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New York State Birth Through Five (NYSB5) Preschool Development Grant Needs Assessment Update Report: Kindergarten Transitions (2023)

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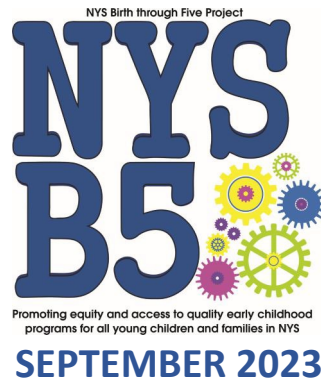
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NEW YORK STATE COUNCIL ON CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

NEW YORK STATE BIRTH THROUGH FIVE (NYSB5-R)

PRESCHOOL DEVELOPMENT GRANT

**Kindergarten Transition Practices:
Activities Performed and Next Steps**



Conducted by



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Introduction

Kindergarten can be a complex transition for children. Even children who attended preschool may find they are entering a new, larger building, and children transitioning from home-based care will be encountering a range of older children. In kindergarten, daily routines change, free play time is less, and more focus is on academics. Children entering kindergarten have different individual and family needs that require different types of support.

According to the New York State Education Department, in the 2021-2022 school year, 116,000 four-year-old children were enrolled in state-administered prekindergarten programs that prepare them for a smooth and successful transition into kindergarten — approximately 52% of the four-year-olds in New York State.¹ This preparation has been shown to be important for future school adjustment and success: children who attend prekindergarten are more likely to graduate high school, are less likely to be unemployed, and cost taxpayers less than their non-prekindergarten attending peers.^{2,3,4}

Further, the transition to kindergarten also involves screening to assess children’s development. Children may receive assessments in the areas of social-emotional, cognitive, language and communication, pre-literacy, pre-numeracy, and fine and gross motor skills. Some children may be identified for the first time as having challenges or delays, while others will have been receiving special education services through preschool.

For children with identified special needs, the transition to kindergarten can be more complex. Children receiving services through the Committee on Preschool Special Education (CPSE) go through an established process in which the oversight of their services transitions from CPSE to the Committee on Special Education (CSE) for their school district. If a child is not receiving special education services through CPSE before entering kindergarten, parents or teachers will need to initiate the process with the district’s CSE if they think a child may need special education services.

The transition process is also difficult for new immigrants, who may not speak any, or very little, English. While some school districts make kindergarten materials available in other languages and engage in outreach to non-English-speaking communities, not all districts actively do so. Interviews with administrators for this report showed that some school districts do not have the funds allocated to support materials in other languages, although a growing number of school districts are allocating such funds.

¹ New York State Early Childhood Data Dashboard, <http://www.nysecac.org/message-co-chairs> and New York State Education Department Office of Early Learning, <https://www.nysed.gov/sites/default/files/programs/early-learning/nys-administered-prekindergarten-fast-facts.pdf>

² Gray-Lobe, G., Pathak, P.P., and Walters, C.R. (2023). The long-term effects of universal preschool in Boston. Retrieved from: <https://academic.oup.com/qje/article/138/1/363/6701924>

³ Effects, L. (2006). The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study Through Age 40. *Ypsilanti, MI*.

⁴ Office of Budget and Policy Analysis. (2022). State Fiscal Year 2022-23 Enacted Budget Analysis. Office of the New York State Comptroller. Retrieved from <https://www.osc.state.ny.us/reports/state-fiscal-year-2022-23-enacted-budget-analysis>

To support successful transitions into kindergarten, New York State Birth Through Five Preschool Development (NYSB5) grants, also, as part of the Every Student Succeeds Act⁵ (ESSA), have provided funding for Kindergarten Transition (KT) Summits as well as Seed Money to Kindergarten Transition Teams for innovative Kindergarten Transition practices for the past four years. These initiatives have allowed communities around the state to enhance or initiate transition teams and strengthen transitions for children, parents, and staff.

