John W. Gardner Center *for Youth and Their Communities*

Improving the Quality and Continuity of Practice across Early Childhood Education and Elementary Community School Settings

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Summary

Research shows that children experience a smoother transition into elementary school when there is coordination among schools, early childhood education programs, and families. The Early Childhood Community School Linkages Project (the Linkages project) supported three regions with a strong community school platform to improve the quality and continuity of practice across community school and early childhood settings (e.g., centers, providers) and systems (e.g., regional leadership, funding, and policy structures). At the conclusion of three years of planning and implementation, the Linkages project has supported concrete changes in discourse and practice, elevated the importance of improved linkages, and fostered improved capacity to sustain and scale improved linkages within the project's demonstration sites. While schools in more advanced stages of community school development embraced norms and structures that facilitated improved linkages, the findings are relevant to all who are interested in supporting vulnerable children and families to thrive in their transition to elementary school.

An Opportunity for Advancing Knowledge and Practice: The Intersection between Early Childhood Education and Community Schools

Research shows that children experience smoother transitions into elementary school when their schools and families are connected and early childhood education (ECE)[1] and elementary practices cohere and align (Bogard & Takanishi, 2005; Pianta, 1999; Schorr & Marchand, 2007). In addition, kindergarten children whose teachers engage in specific practices intended to support a smooth transition (e.g., meeting with an ECE teacher to discuss strategies to support a particular child) demonstrate improved outcomes including more positive social competencies and more positive academic achievement scores (LoCasale-Crouch, Mashburn, Downer & Pianta, 2008; Schulting, Malone & Dodge, 2005).

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[1] Early childhood education (ECE) refers to the care and education children experience prior to elementary school. In most states, ECE includes pre-K, although in some states, pre-K is part of elementary education.

In light of this research, many organizations are promoting an approach to early learning that spans pre-school through third grade and includes intentional efforts to promote smooth transitions into elementary school (for examples, see Foundation for Child Development's focus on PreK-3rd Education and New America Foundation's Early Education Initiative). Specifically, a preK-3 approach promotes: (a) consistency in learning environments, (b) program quality, (c) coordination and integration of curriculum and teaching practices, and (d) family support services (Foundation for Child Development, 2006).

Consistent with a preK-3 approach, community schools assume that learning develops along a continuum that begins well before elementary school and is best supported through integrated services and programs that support children and their families. Full-service community schools engage a number of partners in meeting the social, emotional, academic, and physical needs of their students and their families. Developing connections with ECE centers and providers in order to support families as they transition into elementary school would be a natural extension of a community school's work. While such intentional connections with ECE centers are not yet common in most elementary school settings, the Coalition for Community Schools (the Coalition) sees community schools as uniquely positioned to advance research and practice regarding a preK-3 approach that includes strategic partnerships between the settings and systems associated with early childhood and elementary education (Melaville & Pearson, 2009).

The Early Childhood Community School Linkages Project

In 2009, the Coalition for Community Schools launched the *Early Childhood Community School Linkages Project* (the Linkages project) to support low-income communities with a strong community school platform to make a deliberate effort to improve the quality and continuity of practice (linkages) across early childhood and community school *settings* (e.g., schools, centers, and providers) and *systems* (e.g., regional leadership, funding, and policy structures). The Coalition provided three regions in Oregon, New Mexico, and Oklahoma with a three-year grant and technical support; the regions, in turn, identified two to four elementary community schools to serve as demonstration sites committed to improving linkages, for a project total of nine demonstration sites. Project participants also included ECE centers, county and city-level social service agencies, and a broad community of constituents including parents, community members, university partners, and local leaders (e.g., mayors, superintendents).

> *Improving linkages* *means improving the quality and continuity of practice across early care and community school settings and systems so that children and families experience smooth and effective transitions and thrive in the early elementary years.*

The Linkages Implementation Study

With support from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, the Coalition engaged the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities at Stanford University to conduct a qualitative implementation study designed to yield insight into the practices and conditions that facilitate improved linkages. The researchers made multiple site visits to each region during which time they conducted over 135 interviews with project participants and completed more than 100 hours of observation, including

observations of site-level meetings, regional meetings, elementary classrooms, early childhood classrooms, and cross-regional convenings. The research team also collected and analyzed hundreds of pages of documents (e.g., meeting notes, conceptual frameworks) created by the three regions throughout the course of the project. While the research findings are based on the work of community schools, they are relevant to all who are interested in supporting children and families to thrive in their transition to elementary school. This brief describes a selection of key findings; additional information can be found in the full research report (see Geiser, Horwitz, & Gerstein, 2012).

