



*A Union of Professionals*

# Right from the Start

Transition strategies for  
developing a strong  
preK-3 continuum



**Randi Weingarten**

**PRESIDENT**

**Lorretta Johnson**

**SECRETARY-TREASURER**

**Francine Lawrence**

**EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT**

This publication was funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts. Any opinions or conclusions expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Trusts.

Special thanks to author Linda Jacobson. Jacobson has extensive experience writing about early childhood education policy.

For further information about Kristie Kauerz's presentation at the AFT TEACH Conference and/or the forthcoming "PreK-3 Implementation Framework," e-mail her at [kauerzk@uw.edu](mailto:kauerzk@uw.edu).

Copyright © American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO (AFT 2011). Permission is hereby granted to AFT state and local affiliates to reproduce and distribute copies of the work for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that copies are distributed at or below cost, and that the author, source, and copyright notice are included on each copy. Any distribution of such materials to third parties who are outside of the AFT or its affiliates is prohibited without first receiving the express written permission of the AFT.

# Right from the Start

Transition strategies for  
developing a strong  
preK-3 continuum





# Table of Contents

Letter from AFT President Randi Weingarten | **4**

Introduction | **5**

Every Year Matters! | **6**

Establishing the Foundation for Future Success in School | **7**

Strategies for Developing a P-3 Initiative | **11**

Profiles: *Smoothing Transitions at West Oaks Elementary School, Orlando, Fla.* | **16**

*Meeting the Early Education Needs of Young Children in Cincinnati—a Community Approach* | **18**

*Meeting the Needs of ‘Young 5s’ with Transitional Kindergarten in Los Angeles* | **20**

*Filling Learning Gaps with Summer Transition Programs in Portland, Ore.* | **22**

*Leadership and Partnership in Montgomery County, Md.* | **24**

*Building Bridges Between Early Childhood Education Providers and Schools in Pittsfield, Mass.* | **25**

*Seamless Delivery from Day One in New York City* | **26**

*Early Childhood Linkages and Community Schools* | **28**



# Letter from President Weingarten

Early learning matters. It can't be put more simply than that. Anyone who has ever visited a child care center, a Head Start program or a pre-K classroom—or any of the other myriad settings where infants, toddlers and preschool-aged children are cared for and educated by dedicated and engaged adults—knows that what happens in those settings, as well as in kindergarten and the early elementary grades, will have a lifelong effect. As I said in a recent column (“Investing in a Strong Start,” *New York Times*, May 15, 2011), “whether one views this issue through an educational or an economic prism, it makes sense to get it right from the start.” Both research and common sense tell us that the most effective way to improve educational and economic opportunity for children—particularly disadvantaged children—is “to provide high-quality early learning experiences that ensure a successful and seamless transition to elementary and secondary school, and beyond.” That seamless transition is a vitally important part of the educational process, and requires dedication, attention and the deliberate *intention* of educators, parents, administrators and policymakers.

For this document, we sought out stories that exemplify the strategies we believe must be incorporated into any preK-3 transition model. Profiled are local and districtwide initiatives that illustrate the impact that strong early childhood initiatives—those that involve teachers and leaders from across the 0-8 continuum—can have on the success of young children. These profiles illustrate the variety of steps that individual teachers, schools and entire

districts are taking—and the systems they are creating—to make early school experiences more welcoming for children, so these very young students can focus on their real mission—learning.

The profiles include a pre-K teacher in Orlando, Fla., working to ensure students in her school are reaching their potential. We also feature the role that early childhood programs are playing in revitalizing Cincinnati neighborhoods. Another profile examines the early implementation of California's new transitional kindergarten program in Los Angeles. A story on a summer “early entry” program for new kindergartners in Portland, Ore., looks at the role education assistants have in making children and their parents feel welcome.

Both research and common sense tell us that the most effective way to improve educational and economic opportunity for children—particularly disadvantaged children—is to provide high-quality early learning experiences that ensure a successful and seamless transition to elementary and secondary school, and beyond.

Connecting schools with early childhood centers and home-based child care providers through professional development is a key component of profiles of partnerships in New York City and Pittsfield, Mass. Finally, a profile on Montgomery County, Md., focuses on how a partnership between the union and the school district is contributing to better educational opportunities for young children.

These educators—and many, many others across the country—are making a difference every day in the lives of our youngest children. Their efforts deserve our deliberate and focused attention, and gratitude, and their students deserve the best we can possibly give them. The strategies identified in this publication are a starting point. Our challenge is to find ways to scale up and sustain successful efforts such as these. Doing so will take community partnerships, and our union is fully committed to that effort.

Randi Weingarten  
AFT President



PHOTOS BY MICHAEL CAMPBELL

# Introduction

The early childhood period—a time of tremendous growth and development—spans the years between birth and age 8. By the time children reach the end of that time frame, most have experienced multiple child care and education settings—all with different rules, relationships and expectations.

Some arrangements are formal, including Head Start, private preschools, other center-based programs and home-based providers. Others, such as time with babysitters, neighbors, grandparents and at home with parents, are less structured.

Either way, children bring a wide range of experiences with them when they enter elementary school—where they are expected to keep pace with the class and meet increasingly challenging learning goals.

Historically, there has been little alignment or integration, or even any connections, between the early learning programs in the child care settings or preschool programs children attend before kindergarten, and the elementary schools they enter at ages 4, 5 or 6. A center-based early childhood educator can only hope for the best as she watches her students disperse to various elementary schools in the area. An elementary school kindergarten teacher often may wish he could contact a child's preschool teacher to have a conversation about the child's learning styles. And a parent may seek in vain for an opportunity to share information about her child's preschool experience with her child's new kindergarten teacher.

We are learning, however, that there is a better way for children, and their parents, to transition from the early years into the early grades. Creating opportunities for educators from the early childhood field and the elementary grades to learn together and communicate about their practices can improve school experiences for children. Gradually introducing young children to the teachers and the classrooms they will have in the coming year can help them feel less anxious about what is to come.

Collaborative, thoughtful and intentional transitions to assist children leaving pre-K and entering kindergarten have been found to be especially beneficial to disadvantaged or at-risk children. If achievement gaps exist even before children enter kindergarten, then clearly efforts to close those gaps also should begin during the preschool years.

*Right from the Start* presents many ways to think about the preschool to third-grade (P-3) continuum. It is based on a presentation given by Harvard University P-3 expert Kristie Kauerz at the 2011 American Federation of Teachers TEACH Conference in Washington, D.C.

This publication expands on the presentation, featuring examples from across the country of what communities are doing to improve these transitions for children, as well as the ways that early childhood educators, elementary school teachers, parents, child care program administrators, elementary school principals and unions, can be involved in promoting and advancing stronger transition practices and policies that lay the crucial foundation for P-3 alignment.

What is required, then, are committed community and education leaders to work with educators and parents from the worlds of early education and elementary education to build real continuity in learning in an intentional, informed and sustained way that will take root and flourish in diverse settings.

Some school districts across the country already have made the education pathway smoother by adding preschool classrooms to their elementary schools—thus keeping children from the disruption of changing schools and making it easier for teachers to work together. And, many community-based child care center programs also have developed linkages to elementary schools in an effort to assist parents and children with the transition to kindergarten or first grade.

But having early childhood programs and elementary grades under the same roof, or having some child care centers working with local schools, is not the only way to strengthen the ties within the continuum of education. In fact, a school-based model will only ever cover a small portion of young children, because many parents find early care and education in a variety of settings. What is required, then, are committed community and education leaders to work with educators and parents from the worlds of early education and elementary education to build real continuity in learning in an intentional, informed and sustained way that will take root and flourish in diverse settings.

# Every Year Matters!

Newspaper reporters tend to have certain stories they can count on writing year after year. One of those is the first day of kindergarten. The article tends to feature a lot of photos of cute children and might have a quotation or two from a teacher who is eager to make the first day a welcoming one for students.

But teachers and parents know that for the children in those stories, the entrance to kindergarten is neither the first nor the last major change they will encounter during the period known as early childhood. In fact, it's possible that many of the 5-year-olds in that story attended a pre-K class in the same building, and the move into kindergarten is no more newsworthy than the one into any other grade. Those children already recognize many of the faces in the school, already may have used some of the same classroom materials and possibly have even spent time in other classes for joint activities with the "big kids."