To date the NYB5 Needs Assessment and updates have helped define the needs of families and providers of children five years old and younger. The reports have supported other data discussing the high cost, inequitable access, and other challenges for families. They have also underscored the needs of the early childhood workforce and programs serving young children. This report will review current kindergarten transition activities in New York State in terms of best practices, examine the impact of NYB5 deliverables on these activities, and pinpoint what remains to be done to ensure successful transitions to kindergarten for all children in NYS. This goal is accomplished by incorporating data gathered from the Kindergarten Transition Summits, surveys of Kindergarten Transition seed money recipients, focus groups with parents of children entering or already in kindergarten, and interviews with school administrators and program providers who have implemented new ideas/practices or augmented existing practices with Kindergarten Transition Seed Money.

Methodology

The data for this report were obtained through a combination of primary and secondary methods. The following sources were used:

- **Focus groups** with parents of children entering kindergarten or already enrolled in kindergarten (3 groups, a total of 5 respondents). While not a large sample, these parents came from a variety of socio-economic groups and geographic areas across the state.
- **Key Informant Interviews** with six local providers or administrators who received KT Seed Money (6 interviews conducted). These providers represent a wide geographic range within New York State (outside of New York City) including the North Country, Hudson Valley, Southern Tier, Western and Central New York. They also represent a variety of provider types, including school district administrators, library staff, and Migrant and Seasonal Head Start.
- A **review of** Kindergarten Transition best practices, KT Summit documentation, and Seed Money awardee surveys.

⁵ Every Student Succeeds Act, 20 U.S.C. § 6301 (2015). [congress.gov/114/plaws/publ95/PLAW-114publ95.pdf](https://www.congress.gov/114/plaws/publ95/PLAW-114publ95.pdf)

Findings

Previous Needs Assessment Findings on KT Needs

The 2019 NYSB5 Needs Assessment process found that while the kindergarten *“transition process is very supportive for many children and families, efforts could be improved to reach all children and families.”*⁶ Transitions for children and families in Head Start or state-administered prekindergarten programs were typically smooth, given the connections to school districts and standardized activities in place.

But while transition procedures for children with disabilities are prescribed by federal and state laws that govern the processes between Early Intervention (for children under three years old) and CPSE for preschool age children, and CPSE and CSE for incoming elementary school students, and are typically followed, some of the parents who participated in focus groups for this report whose children are receiving these services reported that the transition to kindergarten still caused them stress and anxiety. Even with this standardization, they felt there was a lack of consistency between services, and a lack of awareness of the social-emotional needs of their children, for whom routines are essential.

And further, home-based child care providers (both family and group family) who participated in the 2019 focus groups were unclear about the skills necessary for success in kindergarten classrooms. Parents whose children were in home-based care or in private child care centers reported feeling that there were no supports in place to ensure a smooth transition into kindergarten for their children.⁷

The parent focus groups conducted in 2019 (total of 83 parents) found that supports for vulnerable and underserved populations are unevenly provided. Some parents felt that their children’s transition to kindergarten was chaotic. Parents who don’t speak English reported not always being able to access materials in their language. Rural home-based care providers were confused about the special education transition process. To provide equal access to all children, it is necessary to reach all children and to develop programming that meets them where they are.

Best Practices in Kindergarten Transitions

It is important that all programs serving children prior to entering kindergarten, whether in a formal school setting, a child care center, a community-based organization (CBO), or in a home, prepare children for entry into kindergarten. Head Start has published the following system-level best practices for arriving at successful kindergarten transitions:

- assess partnerships among affected individuals,
- identify the goals of the transition and align those goals among partners,
- evaluate the current systems in place,

⁶ New York State Council on Children and Families. (2019). *New York State Birth Through Five (NYSB5) Preschool Development Grant Needs Assessment Report*. https://www.ccf.ny.gov/files/4915/7773/1159/nysb5_na_report.pdf

⁷ Ibid.

