindergarten teachers were saying, "Aha, no wonder why the kids stopped counting at 30—because that's all your expectation is in preschool." So I think it's a start of a good thing because they're trying to figure out commonalities. Our hope is that we will be able to use the same curriculum across preschool programs as we use in our kindergarten classrooms. That way we will have much more efficient teaching at the beginning of kindergarten because we'll know the needs and the strengths of the students coming in. And the teachers will have some consistent data points and interventions and so on and so forth.

Elementary schools and preschools programs often operate on different schedules, even when they are co-located, making communication and coordination challenging.

Several principals described a lack of alignment with their area's ISD/RESA preschool programs. Many preschool programs, including Head Start and the Great Start Readiness Program (GSRP), are overseen by the local ISD/RESA. Some of these programs are even housed in elementary schools, but this does not guarantee that they are integrated into the school's daily operations and culture. Different schedules make regular communication and things like joint professional development difficult. For example, preschool teachers employed by childcare programs operate on different schedules than elementary schools, often working longer hours and through the summer. As such, finding a time to bring kindergarten and preschool teachers into a room together is difficult.

Principals need comprehensive information about preschools operating in their areas.

Some principals, particularly those who are new to the role and who have limited ECCE experience, said they lacked information about local preschool programs, and that this hindered their ability to initiate communication. Although principals with greater tenure reported more consistent communication with local preschools, this was largely with preschool programs affiliated with their own local school district or the ISD/RESA, as compared to local private community-based preschool programs.

“Well, we have to identify them (preschool-age children) for one. I’m not too sure where they are if they’re in a home-based preschool or otherwise. I don’t know a good way to find them. We’ve talked about that quite a bit, how to figure out where they might be located.”

– *Elementary school principal*

“When I started the job, nobody left me a contact name for any preschool programs. I don’t have any flyers. I don’t have any, ‘Do this in May. Contact these people and promote the school.’ I don’t have, nobody left anything or nobody’s talked about that.”

– *Elementary school principal*

Conclusion and Recommendations

Principals recognized the necessity and importance of communicating with local preschools to improve kindergarten transition processes. Despite some clear successes through established annual kindergarten enrollment and transition activities with preschool programs—and, to a lesser extent, joint professional development for kindergarten and preschool teachers—significant barriers remain. In particular, elementary school principals experience difficulties communicating with ISD/RESA preschools, challenges to scheduling joint teacher professional development, as well as limited information regarding local preschool programs.

Despite variation in years of experience and size of their school district, principals reported that they needed new ideas for how to connect with local preschools. Based on feedback from principals, the state might consider the following steps to inform future efforts to create sustainable, collaborative relationships between elementary schools and local preschool programs.

- Offer peer-to-peer learning events in which principals can connect with one another to learn new strategies to support kindergarten transition.
- Provide professional development to principals, particularly those new in their roles, to better outline how to connect with preschools and create opportunities for ongoing communication.
- Formally connect Great Start to Quality with elementary schools so that principals have a current list of childcare providers with whom they can communicate.
- Provide guidance to ISD/RESAs to support communication and relationships with local elementary school principals.
- Expand access to initiatives such as First 10 that provide principals with the support to develop connections between local preschool programs and elementary schools.

Although the sample for this study was small, all of the principals we spoke with made it clear that they understood the importance of engaging local preschool programs. At the same time, they expressed that they need both more information and support to realize the promise of communication and collaboration across ECCE and K–3 systems.

References

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