It also is likely that some of the new students that year have never been in school before. Their years before kindergarten might have included a mix of babysitters, staying with a neighbor while their parents went to work or spending a couple days a week in a child care center. Perhaps they haven't even seen their school until the first day and are worried about not having any friends on the playground.

As early childhood educator (ECE) researcher Kristie Kauerz pointed out in her AFT TEACH presentation, preschool should not be thought of only as a "single program." It's not just a classroom in a public school full of children rotating through centers,

singing songs in circle time and having snacks after recess. Preschool instead consists of all the in-home and out-of-home settings children experience before they start school. That line of thinking can change one's perception about what children bring with them to each new setting.

Looking at the many possible learning and social experiences children have had before kindergarten, it becomes clear that focusing only on the beginning of the kindergarten year is an outdated and shortsighted view of a child's early schooling experiences. What happens before and after that first day of kindergarten deserves just as much attention from the newspaper reporters tracking down the perennial "first day of school" stories as it does from policymakers, school administrators, early childhood program administrators, educators and families.

A new report from The Pew Center on the States—focusing on 10 years of work by Pre-K Now to advance strong preschool programs—speaks to the gaps that still exist for many young children entering school.

"The national conversation about how to improve education at the elementary, middle and high school levels must shift to concentrate on the ways that integrating pre-K will allow us to raise early achievement and improve teaching practices to support learning in all grades." According to the Pew report "Transforming Public Education: Pathway to a Pre-K-12 Future," "It must be about how to advance a preK-12 system that can develop critical skills early and then build upon them in subsequent grades rather than remediating children later or not maximizing early gains. In this way, we can instill in every level of our public education system a focus on ensuring that children cultivate, sustain and apply crucial skills."



# Establishing the Foundation for Future Success in School

The early years are a time for children and parents alike to establish habits and attitudes toward learning that can serve them well throughout their years in school.

These habits include executive functions like self-control and decision-making skills, and regularly attending school in kindergarten and the early grades, regardless of what a state’s law says about compulsory attendance age.

Some communities are now taking a look at chronic absenteeism in the early grades because more than 11 percent of kindergartners and close to 9 percent of first-graders miss at least 10 percent of the school year. Such absenteeism has an adverse effect on children’s academic achievement.

The issue is one that easily can draw together early childhood professionals and K-12 educators, because they can both play a part in addressing the problem. Preschool and child care providers can begin to make families aware of the importance of attendance, and elementary schools can track absenteeism in the early grades.

## Horizontal Alignment

Educators are talking about the need for horizontal alignment, meaning that teachers, paraprofessionals, curriculum specialists and others in the field of education are working across a grade level to give children similar, high-quality learning experiences. Every educator is different, and each one brings his or her own personality and unique ideas to the classroom. But educators’ expectations for children and for the concepts and skills they are learning should be the same.

This commonsense alignment means that educators have an opportunity to plan together,



share strategies and receive professional development that strengthens instruction in their particular grade.

This type of alignment also can apply to teachers at the preschool level—even though they might work in a variety of settings. Whether children are in a Head Start class, a family child care home or a child care center, they can acquire skills and knowledge that can prepare them for kindergarten.

## Vertical Alignment

Vertical alignment refers to the process of ensuring that each level or grade provides a strong foundation for the next. For example, are preschoolers learning the vocabulary and social

**M**y district, in Seattle, is made up of many diverse communities. I've watched children grow up in all kinds of circumstances. And the ones who have high-quality learning experiences—no matter their economic circumstances—have a better opportunity to succeed in life.

Early education and care is but the beginning in what should be a continuum of high-quality learning programs that a child experiences. As a state legislator, I've worked to ensure all children experience such a continuum—from the early years, through the transitions to elementary school and secondary school, and beyond.

Transitions are times of excitement and anxiety. A child going from an early learning setting to a public school should be supported through this process. A family whose children's early care experiences have been in a language other than English will need special help as the children move into the English-speaking elementary school world.

Education is an ongoing process—a chain. Transitions are the connecting points as we link one education experience to another. Being thoughtful and proactive about transitions will help ensure that our nation's young people, no matter their economic circumstances, are afforded an education that will serve them well throughout their lives. By shining the light on transitions, this publication is making a great contribution to these efforts.

**Eric Pettigrew**

Washington State Representative

skills they will need to succeed in a kindergarten class? Are the standards in first grade a natural progression from what children are expected to know at the end of kindergarten?

Again, the diverse and fragmented delivery system of early education in the United States creates profound challenges in pursuing vertical alignment between early childhood programs and schools. Communication can be more challenging when educators don't work in the same building, have different employers, have different calendars, and bring different skill sets and levels of training to the classroom.

Nevertheless, vertical alignment is not impossible. Bringing together educators across the spectrum of early settings—from child care providers to third-grade teachers—for joint professional development and collaboration is one way for them to share best practices, design effective programs, collaborate in carrying out projects to improve classroom quality, engage families, break through some of the misconceptions that early childhood and elementary school teachers may have about each other and, in general, integrate and align diverse systems.

### **Wraparound Support**

The comprehensive approach to learning that is provided in many preschool programs, such as Head Start, should not drop off once children enter the early grades; this is particularly important for disadvantaged students.

For example, a preschool with low child-to-teacher ratios

and a parent participation component that includes adult education, volunteering in the

classroom and engaging in parent room activities, as well as home visits by educators, health and nutrition services, and ongoing staff development ensures better child outcomes and school readiness.

The best aspects of these child- and family-focused settings should be continued in elementary schools. One way to achieve this is to look to the community school model. The Coalition for Community Schools describes community schools as having an "integrated focus on academics, health and social services, youth and community development, and community engagement," which "leads to improved student learning, stronger families and healthier communities." The coalition's Linkages Project (see the Portland [Ore.] Public Schools profile on page 22), currently in the third year of implementation, should provide guidance on best practices for creating strong links between early childhood programs and community schools. The hope is these best practices can inform transition strategies for all settings.

### **The Role of Leadership**

In the case studies, we demonstrate how policymakers, school administrators, early childhood program administrators, educators, unions and parents are advocating for sound practices, policies and programs that ensure the transitions children have between grade levels and from early education settings to elementary schools build upon each other rather than set children behind.

One role for all stakeholders is advocating for funding because P-3 transition can't happen without the resources necessary to make it happen. Early childhood funding is complex; the broad concerns to be addressed are: inequity, duplication, finding a balance between targeting programs to children with the highest needs versus universally offered preschool quality, and the goal of filling gaps left by cuts at the state and local levels. All stakeholders can advocate for federal funds, as well as state and local funding, to be allocated toward early childhood, preschool and the early grades in an effort to strengthen P-3 programs. These same stakeholders also can lobby in their states and districts for pre-K programs, funding for full-day kindergarten and lower class sizes in the early grades, as well as increased resources for all early childhood programs, no matter the setting.

Beyond advocacy for funding, stakeholders can take other steps.



### **Policy***makers*

Policymakers at all levels should remain aware of the research showing how high-quality early learning programs benefit children in the early grades. Policymakers should support policies and funding that allow for educators to collaborate and share knowledge and resources.

### **Business Community**

Business leaders are key, yet often overlooked, stakeholders. The Committee for Economic Development, a business-led public policy organization, is a leading advocate for early education. The CED's five guiding principles for early education address access, delivery, financing, quality, and the need for additional data and research. CED's 2006 publication "The Economic Promise of Investing in High-Quality Preschool" concludes that "early coordination will ensure children are taught the skills and abilities that prepare them for a successful kindergarten year, and provide a seamless transition to the educational expectations of elementary school." The CED recommendations include adoption of practices that align preschool programs with kindergarten and elementary education.

### **Early Childhood Programs and School Administrators**

School administrators should build relationships with child care and preschool directors as well as with leaders of other early childhood programs to set an example for teachers and open the door to innovative ways for early childhood programs and schools to work together. School administrators should work just as closely with parents and

families to support young children who are transitioning through the early grades.

Similarly, early childhood center directors can talk to families of the children in their programs to find out which elementary schools they will attend. By building relationships with the administrators, teachers, paraprofessionals and other staff in those schools, early childhood program directors can facilitate the exchange of information, the collaboration of teachers, support for families, and other initiatives that will help children successfully transition from preschool to kindergarten or from kindergarten to first grade.