- examine the data,
- plan and prioritize changes to the current systems, and
- implement and evaluate those changes.⁸

Additionally, using NYSB5 funding, NYS held a Kindergarten Transition Summit Orientation in March 2019 which helped highlight additional best practices at the family/individual level for successful transitions, such as:

- meeting with a kindergarten teacher,
- meeting with the principal,
- taking a tour of the school,
- talking with preschool staff about kindergarten,
- talking with parents of their child’s new classmates (while children play together),
- participating in elementary school-wide activities the year before kindergarten entry,
- meeting with their child’s anticipated kindergarten teachers, and attending an orientation to kindergarten.⁹

NYSB5 Activities: Kindergarten Transition Orientations, Summits, and Seed Money Awardees

The Early Learning Guidelines (ELG), developed by the Early Childhood Advisory Council (ECAC) and the Council on Children and Families (CCF), “aim to standardize expectations and provide a framework for collaboration.”¹⁰ These guidelines help provide additional recommendations for successful kindergarten transitions by framing the knowledge and skills young children should have before entering kindergarten. The ELGs are intended for use by all early childhood professionals as they educate and care for children before entering kindergarten. New York State is promoting the ELGs by providing them to every licensed child care center in the state, and through the NYSB5 grant has provided additional revision, training, and dissemination of the ELGs.

The Next Generation Learning Standards were approved by the NY State Board of Regents in 2017. NY State Education Department revised its NYS Prekindergarten Learning Standards Resources to support early learning educators in implementing these standards.¹¹ Other early childhood documents, such as the Core Body of Knowledge (CBK), provide guidance for early

⁸ National Center on Quality Teaching and Learning. *Effective transitions to enhance school readiness*. Retrieved from <https://slideplayer.com/slide/3889352/>

⁹Pianta, R. C., Kraft-Sayre, M., Rimm-Kaufman, S., Gercke, N., & Higgins, T. (2001). Collaboration in building partnerships between families and schools: The National Center for Early Development and Learning’s Kindergarten Transition Intervention. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 16(1), 117–132. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0885-2006\(01\)00089-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0885-2006(01)00089-8)

¹⁰ New York State Council on Children and Families. (2019). *New York State Birth Through Five (NYSB5) Preschool Development Grant Needs Assessment Report*. https://www.ccf.ny.gov/files/4915/7773/1159/nysb5_na_report.pdf

¹¹ <https://www.nysed.gov/sites/default/files/programs/early-learning/pk-standards-resource-web-revised-2021.pdf>. The Prekindergarten Learning Standards were created in 2012 and updated in 2021.

care and learning professionals. NYSB5 funds have been used to distribute these documents at train-the-trainer institutes and to higher education teacher preparation programs.

Table 1: Resource Dissemination by the Council on Children & Families (CCF)¹²

Resource	Number Distributed
Core Body of Knowledge	5,106
Pre-K Learning Standards	1,949
Early Learning Guidelines (English)	3,880
Early Learning Guidelines (Spanish)	440

“Based on the proven successes of the transition practices required of Head Start programs, CCF used NYSB5 funds in partnership with the NY State Education Department, the New York Association for the Education of Young Children and the Early Care and Learning Council, to host two statewide Kindergarten Transition Summit Orientations”¹³, one in March 2020 and one in March of 2021. These summits were organized to demonstrate how regional summits can be convened to support children and families with transitions into kindergarten. Participants were invited to apply for funding to host a regional transition summit to convene parents, school districts administrators, prekindergarten and kindergarten teachers, Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies, special education providers, Head Start, Community Based Organizations, family child care providers, child care centers, parent organizations, health care providers, and local coalitions.

Kindergarten Transition Summit Goal

The goal of these summits is to encourage the establishment of local transition teams and to develop policies, procedures, and annual activities that will support the needs of families with young children and families as they transition into kindergarten. The first Orientation was held in person; the rest were held virtually due to the pandemic. These orientation summits resulted in overwhelming interest on the part of attendees to host regional Kindergarten Transition Summits. Two virtual regional summits were held, with 37 transition teams participating (including 7 newly formed teams).