### **Educators**

Educators across the P-3 spectrum should always ask questions about the formal and informal learning experiences the children have had before entering their classrooms, and what the children will need to accomplish before they go to the next level or grade. Educators should look for opportunities to work in

Smart and successful employers have learned many things, but two strategies stand out: (1) the importance of research and development; and (2) the need for wise investment on the front end. The effectiveness of these two good business strategies is proven once again when you look at what the research tells us about the long-term results of investing in high-quality pre-K programs. When high-quality preschool is paired with a solid K-12 education, students are better prepared for life and have the skills they need to succeed in the workplace.

It makes sense, then, that the transition period from home or a child care setting, to a preschool program, and then to an elementary school classroom, needs as much attention as the time spent in those settings, programs and classrooms. Anyone who has started a new job knows there can be a steep and ongoing learning curve when adjusting to an unfamiliar environment, and this can be even more pronounced for a young child. Business, community and policy leaders must work together to ensure educators, parents and children get the time and support they need for continuity of learning throughout their schooling, but especially in the early years.

The learning experiences in early childhood are the foundation for a child's creativity and problem-solving abilities. Ensuring that young children have both a high-quality educational experience and a thoughtful transition from preschool to kindergarten will result in a solid investment in a better future.

### **Robert H. Dugger**

Founder and Managing Partner, Hanover Investment Group; Chairman, Partnership for America's Economic Success Advisory Board and Invest in Kids Working Group

Preparing our nation's young people for the jobs of the future is work that begins in preschool classrooms around the country—classrooms that can be found in schools, child care centers and homes. These early learning years lay the foundation for critical-thinking and problem-solving abilities, academic knowledge, and social skills that are essential no matter what kind of work you do in your life.

In today's United States, in most families, one or both parents work, making high-quality early education and preschool programs even more essential. Supporting working families is an opportunity to give our nation's youngest children a foundation of learning that will serve them throughout their youth and into adulthood and their careers.

We at the AFL-CIO, representing millions of working people, fully support investing in high-quality early education and preschool, as well as in a public school system and higher education institutions that will prepare our young people for careers and happy lives. A critical factor in achieving this goal is helping children transition from preschool programs to elementary school—a foundational transition that will help children with the many other transitions they will face along the way. And, as is vital for all work with children, we also support the adults in their lives—from parents and family members in the home to teachers and paraprofessionals in educational programs.

Together, we can invest in our future.

**Richard Trumka,**  
President, AFL-CIO



teams with those who teach both younger and older students, as well as foster collaboration with educators working with children at the same level or grade. And the educators should ask parents for as much information as possible about their children's backgrounds.

All teachers whether in an early education and preschool setting or in an elementary school can work with parents and other family members to ensure that all the adults in a child's life are assisting with the transition from pre-K to kindergarten or from a non-school setting to a classroom in an elementary school building.

### **Unions**

As part of contract negotiations, unions representing school district personnel can negotiate for professional development and common planning periods that enable both horizontal and vertical alignment and that training opportunities focused on early childhood are open to community-based preschool teachers and staff.

Unions also can press for equitable pay for preschool teachers. Many preschool teachers working in commu-

nity-based programs make less than they would if they were working in a school district—even if they have the same credentials as district teachers. Unions can build partnerships to advocate for funding to improve access and quality of preschool programs of all types.

The AFT through policy and action welcomes early childhood educators who are seeking to be represented by a union. The AFT also advocates working with higher education institutions to create a career path that allows early childhood educators to earn associate or bachelor's degrees and obtain ongoing "job-embedded" professional development.

Unions also can make sure they include early childhood educators in discussions when policymakers are considering issues such as quality rating systems (QRIS) or standards. For example, the ABC Federation of Teachers, outside Los Angeles, added a child development teacher to its executive board so that the perspective of early childhood educators would consistently be represented.

### **Parents**

Parents should plan early for the changes their children will encounter when they move into a new school. They can gather materials from the school, ask to visit with a teacher before the child attends the new school, and talk to their children often about what they can expect. Parents should talk with their child's preschool teacher or child care provider before the transition to gain knowledge about their child's skills and approaches to learning.

# Strategies for Developing a P-3 Initiative

In her work at Harvard Graduate School of Education and the University of Washington, P-3 expert Kristie Kauerz identified eight key components that ensure comprehensive attention to the preschool–grade 3 continuum. In 2012, she will publish a detailed framework that describes these components, outlines key implementation strategies, and provides tools for schools and districts to self-assess their P-3 efforts.

In this section, we take a closer look at these eight components, and suggest best practices for ensuring that early education is the seamless underpinning for continued learning in kindergarten and through the elementary school years, and that each year between preschool and third grade supports ongoing success in the subsequent year.

Among these best practices are:

- Creating collaborative mechanisms;
- Ensuring that administrators are instructional leaders;
- Empowering teachers to focus on instruction and teamwork;
- Aligning standards, curricula and assessments;
- Establishing a student-centered learning environment;
- Relying on data to improve instruction and guide reform;
- Engaging families; and
- Moving children along a high-quality pathway.

Explanation of these strategies, which district and union leaders can use as a way to gauge their progress toward building strong and fruitful relationships between early childhood programs



and elementary schools, is presented below along with examples of how educators at the local level are implementing the strategies.

## **Create collaborative mechanisms**

If preschool teachers never talk to kindergarten teachers, the preschool teachers may never have a full understanding of the skills and knowledge children should have when they enter kindergarten. And the kindergarten teachers may have unrealistic expectations of entering kindergartners.

Teachers from these different levels—from early childhood settings on through third grade—should have opportunities to share experiences and teaching practices so that the changes children experience from year to year are less abrupt.

A good example of this is the Montgomery County (Md.) Public Schools' council on teaching and learning for preschool and kindergarten teachers. The council recently focused on the change to an integrated curriculum in the primary grades—a concept that might be unfamiliar for teachers who are more accustomed to focusing on separate subjects, but one that is quite comfortable for most early childhood teachers who are experienced at teaching theme-based lessons.

But of course, the majority of elementary schools still don't have preschool classrooms on site. That's why it's important for these collaborative mechanisms to exist not only at a local school level, but across school districts and on a community level as well.

Whether it's a task force or a special committee, "this governing entity needs to include people from community-based child care and Head Start," Kauerz said in her TEACH conference presentation. "You just have to have somebody who nurtures this idea, because it doesn't happen on its own."

### **Ensure that administrators are instructional leaders**

Organizations such as the National Association of Elementary School Principals, the National Association for the Education of Young Children, the CAYL Institute and the National Institute for School Leadership (NISL) are making it clear that not only should principals and assistant principals be instructional leaders, they also should have competencies in the area of early childhood education.

This might mean that principals appreciate the role of play and other developmentally appropriate practices in building children's vocabulary skills; use assessments that capture the broad range of children's growth—not just math and literacy; and form partnerships with early-learning providers in the community to create greater awareness about the educational experiences children have before they enter school.

### **Empower teachers to focus on instruction and teamwork**

Vertical alignment allows teachers—whether it's the toddlers' teachers working with colleagues teaching the 3-year-old class or first-grade teachers collaborating with the second-grade team—not only to discuss the details of lining up the curriculum from year to year but also to tackle challenges regarding specific children, whether it's a child who is having trouble working during certain times of the day or one who is soaring ahead of the class and needs additional enrichment.

Again, this is clearly less complicated if teachers from these different levels work in the same building, or at least in the same school district or neighborhood.

NISL's Early Childhood Executive Leadership Institute provides training for school leaders resulting in development of school- and district-level collaborative projects that support transition. One example was an initiative to improve the literacy skills of children entering from neighboring pre-K programs, which provided professional development sessions for the pre-K and kindergarten teachers, visits to one another's classrooms, and an ongoing emphasis on "literacy transition" as children progressed through third grade.

### **Align standards, curricula and assessments**

Alignment refers to the natural progression of expectations, developmentally appropriate teaching and learning practices, and assessment strategies as children move through the preschool programs and grades in elementary school. As children approach the end of preschool, they should be working on tasks and concepts they will see in kindergarten. And the classroom environment and learning activities in kindergarten should include things the children are familiar with from their preschool setting.

The AFT has a policy resolution ("Early Childhood Education for the 21st Century," 2009)



encouraging states to create and implement developmentally appropriate early childhood standards and curricula that are both “in collaboration with recognized best practices for children under 5 and in articulation with K-12 standards.” The same policy also urges clear and specific linkages to the K-12 system. Aligning standards for what children should know and be able to do across the early years has been challenging to say the least, because early childhood educators and those in K-12 systems often have approached the issue from different perspectives. Early childhood educators have typically focused on milestones that reflect the development of the “whole child,” including social-emotional and physical development, while K-12 educators have tended to be more concerned with academic knowledge and skills.

A 2008 analysis of Pennsylvania’s early childhood standards found that the state has provided a good model for aligned standards across the early years. The standards cover birth through second grade—a feature the researchers called “unique” and “forward thinking.” Another strength is that the standards have covered both academic and developmental content across the spectrum.

Reaching this level of cohesion also requires structural changes such as those that are occurring as part of the Linkages Project, mentioned in the Portland profile (see page 22).

In the Albuquerque Public Schools, for example, Heather Vaughn, the district’s early childhood program coordinator, reports directly to the chief academic officer, a line of authority that Vaughn says “raises our profile” and provides more “support and visibility” for early childhood. “It has given us a voice at the table,” Vaughn says. “The result is that early childhood is present in the discussion and not being swallowed up by NCLB.”

Through the negotiations process, the district and the union had created a paid position for early childhood leaders in the elementary schools. Unfortunately, due to budget cuts, the stipend for that position has been eliminated. However, many of the early childhood leaders continue to meet regularly with Vaughn and serve as leaders in their school sites. More than 50 teachers in the early grades have continued in that role on a voluntary basis.

One of those early childhood leaders is Miriam Martinez, a kindergarten teacher at Los Padillas



Elementary School and the elementary vice president for the Albuquerque Teachers Federation. In her role, she currently is working to “infuse early childhood” philosophy and practices into the district’s four areas of focus. One of those areas is “accountability for student achievement,” which Martinez describes as “basically a bunch of tests.” So she is working to make sure methods such as observation as well as more developmentally appropriate performance assessments are included in the district’s testing plans.

In Tulsa, Okla., another model was used. Transition planning teams were created to bring early childhood and elementary school teachers together to discuss classroom practices and the needs of specific children.

With most states now adopting the Common Core State Standards (CCSS)—which begin in kindergarten—additional work is taking place as educators again look to close gaps between early childhood settings and the early grades.

The AFT’s resolution on the Common Core (“Recommendations of the AFT Ad Hoc Committee on the Standards Rollout,” 2011) says that the national union will help local affiliates “advocate for time for teachers to: learn about the CCSS; collaboratively develop lesson plans

and other materials; review student work and use multiple forms of student data to inform instruction; and reflect on, discuss and review their practice.”

This process should include preschool educators so they can better prepare their students for meeting the standards and share their knowledge with teachers in the early grades.

“This time for collaborative work and professional growth will make learning a fluid process from grade to grade and across subject areas,” the resolution states.

### **Establish a student-centered learning environment**

“Student-centered”—much like “developmentally appropriate”—is a term that can be interpreted in different ways, depending on the education setting in which someone works. Elementary teachers sometimes associate the term “student-centered” with the absence of structure, routine and discipline. Preschool teachers, however, might be more likely to define it as a classroom in which children are allowed to choose from a variety of learning activities, are engaged in their work and in which the instruction can be flexible—within reason—to respond to children’s interests.

Kauerz defines it as paying attention to the environment in which children are learning. The classroom environment tends to receive more attention in the early childhood field, but that shouldn’t be discounted or abandoned as children advance in school.

### **Rely on data to improve instruction and guide reform**

Educators across the P-3 spectrum consistently hear the dictum that assessments and data—whether in the form of a standardized test, a parent survey, a teacher observation or a classroom quiz—should be used to inform instruction and better address children’s academic needs. Educators trained in child development recognize that the early childhood period is fluid and that skills are constantly emerging. A child’s problem areas can become strengths if the right support is provided.

The challenge facing the education field is developing a common language about data among educators from early childhood programs and those in the K-12 system, and developing an approach for understanding and using data from diverse early childhood providers. This

is a task that some states and districts already are tackling with the help of Statewide Longitudinal Data Systems grant funds that were awarded in 2010. Attention to connecting early childhood and K-12 data is also likely to increase with the opportunities presented by the federal Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge. Two areas that states can address in their applications for the grant funds are “understanding the status of children’s learning and development at kindergarten entry” and “building or enhancing an early learning data system to improve instruction, practices, services, and policies.” Any early learning data system must also align with the state’s overall longitudinal data system for students.

In Pennsylvania, for example, the Office of Child Development and Early Learning is hoping to fill a gap in data with a “kindergarten inventory.” This new readiness assessment is being piloted in eight districts and will show where entering kindergartners stand in relationship to state standards. The inventory will be used to target children’s individual needs, guide classroom practice, and identify strengths and weaknesses at both the district and state levels.

Ideally, this new inventory will eventually connect to the state’s existing Early Learning



Network, a Web-based system for collecting and tracking information on children in all state-funded early care and learning programs. This will allow policymakers and educators to better understand how children from different early childhood education backgrounds adjust and perform once they get to kindergarten.

### **Engage families**

For most families, the move from preschool into kindergarten—or from one grade to the next—is full of questions and uncertainty, not only for the children, but also for their parents. Organized events, such as back-to-school nights, orientations, school picnics and other gatherings can serve as one type of forum in which parents can get some of their questions answered and receive an overview of what their children are expected to learn that year.

But parents also need ongoing communication with their child’s teacher throughout the year when questions or concerns about their children arise—whether it’s by phone, e-mail or in person. Parents need regular feedback about how their children are progressing and opportunities to participate in their children’s learning. A resolution of the AFT (“High-Quality Early Education For All,” 2010) states that early childhood systems should include a parent education component, such as the one described in the Portland profile. The National Network of Partnership Schools at Johns Hopkins University offers a framework that outlines six types of parent involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community.

The network’s examples of best practices and success stories provide a wealth of ideas for making parents feel welcome at school, connecting them with one another, and giving them ways to support their children’s learning.

### **Move children along a high-quality pathway**

Adding a preschool program and providing additional support for children as they move into kindergarten are important pieces of a strong P-3 effort. But they can’t stand alone. Unions can support the development of P-3 initiatives by advocating for professional development for teachers at these grade levels, and for coaching and mentoring programs that allow teachers in the primary grades to grow and improve their practice. Teaching young children has sometimes been mistakenly viewed as “easy” by educators in higher grades who are responsible



for more complex subject areas.

But in the drive to narrow achievement gaps among groups of students, it’s clear that the weight is on teachers in the early years and the early grades to help children become confident and competent learners, regardless of their skill levels when they entered school.

An AFT resolution (“Early Childhood Education,” 2002) states that future preschool teachers have four-year degrees and should complete teacher preparation programs that are focused on child development and early childhood education strategies. Another resolution (“Early Childhood Education for the 21st Century,” 2009 ) supports research-based professional development for early childhood educators and paraprofessionals so they can meet these higher standards. And the same resolution supports compensation for early childhood educators that rewards them for reaching those higher credentials.

In districts such as Albuquerque; Cincinnati; Montgomery County, Md.; Portland, Ore.; and many others, Head Start and other preschool teachers and staff already are receiving the respect and support they need to be effective in the classroom. Being fully certified teachers and members of their unions makes the statement that these professionals play an important role in helping all students reach the goals that have been set for them.

## Smoothing Transitions at West Oaks Elementary School, Orlando, Fla.

As the only prekindergarten teacher at West Oaks Elementary, part of the Orange County (Fla.) Public School System, Sharon Leonard works to make her students' entry into and exit from her classroom as comfortable and positive as possible.

West Oaks is a Title I school on the west side of Orlando. The school's pre-K program runs for a full day, with

And when the kindergarten students go on field trips, Leonard looks for opportunities to have her pre-K students tag along for the experience.

Transition practices at West Oaks have evolved over the years. Kindergarten and pre-K teachers used to conduct home visits to students' families during the summer—an event Leonard says

garden isn't the same that it used to be." That's when the "roundup" gatherings were created.