CCF also professionally recorded a Kindergarten Transition Orientation with State Education Department, QUALITYstarsNY, and many other statewide partners so participants can view it with their teams at their convenience. (<https://www.ccf.ny.gov/our-work/early-childhood-care-and-education/preschool-development-birth-through-five>)

¹²<https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/center.for.human.services.research/viz/CCFResourceDissemination/CCFResourceDissemination>. Updated 2/1/2023.

¹³ New York State Council on Children and Families. (2019). *New York State Birth Through Five (NYSB5) Preschool Development Grant Needs Assessment Report*. https://www.ccf.ny.gov/files/4915/7773/1159/nysb5_na_report.pdf

Seed Money Recipient Feedback

2021, 2022, 2023 years' funds were directed towards the Kindergarten Transition Seed Money for Transition Teams. The NYSB5 Seed Money funding was designed to allow individual communities to develop kindergarten transition practices specifically tailored for the children and parents in their areas. This funding has been offered for the past three years, and the activities that were funded were reviewed enthusiastically by children, parents, and administrators alike.

Administrators across the state who were interviewed all discussed the importance of KT activities and the need for high quality programming. They said that children need extra support during this transition because there are usually fewer adults and more students in the classroom than they are used to and because kindergarten requires a more independent skill set. Some also noted that it sometimes takes up to eight weeks for children to adjust.

While all recipients of the Seed Money had some KT activities in place prior to receiving the funds, they varied in degree and scope. Administrators of state-administered prekindergarten programs reported having well-established KT infrastructure and processes in place, making the transition smoother. Children attending these programs could more easily tour kindergarten classrooms and meet the teachers when they were already located in the same building or on the same campus. One administrator stated that when state-administered prekindergarten students graduate, they "roll right into kindergarten."

These providers used the KT seed funding to enhance their current KT practices by organizing district-wide community events in centrally located schools or other locations, where families with transitioning children could meet other families and district personnel and participate in recreational activities such as games, arts, parades, and story time. Families could register for library cards, take home book bags with school supplies, talk to mental health consultants and social workers, and experience riding a school bus together. One program had school busses pick up and drop off families at the event, so they could practice transportation drop off/pick up together; another had a school bus simulation exercise which similarly helped familiarize pre-kindergarteners with this new transportation mode.

Other innovative practices included:

- a haircut station where incoming kindergartners could get free back-to-school haircuts,
- inviting the local fire and police departments to meet and greet parents and children and give out hats and coloring books,
- presentations by dental students about oral health, and
- evening workshops for families who work during the day to meet school personnel.

Other administrators described a more complicated transition process in their interviews. They were either located in child care deserts (and so had proportionally more children who did not attend any formal program before entering kindergarten), or they had more children coming

from home-based child care and/or CBOs that were not partnered with the school district. These incoming kindergartners were less likely to be acclimated to public school environments or routines, and thus might need more time or structured support to adjust.

Administrators reported that teachers could usually identify which children attended state-administered prekindergarten compared to those who either attended other prekindergarten programs (and thus experienced different philosophies and regulations) or no prekindergarten program at all. They noted that children who attended state-administered prekindergarten in public schools often had a smoother transition because they tended to enter kindergarten already having some academic knowledge (e.g., vocabulary, familiarity with numbers), were more ready to learn, had the skill sets they needed (e.g., knowing how to get in a line, hold scissors, share, and sort things), and were more familiar with the school setting/environment. They recognized that more support was needed for incoming kindergartners who had not attended state-administered prekindergarten, and so used the KT seed funding to help create Kinder Camps. These were more structured than the community day events previously described and ranged from a one-day event at the local library that simulated the first day of school to a week-long camp where students attended half-day classes in the classrooms, met the teachers and toured the school. There were activities and information sessions for parents as well.