These events, however, are just one of several strategies teachers in the early grades at the school use to relieve some of the anxiety that young children may feel at the beginning of the school year.

Near the end of the kindergarten year, teachers schedule lengthy student visits to first-grade classrooms so the kindergartners can get a feel for the pace of the work and the environment in that grade.

Once again, Leonard was not to be left out. She began arranging visits for her 20 prekindergartners to a different kindergarten class every day. The students get a chance to visit all six of the kindergarten classrooms. And although they don't know until summer which class they will be in, the teacher and the classroom won't be unfamiliar to them.

"My students are actually engaged" in whatever lesson is being taught during their visit, Leonard says. "They get to be part of it." Her students even "buddy up" with kindergartners to work together.

Leonard has had some influence on where her pre-K students are placed in kindergarten. One year, for example, she had 14 students who were scoring exceptionally high in reading, and she knew they were challenging each other. "I wanted that group to stay



"One of the other kindergarten teachers and I said, 'How can we fix this?' We need to meet these kids, and we need to let the parents know what to expect," Leonard recalls. "Kindergarten isn't the same that it used to be."

half paid for by the state's Voluntary Prekindergarten Education Program and the other half covered by Title I funds.

Without other pre-K teachers on staff to consult with, Leonard—a West Area board member for the Orange County Classroom Teachers Association—has largely designed and implemented her own practices to welcome new pre-K families and gradually expose them to the challenges that will lie ahead in kindergarten.

When West Oaks' kindergarten teachers began holding "roundup" nights for parents and children before the first day of school, Leonard asked West Oaks principal Donald Richardson if she could do the same thing.

was largely successful because it created an immediate bond between the child and the teacher.

"The kids would say, 'Oh, that's my teacher. She came to my house,'" Leonard remembers. But regrettably, school officials ended that practice.

In the absence of home visits, Leonard (who previously taught kindergarten at West Oaks) began sending postcards to her incoming students, but she knew the notes fell far short of having "face-to-face" contact.

"One of the other kindergarten teachers and I said, 'How can we fix this?' We need to meet these kids, and we need to let the parents know what to expect," Leonard recalls. "Kinder-



Florida pre-K teacher Sharon Leonard tailors successful strategies from higher grade levels to help students move smoothly into kindergarten.



together, because they worked so well together," she says.

She asked the principal whether the students could stay together the next year instead of being split up into different classes as typically happens.

"I'm a little competitive. No, I'm a lot competitive, according to my principal," Leonard says with a laugh, adding that she likes to see this spirit in her students as well.

Principal Richardson agreed with her request. Six of the students went to one class, and eight went to another.

Leonard's role as an advocate for her young students is particularly crucial in situations where parents are unable to provide academic support at home or to navigate comfortably in the school

setting. She realized she had to carry more of the burden of making sure her students had the skills they needed to do well in kindergarten and beyond.

Her attention to both the academic and social-emotional needs of children also has made an impression on parents.

"Our daughter had been at home [until pre-K] and was fairly shy," recalls Samantha Irving, whose daughter, Georgia, was in Leonard's pre-K class during the 2009-10 school year. "Once Mrs. Leonard saw our daughter's passion for reading, she gave weekly reading tasks above regular work, also allowing those who wanted to read aloud to their classmates the opportunity each week."

Georgia also benefited from exploring

the kindergarten classrooms. "Our daughter loved these visits," Irving says, "and we feel it helped a great deal with the move up."

Leonard remembers Georgia as a child who "didn't want to be there," but who ended up being "one of my leaders."

Kindergarten teachers at the school say Leonard's active participation in the transition process has allowed them to spend more time on helping students learn and less on helping them adjust to the new classroom. "Ms. Leonard knows the kindergarten expectations, and her children are well prepared when they come to us," says kindergarten teacher Caroline Garcia. "Ms. Leonard is an important part of our team."

Overall, Leonard believes her efforts to make the changes young children experience during their early years in school as seamless and enjoyable as possible are working. "I find that we have less tears now."

## Meeting the Early Education Needs of Young Children in Cincinnati—a Community Approach

**R**achel Tapp, a teacher at Oyler Community Learning Center in Cincinnati, rarely, if ever, saw her former students dressed in nice clothes heading out to the high school's job-shadowing programs. That's because most of those students never made it to high school. But a dramatic transformation is taking place at Oyler, located in the urban Appalachian neighborhood of Lower Price Hill; that transformation will begin with newborns receiving the healthcare and nurturing they need to get a strong start

might not have finished their education.

"Many of my former third-graders who are attending high school now talk about colleges, careers, and how they aren't ready for babies yet—quite a culture change over the past few years," says Tapp, who used to teach third grade at Oyler and now teaches preschool at the center. "There is a sense of hope and pride among our high school students that is impossible to miss when you walk through our hallways."

This is a win-win situation for all: The co-location of programs means that preschool teachers are able to collaborate with kindergarten teachers in the same building to make sure everything runs smoothly as children advance.

on learning. And it will continue through grade 12, with students having the skills they need for college or a career.

Oyler already offers Head Start classes, but starting this school year, as part of a partnership with a community-based early childhood education provider, the school is serving children at 6 weeks old. Because of the relationships the school has formed with healthcare providers and other social service agencies in the community, families will have access to programs such as home-visiting, a school-based health clinic and housing assistance.

Instead of ending at eighth grade, as it used to, Oyler now includes high school, the realization of principal Craig Hockenberry's vision for students in this tight-knit community that they don't give up hope on their future just because others in their family

About seven miles east of Oyler, along the Ohio River, the same developments are under way at Riverview East Community Learning Center, another preK-12 site in a community that faces the same challenges as Lower Price Hill.

As community learning centers, Riverview and Oyler enter into contracts with service providers that deliver programs in the schools and share the same goal of seeing children reach their potential and revitalizing the communities they serve. One of those partners is Cincinnati Early Learning Centers (CELC), a nationally accredited early childhood education provider that runs the toddler and preschool classes at Riverview and is operating the early childhood classes at Oyler.

This is a win-win situation for all: The co-location of programs means that



preschool teachers are able to collaborate with kindergarten teachers in the same building to make sure everything runs smoothly as children advance.

**Kindergarten teacher Barbara James says dialogue among educators across grade levels is one key to success.**

For example, Linda Doyle, the director of the preschool program at Riverview, who works for CELC, meets regularly with kindergarten teacher Barbara James to talk about any challenges that students might be facing as they make the transition into kindergarten. Doyle's students visit James' classroom as well.

The preschoolers "get a chance to see that there is a beyond," James says, "and they get to see older children." Those visits also encourage the kindergartners, because the visits allow them to observe how far they have come, she adds.



PHOTOS BY BRUCE CRIPPEN

**Comprehensive student services in Cincinnati help preschool teachers like Rachel Tapp give students a great start.**

Community learning centers (CLCs), also known as community schools, operate as the core of a network of services and programs for children and families. Through partnerships with an array of community organizations and agencies, schools become centralized locations for providers of services such as health clinics, dental care, social service case workers, mental health professionals, after-school programs and recreational opportunities—all with the goal of contributing to children's success.

Resource coordinators, sometimes called community school coordinators, work to create and maintain these relationships with providers to best fit the needs of children and families, and to work toward the goals of the school.

"One of the hardest things to endure as a teacher is watching one of your little ones suffer with an extraordinary amount of emotional pain and not having the resources to really help the child work through the problem," Tapp explains. "Now we have those resources right down the hall."

CLCs came to Cincinnati following an Ohio Supreme Court ruling that forced the school district to raise funds for rebuilding or renovating all of its dilapidated schools. Community leaders engaged parents and other community members in the initial process by asking them what they wanted to see in their new schools.

And in many instances, community members said they wanted early childhood programs.

At the other end of the K-12 spectrum was

and Oyler, community leaders hope, will reverse this trend and put high school graduation and postsecondary education within every student's reach.

When children show any special needs, or families require social services, the other professionals and providers linked to or based in the school are available to help. One of Oyler's partners, for example, is a new vision clinic. "Our students in need of glasses won't have to wait weeks to get what they need to be successful in the classroom," Tapp says.

And beginning in the primary grades, children can be assigned a mentor who can help support them in school and serve as another caring adult.

One of the strongest supporters of CLCs in Cincinnati has been the teachers union.

"In Cincinnati, we have a very high number of students who are living in deep poverty," says Julie Sellers, president of the Cincinnati Federation of Teachers (CFT). "I believe that the services to support these students are in the community, so it is only natural to allow these students to receive the services in the schoolhouse." Providing early childhood services in the schools, Sellers adds, contributes to the goal of having children "kindergarten ready" and reduces the gap between middle-class and disadvantaged children.

Darlene Kamine, executive director of the Community Learning Center Institute in Cincinnati—who was instrumental in the early development of CLCs in the city—says the CFT has embraced the role of community organizations in meeting students' needs.

the need to respond to low graduation rates among urban Appalachian teens. Providing a preK-12 experience for children at Riverview

Tapp adds that elementary school teachers at Oyler make themselves known to children in the preschool program—helping out in the lunchroom, in the hallway or in the restrooms when needed—because it contributes to the feeling of the school being "one big family."

"Kindergartners at Oyler who have had the preschool experience begin their formal schooling with a different level of confidence—not to mention significantly improved language and academic skills," Tapp says.

A recent experience demonstrates the capacity that CLCs have to simultaneously improve the lives of both a high school student and her young child, and strengthen the connections between parents and schools.

Jami Harris, Oyler's resource coordinator, worked with several partners to create some stability for the mother of an 8-month-old. The teen had just arrived at the school from Kentucky, was days from being homeless, needed help to pass state tests, and was giving her daughter whole milk because she thought the child was allergic to formula.

Working with several partners, Harris was able to get the young mother bus tokens so she could get to school, get an application filed for welfare benefits, find low-cost housing and work with a WIC (Women, Infants, and Children's) program office to get the child another type of formula. CELC stepped in with baby clothes and furniture, and Harris even found the student a tutor to help her prepare for the state assessments.

As Harris, school officials and partners continue to plan for the expansion of early childhood classrooms at the school, they also are discussing how to make similar services available to all families with young children in the community—whether or not the children are enrolled in Oyler.

"Not only will I be able to help my students," Harris says, "but we also want to chisel out a pathway for anyone in the community who has a young child."

## Meeting the Needs of 'Young 5s' with Transitional Kindergarten in Los Angeles

Gathered around a table with five boys, teaching assistant Karla Ramirez instructs them on how to trace the first letter of their names with a black marker.

"I want you to try your best," she says, pausing to help a student correctly position the marker in his hand.

"I traced number A," one boy announces, and Ramirez reminds him that it's a letter.

als and advocates who had long said that the state's kindergarten cutoff date of Dec. 2 was allowing older 4-year-olds—many of whom did not yet have the necessary classroom readiness skills—to enter kindergarten.

Beginning in fall 2012, the new law gradually moves the kindergarten cutoff date to Sept. 1 (which means that to enter kindergarten, a child must be 5 years old by Sept. 1 of the school year, not by Dec. 2 of the school year as in



Alicia Brossy de Dios, a member of the United Teachers Los Angeles board of directors, and a teacher at the Macarthur Park Primary Center in the city, says transitional kindergarten provides parents a choice they didn't have before.

"When TK came along, they said this is the answer to their prayers," reports Armenta, who is now the school district's executive director of early childhood education.

Ana Quintanilla, the teacher in this transitional kindergarten class at Kingsley Elementary School in Hollywood, says the activity the boys are completing is not much different from what they would have been doing in a regular kindergarten class. It's just that with the quickened pace of an increasingly academic kindergarten curriculum, there's not much time for students to work in small groups and get individual attention.

That's what transitional kindergarten is providing for children who would have been the youngest in their kindergarten class: more time.

The passage of the Kindergarten Readiness Act in California was a victory for early childhood education profession-

years past). The law also establishes transitional kindergarten (TK) statewide, which is intended for children with fall birthdays.

Launching its own pilot program in the 2010-11 school year, the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) has been a leader in addressing this long-standing issue, which many people thought was hindering the state's progress toward improving academic outcomes among low-income students and English language learners.

As the former principal of Gulf Avenue Elementary in Wilmington, near the Port of Los Angeles, Nora Armenta says she frequently had preschool teachers talk about certain students they felt were not ready for kindergarten.

Alicia Brossy de Dios, a member of the United Teachers Los Angeles board of directors, and a teacher at the Macarthur Park Primary Center in the city, says transitional kindergarten provides parents a choice they didn't have before.

"There are some kids who would benefit from a little extra time," she says.

At Gulf Avenue and the other 35 schools that volunteered to offer the classes in the first year, teachers and principals had to help parents understand that entering transitional kindergarten didn't mean their children were being retained, Armenta explains. Parents still had the option of choosing to place their older 4-year-olds in kindergarten, just as before. And in some cases, children have moved straight into first grade after their year in transitional kindergarten—showing that the guidelines are flexible



Los Angeles “transitional kindergarten” teacher Ana Quintanilla (pictured left with teaching assistant Karla Ramirez) is helping to better prepare students who would have been the youngest in their kindergarten classes.



PHOTOS BY ARMANDO ARORIZO

enough to adapt to the needs and progress of each child.

Stacey Arballo, a transitional kindergarten teacher at Gulf Avenue, says she has four students this year who she believes could skip the second year of kindergarten and go straight into first grade. When working with those children, she tries to teach as close to the regular kindergarten curriculum as possible.

Because LAUSD was one of the districts to launch a pilot program, it has been able to learn some lessons from early implementation and provide guidance to other districts. Kingsley Elementary, for example, recently hosted several guests from other districts who came with questions about starting the program in their schools.

At Kingsley, for example, administrators found that a brochure on transitional kindergarten, designed with parents in mind, was actually more useful in helping other teachers and front office staff understand the purpose of the new program. “Everyone needs to know that TK is coming,” says Ruth Yoon, administrative coordinator for LAUSD’s early childhood education division.

Armenta notes that it is also essential to have well-qualified early childhood teachers for the program to be implemented successfully. “This is not a scripted program. It really takes an expert teacher.”

In the 2011-12 school year, an additional 78 schools joined the original 36—for a total of 120 classrooms. And Armenta plans to continue working with the state and the district for direction on how to make sure schools and families that want transitional kindergarten are able to get it.

The district also is following the progress of the 700 students enrolled in the first year of the program to see how well they do on the DIBELS (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills) assessment and the California English Language Development Test.

Arballo says the district did “a good job” of providing materials, resources and suggestions for how to modify lessons. But she adds that more guidance is needed on the precise goals transitional kindergarten teachers are expected to meet by the end of the year—something more specific than “get [the students] as ready as possible.”

For now, teachers are following the kindergarten curriculum and also pulling from the state’s Preschool Learning Foundations document when necessary. And English language learners in transitional kindergarten are more likely to receive support in their home language than they would be in regular kindergarten.

Transitional kindergarten classes allow for centers, such as a housekeeping area, a library corner where students read to a stuffed animal, a writing corner and a puppet center—features that are not seen much in kindergarten classes anymore, but which are the very activities that build language skills in young children, Arballo says. “One of the things language learners need is vocabulary. In center time, they really get it.”

She also has her students sit around kidney-shaped tables instead of desks to encourage more conversation.

When Arballo taught kindergarten last year at Gulf Avenue, she often had to move forward with the material she was teaching—even if all of her young learners weren’t grasping what she was presenting. Transitional kindergarten, she says, allows her to be more sensitive to the pace of her students.

“It’s academic, but it also allows for more flexibility,” says Arballo, who holds a master’s degree in early childhood education and says this modified kindergarten program is right up her alley. “If I see that they can’t sit through a lesson, I can change it. I can slow it down.”

## Filling Learning Gaps with Summer Transition Programs in Portland, Ore.

At a parent session during the Portland Public Schools' new summer transition program for incoming kindergartners, a Vietnamese mother began to speak about her experience as an educator in her own country. She felt that the Portland program had greatly benefited her own child, and she wanted to share some of the program's teaching practices with colleagues on her visits back to Vietnam.

at Woodmere Elementary—one of five schools that offered the summer program in 2011. With the EAs helping children adjust to the classroom, Jensen says, she was able to “go ahead and teach.”

The district began offering the three-week summer program in 2010 with two

really disconnected from schools during the summer,” says Allyson Yoshiwara, early childhood education administrator for the Portland Public Schools.