The goal for all these KT activities was to bring children, parents, and schools together in the summer before kindergarten started to familiarize them with each other and connect families to school and community resources. The community day events were described by parents and teachers as successful, fun, and well-attended. Most districts planned to host such days annually. Positive feedback from teachers who participated in the school-based KT activities included children being more comfortable with their environment, far less crying on the first day of school, and the teachers being able to get a feel for what the students were like and what to expect. They felt the children who attended the week-long Kinder Camp entered kindergarten with a level of independence, confidence, and readiness that would have taken the first week of school to establish, allowing the teachers to begin focusing on academic activities sooner.

Despite these successes, KT Seed Money recipients identified some barriers to a more effective transition experience for children and their families:

- **Transportation:** Some families had difficulty accessing KT events even if they were held in a centralized location because they lived in rural areas/child care deserts where programs are spread out. One administrator reported reimbursing families who had to travel long distances to attend, while others offered virtual access to KT activities.
- **Language barriers:** Providers described an increase in immigrants and families whose primary language was not English. Rural districts were not prepared to translate for families. Translators are needed at the KT events and throughout the year to facilitate a smoother transition for this vulnerable population.

- **Food:** Food was not an allowable expense under the Seed Money Grants, but many administrators argued it was needed to be able to provide full-day or week-long activities. They thought that more families would have attended if food were provided.
- **Timing of events:** Most of the KT events were held during the day. Some providers suggested holding additional community-based events in the evening when it may be easier for working parents to attend.
- **District support:** CBOs sometimes had more difficulty getting support from district personnel to participate in their KT events, especially if the district held its own school-based KT event. Children who attended these CBO programs did not always have the same opportunity to meet teachers or tour the school and classrooms, so more district involvement is needed to allow for these experiences.

In addition, providers described a major barrier to kindergarten transition in general, not related to the KT seed money grant activities: not being able to provide **special education services** for all incoming kindergarten students due to a shortage of providers. This shortage left families on long waitlists and caused disruptions to the continuity of care.

Overall, results from the KT Seed Money recipient interviews showed that funds were used to enhance current KT activities rather than overhaul them, demonstrating that many administrators already understood KT best practices. Increased funding allowed participants to build on their existing efforts to enhance high-quality transition practices. Key takeaways for successful KT practices that emerged from the interviews included:

- have children and families visit Kindergarten classrooms, tour the school, meet teachers, staff, and administrators in-person or virtually;
- include experience with transportation, drop off/pick up;
- connect families with community resources at events, such as mental health consultants, social workers, library access, and special education services;
- provide supplies for basic needs at the events (e.g., toothbrush, toothpaste, haircuts) and backpacks with school supplies (e.g., pencils, pencil holders, markers, notebooks, folders);
- hold KT events in summer close to the start of the school year, including evening events for working parents if possible;
- use funds to compensate teachers for the extra time to attend events, prepare for the school year; and
- keep a classroom open year-round for tours, meetings with parents, and prekindergarten and kindergarten teacher meetings to discuss individual students and their needs.

Many of these takeaways are in line with the best practices identified at the 2019 NYS Kindergarten Transition Summit Orientation.

Other notable KT practices discussed by administrators during interviews that aligned with best practices included:

- involve multiple stakeholders in planning and implementing KT activities (e.g., establish education advisory committees (KT Teams) consisting of school teachers, staff, administrators, community partners, and parents to meet every Spring to discuss the transition process, what happened with the most recent graduating class, and what else can be done to help students through the process);
- hold 2-part parent meetings with the kindergarten teacher or principal for those with children who are transitioning: first to assess their needs via survey, second to review results, identify solutions, and help where needed;
- notify parents of registration and screenings;
- have teachers send school readiness activities home by summer pre-transition into kindergarten;
- solicit parent feedback (e.g., ask parents what they wished they knew that first day of school but didn't, what supplies they wished were provided, what they learned along the way that would have been good to know going in); and
- solicit kindergarten teacher feedback (e.g., asking what they wish kids knew when they walked into the classroom).

Parent Feedback

Transitions to kindergarten were reported to be easier for children who had attended prekindergarten in the same school as the one they were entering for kindergarten. These children already knew the building. One child was assigned a “reading buddy” from an older class, which helped her to feel comfortable and excited about moving into kindergarten. One school also held an open house for the prekindergarten classes so students could see their new classrooms and meet their new teachers.

Even so, these parents reported that kindergarten routines were still a big adjustment. Preschool has more free play, more snack time, and nap time; kindergarten students generally have less free play, one snack time, and less nap time. One parent stated that her child was “exhausted” after school, even though she was in school for the same number of hours as PreK. Another parent mentioned that her child’s school retained nap time for the first half of the year, and then slowly transitioned that time to “quiet time,” when students could read or write in their journals. She reported that this slower transition made the transition to a full school day easier for her child.

One parent in this group mentioned that their child had to adjust to being transported both to and from school on the bus. The transportation on a bus to and from school can be a big transition children who were previously taken to school and picked up by caregivers.

Two parents whose children have special needs reported that they had further difficulties in making this transition. One parent with a child who attended a specialized private preschool program in NYC was transitioning to public kindergarten the next year. She explained the onerous application process for public kindergarten which required parents to apply online, select up to 12 schools, and then apply separately for special education

services if needed. This parent reported that she was not informed about the application process until October; and because applications were due in January, she didn't have time to visit the schools she was interested in. As she noted, *"I'm sure we will get more information, but we won't get it until later because the schools in the city operate as silos. It's on the leadership of each school how they will reach out to parents."*

This parent expressed interest in a "kindergarten introduction program," where the children could come in for a week before kindergarten started and be introduced to the teachers, the classrooms, and the new routines.

Conclusions

Several school districts and regions across NY State have developed effective, high-quality kindergarten transition programming. However, not all districts have been able to achieve this goal. As mentioned in previous Needs Assessments, this programming does not always reach families with children in CBO prekindergarten programs, children in home-based programs, and children in other program types that are not directly connected to public elementary schools.

The kindergarten transition process for children who are receiving special education services is very clearly defined by federal and state laws. However, according to some parents, not all school districts are successfully managing smooth transitions for these families, and more support is needed.

Recommendations

State Department of Education

- Sustain kindergarten transition practices by requiring and supporting the establishment of cross-sector transition teams in every community throughout the state. This work could be done through blending and braiding funds (e.g., private donations, district funding, state funding).
- Ensure all parents of prekindergartners in the state have a list of kindergarten pre-registration requirements that are simple to follow, and in the family's primary language.
- Hire and train professionals who can screen preschoolers for learning and other disabilities.
- Expand Help Me Grow into additional communities across the state.

Committee on Preschool Special Education

- Ensure all preschoolers who may need special education services in kindergarten are evaluated, so that the needed services are in place for them when they get to kindergarten.
- Provide all parents of prekindergartners with information about requesting an evaluation for their child if they think she or he might have a learning disability.

- Provide more support for transitioning CPSE services to CSE services. Mobile/Traveling screening services might facilitate this.

School Districts and LEAs

- Offer formal KT programming — focusing on the cognitive, social emotional, and developmental readiness needed for kindergarten, and structured days and routines of the kindergarten school day as part of the kindergarten transition process.
- Offer informal programming that is oriented to community-building within the district, with fun social events and that connect families to resources at libraries and places of worship.
- Support CBOs and home-based providers in preparing prekindergarten students for kindergarten in the following ways:
 - Increase outreach to both groups to invite preschool families to KT events and inform them about kindergarten registration requirements.
 - Facilitate more collaboration between PreK and kindergarten teachers, possibly through classroom visits.
 - Hold virtual meetings/tours of schools and kindergarten classrooms.
 - Provide transportation or reimbursement to KT events.
 - Provide translation services at KT events and for KT materials.