To find children for the program, the district started by inviting families that were still on the Head Start waiting lists after the classes were filled. Then the district reached out to children who already were registered for kindergarten. Fliers were also distributed to child care centers, but Yoshiwara believes that more work needs to be done to find the children who are most in need of the learning opportunity.

“We’re going to have to go even deeper and go to Laundromats and grocery stores and parks,” she says. “We need to find more of these kids.”



The assistants, represented by the Portland Federation of School Professionals, are a key reason why the program is succeeding at making the new kindergartners and their parents—feel welcome and comfortable in their new schools.

Her story of how Portland's “early entry” program has affected her both personally and professionally never would have been heard by the school if it hadn't been for the translation services of Gnoc Tran, one of the educational assistants (EAs) who works in the summer program.

The assistants, represented by the Portland Federation of School Professionals, are a key reason why the program is succeeding at making the new kindergartners and their parents—feel welcome and comfortable in their new schools.

“The EAs really help the families and kids understand that this is a safe place,” says Rose Jensen, a kindergarten teacher

schools, after recognizing that there was a need for families to have a smoother transition into kindergarten. After a successful first year, the program expanded to five schools in part because of an initiative called the Linkage Project. The Linkage Project—in Portland, Tulsa and Albuquerque—is a three-year effort of the Coalition for Community Schools to strengthen the ties between early childhood education programs and community schools. The goal is to make sure children and families receive support during the transition into school, and that services and programs are in place to meet the needs of families following that transition.

“Research showed that parents felt

The program is organized around three book selections (for example, *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?*), which are used to teach not only literacy skills, but also math and even small and large motor skills. Although not required, a twice-a-week parent component is also offered, which parents are “strongly encouraged” to participate in, Yoshiwara says. Child care is provided for those who have younger children.

“At first they don't want to come, and then they just get addicted to it,” she says.

The parents read the same books their children are reading, and learn the routines and techniques that the teachers use in the classroom—such as the morning message and brainstorm-



Portland, Ore., kindergarten teacher Rose Jensen says teamwork with educational assistants allows her to “go ahead and teach.”

ing. They also focus on becoming comfortable with the school, how to talk to their child’s teacher and what to do if a conflict arises—what Yoshiwara calls the “big deal breakers that can set up a wall that just doesn’t go away.”

She adds that the EAs’ dedication to the program is clear. “They are really good at what they do, and it’s not just a summer job.”

In addition to translating, the EAs serve the children breakfast and sit with them during the meal to encourage conversation. They play games with students on the playground, help them learn the classroom rules and show them how to write their names.

The children “are very honest, and they are ready to learn,” says educational

assistant Teresa Ramirez, who works during the summer at Whitman Elementary. “I love my job.”

Because most of the EAs work in Head Start during the school year, they already “know how the kindergarten mind works,” Jensen says.

After the first year of the program, the children who attended the summer transition program were scoring up to 10 points higher on literacy skills than kindergartners who had not participated.

Yoshiwara initially attributed the results to the children being more comfortable and confident, but at the end of the school year, they were still performing



higher than their peers. Those results were only based on the first two schools (Woodmere and Whitman), so the sample was small. But still, Yoshiwara is encouraged that the children’s performance “didn’t turn in the other direction.”

Heather Hull, the principal at Woodmere Elementary, agrees that the language support and translation work the assistants do is crucial in helping the children and their parents feel welcome so they can benefit from the program.

“It is so important for the kids who speak a second language to have that connection,” she says, adding that the assistants are viewed as educators. “We just all work together as a good team to move kids forward.”



## Leadership and Partnership in Montgomery County, Md.

The Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) is a district that has attracted national attention, not only for strengthening its preschool and primary grade programs, but also for collaborating with its unions to benefit young children.

Under former superintendent Jerry Weast's leadership, the district began using Title I funds to extend Head Start to a full-day program, began its own pre-K program and implemented full-day kindergarten, beginning in the district's neediest and lowest-performing schools. The district also set advanced reading targets for the primary grades and made success in the early years the first key in the district's "Seven Keys to College Readiness." The

Preschool and elementary teachers regularly meet to discuss strategies, assessment data and individual students. The district's pre-K and Head Start teachers are paid on the same salary scale and receive the same benefits that other MCPS teachers receive. They are also part of the Teacher Professional Growth System—a joint initiative of the district and the Montgomery County Education Association (MCEA), a National Education Association affiliate.

Improving opportunities and outcomes for young children has been a high priority for the union.

"MCEA was an active advocate both of the expansion of full-day kindergarten and the

transition from time-consuming paper-and-pencil assessments to the adoption of handheld "personal digital assistants" for monitoring student progress—a tool that provides better data on how students are learning.

The union also has a council on teaching and learning for its pre-K, Head Start and kindergarten teachers, which is supported by the district and serves as a forum for teachers to discuss curriculum and teaching practices.

District and union leaders meet every two weeks—a routine that has become an integral part of how the district operates. "We don't know what we would do without these meetings," Lacey says.

"MCEA was an active advocate both of the expansion of full-day kindergarten and the availability of full-day pre-K for low-income kids," says Tom Israel, MCEA executive director. "This involved both advocacy for local funding for the MCPS budget for these initiatives, as well as support for statewide legislation mandating full-day kindergarten."

keys provide a clear and concise road map, strongly supported by the community, for getting students prepared for the transition to higher education. Standards for 4-year-olds were aligned with the district's overall curriculum.

The district also has partnered with a variety of home and community providers to extend services to children not served in school-based programs. Results show that the district's concentrated efforts to upgrade early-learning programs have been successful. Children in full-day Head Start classes—especially Hispanic children and English language learners—have made significantly larger gains in reading compared with those in half-day classes. And the district has continued to raise the bar in reading for children in the early grades, because they keep exceeding the standards.

availability of full-day pre-K for low-income kids," says Tom Israel, MCEA executive director. "This involved both advocacy for local funding for the MCPS budget for these initiatives, as well as support for statewide legislation mandating full-day kindergarten."

Frieda Lacey, deputy superintendent of MCPS, provides further examples of how MCEA, as well as the unions representing principals and classified personnel, have worked with district leaders on early childhood education issues. For example, when MCPS was developing a policy regarding early admission to kindergarten, the district relied on the unions to gather feedback from staff on an early screening process.

MCEA was also especially helpful, Lacey says, during the primary grade teachers'

The district also serves as a strong example of how a union can work with district leaders to institute a process that gives rookie teachers the support they need to grow and struggling teachers the guidance they need to improve their practice. The unions collaborated with district leaders to implement peer assistance and review (PAR) in the district. In PAR, a concept originated by the Toledo (Ohio) Federation of Teachers, new and low-performing teachers are assigned a consulting teacher who coaches them toward improvement.

The union partners were also instrumental in developing specific interventions for some of the district's high-need elementary schools, such as weekly common planning meetings in the evening and getting teachers to commit to working in a low-performing school for at least three years.

Thanks to the leadership provided by Weast, the unions and other MCPS administrators, the district's early childhood program is not an add-on, but a fully integrated part of the system. And early childhood teachers are given the respect and support they need to give students a successful start in school.

## *Building Bridges Between Early Childhood Education Providers and Schools in Pittsfield, Mass.*

**W**hen the Pittsfield, Mass., school district received a Kindergarten Grant and a Community Partnership Grant from the state education department, it turned to the town's local early childhood education providers to focus on improving children's transition to kindergarten.

A transition team was formed that included school district leaders, kindergarten teachers and representatives from the early learning programs in the area, including Head Start. The group participates together in profes-

sional development days for teachers involved in the transition team focus on literacy in connection with other academic areas such as math, science and wellness. And KidZone uses Handwriting Without Tears, the same handwriting curriculum used in the schools the students will enter. Teachers at KidZone and other programs also have received training in positive behavior support in the classroom, using the same practices teachers use in the public schools.

Professional development days for teachers involved in the transition team focus on literacy in connection with other academic areas such as math, science and wellness.

sional development, giving child care providers and preschool teachers access to training and teaching materials they probably would not have had otherwise.

Now, several years later, funding for the team has run out, but that hasn't derailed the participants' efforts to ensure the young children they serve are confident and prepared when they enter kindergarten. In fact, the team still meets monthly at a local diner to talk about issues such as Massachusetts' new pre-K standards, the Common Core standards and which children will be moving into which schools.

"I have developed the pre-K program as a kindergarten-readiness program," says Karen Vogel, the director of pre-K at KidZone, a child care and educational center in Pittsfield where the staff is currently involved in unionizing efforts.

Efforts also have increased to educate pre-K parents about kindergarten enrollment and how to help their children through the transition.

"I preach it all the time," Vogel says, adding that she is beginning to work with parent-teacher organization leaders at the elementary schools to focus even more attention on issues related to transition and to help parents feel comfortable in their children's new schools. A citywide "transition day" is currently being planned for the fall of 2012 to ease some of the stress and anxiety associated with the first day of kindergarten, according to Sue Doucette, the early childhood coordinator for the district.

Vogel says that the grant funding—and the formation of the transition team—has had the most impact on the centers' relationships with the Pittsfield school district and local kindergarten teachers.



In fact, Vogel says, she regularly picks up the phone or sends e-mails to teachers to talk about the children who will be moving into their classrooms. Kindergarten teachers also visit KidZone and other centers so their faces won't be so unfamiliar when the children enter school. And Doucette hopes the early learning providers will begin bringing groups of pre-K students for visits to kindergarten classes.

"I think it has really connected the early childhood community," Vogel says. "We truly work as a community trying to help these kids."

## Seamless Delivery from Day One in New York City

**T**ammie Miller spent years as a family child care provider in New York City and remembers how these professionals often feel like they are on the outside looking in. Although there is universal agreement that what happens with children before they reach preschool is key to their chances for successful learning later in life, child care providers all too frequently are excluded when it comes to outstanding professional development and collegial support that could help them make the earliest years a chance to prepare children for school success.

care providers across New York City understand and teach early literacy development by using a curriculum adapted from the PBS learn-to-read television show “Between the Lions.” PBS affiliate WGBH produces the award-winning show—long a staple of learning in preschools around the country—and worked with the UFT last year to develop a curriculum modified to help even younger learners gain early literacy and oral language skills. The goal is to give 3- and 4-year-olds a solid foundation for preschool and kindergarten, and the work is supported through



“Making that connection with the pre-K teachers is going to open a world of resources and knowledge that providers have never had. Children can only benefit in that climate.”

—TAMMIE MILLER  
Chapter Chair, UFT Providers

Today, Miller is chapter chair for family child care providers represented by New York City’s United Federation of Teachers, which puts a premium on closing that professional breach between prekindergarten teachers and the more than 20,000 child care providers across the city. “Making that connection with the pre-K teachers is going to open a world of resources and knowledge that providers have never had,” says Miller. “Children can only benefit in that climate.”

The UFT, an affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers, is helping child

a grant from the American Federation of Teachers Innovation Fund.

“The curriculum is the ‘what,’ but more interesting is the ‘how,’” stresses Innovation Fund grant coordinator Rita Danis. The project is training child care providers in the Bronx and Brooklyn to serve as a network of coaches for colleagues in their neighborhoods who are using the modified curriculum. The coaches regularly visit the homes of child care providers, meeting and conferring, modeling and observing, answering questions about learning activities, and identifying opportunities

to enrich learning at the home-based centers. And relationship building between coach and provider is a paramount concern, says Danis, who describes the coach’s role as “a guide on the side” who can reinforce and enrich many practices already in place.

Many providers, for example, will offer “circle time” reading at their centers. Coaches will typically work with them on strategies for selecting stories, introducing background knowledge and coaxing children to answer questions about stories that go beyond one-word answers. “It’s about helping them think through the opportunities they have throughout the day,” Danis says of the family care providers working with coaches.

Interest in the project is growing. Informational meetings that the UFT holds regularly in the two project boroughs have been well-attended, and the response has been enthusiastic.



Tammie Miller, who spent years as a family child care provider in New York City, now helps address the professional needs of providers as a chapter chair for the United Federation of Teachers.

PHOTOS BY BRUCE GILBERT

Child care providers, who earn a stipend for participating in the project, see it as an opportunity to enhance their skills and to “break through the professional isolation,” Miller says. Coaches, who are compensated for their extra duties, also meet regularly to discuss their work. In doing so, they begin to see the project as an exciting opportunity to become path-setting instructional leaders in their field.

In 2012, the UFT plans to extend the project, adding new providers and coaches to the network, which currently encompasses 10 coaches and 50 providers. The project also is looking for opportunities to loop in schools, “building the dialogue between family care providers and pre-K” through regular discussions between child care providers and prekindergarten teachers who use the traditional “Between the

Lions” curriculum in their classrooms, Danis says.

The project is just one way that the UFT is working to help providers meet the professional demands of working in child care settings.

The UFT also holds early childhood education conferences each spring, drawing together teachers, paraprofessionals, home-based providers and administrators for training and discussions. Conference attendance typically tops 400, and the participants constitute “a complete mix” of members of the early learning community in New York City, says Catalina Fortino, UFT vice president for education. Topics range from differentiated learning to using smart boards in early childhood education. And

“there is always a piece of the conference that we tailor specifically for child care providers,” keeping them involved as respected members of the professional community, says Fortino.

Conference follow-up and reinforcement are key. Many home child care providers who attend the spring event also go on to participate in the UFT’s professional development for educators. These twice-monthly afternoon courses give home child care providers affordable, high-quality vehicles for meeting licensing requirements.

“Alignment has traditionally been missing between family care providers and educators serving older children,” Fortino says. “What we’re finding is that you can build bridges and do it through professional development. It’s a new way of looking at things, and we’re excited to be one of the groups in the forefront of this commonsense approach.”



## Early Childhood Linkages and Community Schools

The Coalition for Community Schools at the Institute for Educational Leadership is taking a deeper look at the transition from early childhood into early elementary school years through its Early Childhood and Community Schools Linkages Project. This project addresses the lack of collaboration and continuity across early childhood education (ECE) programs and elementary schools by intentionally linking ECE programs with community schools. The underlying assumption is that the partnerships and strategic linkages between high-quality comprehensive early childhood opportunities and effective community schools will lead to better results for vulnerable children and lay a foundation for success in school and life. Community schools

and ECE programs share a culture and a set of values that include addressing the needs of the whole child and his or her family, which makes transitions from ECE programs to community schools more seamless than transitions to traditional elementary schools might be.

The Linkages Project has been initiated in three community school initiatives: Multnomah County, Ore. (Portland); Tulsa, Okla.; and Albuquerque, N.M. In addition to these initiatives, there is a strong and growing core of community schools (more than 45 initiatives) nationwide and many other communities are showing great interest in implementing the strategy—from tiny suburban Tukwila, Wash., to sprawling cities such as Chicago, Cincinnati, Los Angeles and New York, to rural communities like the Lehigh Valley of Pennsylvania.

The Linkages Project envisions a deliberate integration of policy and practice at the local, district and state levels. After just two years, the project is already demonstrating how community schools serve as effective vehicles to promote access to and continuity of high-quality curriculum, pedagogy and expectations across early childhood programs and the early grades. It is also designed to increase the scale of those efforts and promote their sustainability. Long term, Linkages communities are working toward a results-driven, sustainable system that provides continuous high-quality services and learning experiences for children and families from birth through the early grades.

Linkages sites are employing four key strategies:

- Promoting linkages to local and state agencies and community leaders;
- Partnering with community schools, ECE programs, communities and families;
- Sharing and collaborating on governance; and
- Engaging in shared professional learning and development.

As part of their ongoing work, sites are focusing on and tracking several key indicators: parent involvement, early chronic absenteeism, and reading on grade level by the end of third grade. These indicators are part of a larger community schools results framework.

Ultimately, the Linkages Project will contribute to the community schools movement and the early childhood field by:

- Developing example sites that demonstrate successful and sustainable early childhood linkages to community schools;
- Promoting communication and efforts to develop supportive district and state policy;
- Contributing to the knowledge base through “lessons learned” about building integrated systems for supporting the academic and non-academic development of children, youth and families; and
- Demonstrating that community schools offer a flexible and efficient vehicle for moving communities toward long-term positive results for children, families, schools and communities.







*A Union of Professionals*

American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO  
555 New Jersey Ave. N.W.  
Washington, DC 20001  
202/879-4400  
[www.aft.org](http://www.aft.org)

Item no. 19-11001

12/11