Promising Practices

As regions experimented with an array of strategies and policies to improve linkages, a promising theme emerged. In the early stages of the project, most participants viewed the transition into elementary school as an issue of "kindergarten readiness" that focused almost exclusively on a *child's readiness* for kindergarten and assumed that the primary objective of an effort to improve linkages was to ensure that the child was ready to thrive in the elementary school setting. By the end of the project, there was an observable shift to where most participants viewed the transition into elementary school as an issue of *child, family, and school readiness* wherein the focus of an effort to improve linkages involved engaging parents as well as early childhood and elementary educators as active partners and participants in facilitating and supporting a smooth and effective transition. One of the early childhood providers described the shift in this way:

> We were getting [children] ready to take them to the door and then leaving them—and that is not what a good transition is. The key to a successful transition is that the receivers are ready, the travelers are ready, and the deliverers are ready—the schools, the families, and ECE settings.

This shift in thinking and discourse opened up new possibilities and opportunities and led project participants to implement practices designed not only to prepare children and their families for a smooth transition, but also to equip ECE and elementary school settings and the regional systems to support improved linkages. A few examples of these practices are highlighted below.

Preparing Children and their Families

Parent education and capacity building. Almost all of the participating schools and ECE programs implemented practices designed to build parents' capacity to support their child's smooth transition into elementary school. Many efforts focused specifically on supporting parents of infants, toddlers, and young children to understand how early care and learning provide an important foundation for K-12 education. These efforts also focused on building parents' capacity to support and advocate for their children within the K-12 system. Community school staff members intentionally engaged families who did not yet have children enrolled in elementary school because they believed that by supporting the families of infants and toddlers, they were supporting their *future* kindergartners, and in turn, promoting improved linkages. To this end, a few schools invited families to a weekly book club where school staff read books aloud while modeling and explaining strategies to support literacy development with a toddler or pre-school age child. Another school organized a story time in Spanish in one family's home to encourage involvement from Spanish-speaking families. In each of these

examples, the schools provided families with books to keep which helped families grow a home library and create a home environment that supported literacy development.

Opportunities for families to become comfortable in the elementary school setting prior to the start of kindergarten. Across regions, the data illustrated multiple ways in which schools intentionally familiarized children and families with the elementary school setting prior to kindergarten. A few schools focused their efforts on making sure that parents and young children felt welcomed by the school's physical environment. The staff members of one school noticed that their playgrounds were not safe for toddlers and young children, so they installed a play area that was specifically designed for them. Another school transformed an underutilized classroom into an early childhood room that was decorated with a colorful rug where families gathered for parent-child classes, a glider where mothers could soothe and nurse infants, worktables where parents could complete volunteer tasks, and a bookshelf filled with resources regarding early learning and development. Sites without designated early childhood spaces found other ways to familiarize parents with the elementary school environment. Common practices included inviting parents and preschoolers to attend events at the elementary schools (e.g., cultural events, guest speakers, and kindergarten preview nights) and attending to very specific practices that helped parents of young children feel comfortable in the elementary environment. For example, one school arranged to have teachers from the adjacent ECE center greet parents as they arrived at the elementary campus for a kindergarten preview night. Teachers reported that families were very happy to see a familiar face in an unfamiliar setting, and that the mere presence of the ECE teachers helped ease their transition into the new setting.

Almost every site implemented practices to familiarize children with the elementary setting as well. Some practices involved bringing staff and materials into the ECE setting, but most involved bringing ECE students to the elementary schools to experience a typical school day. For example, ECE students visited kindergarten classrooms, participated in various classroom activities, met teachers and other school staff, attended assemblies with kindergarteners, played on the elementary playground, attended story time in the school library, learned to navigate the lunch line, and ate lunch in the school cafeteria.

Summer transition programs prior to the start of kindergarten. A few elementary schools implemented summer transition programs that targeted incoming kindergarten families who had not participated in a formal ECE program. Summer transition programs were two to three weeks long and included both a child and a parent component. The programs were designed to allow the children to become familiar with the kindergarten teachers, classrooms and routines. The programs also familiarized students with the school setting including the office staff, cafeteria procedures, restrooms, and playgrounds, as well as the routines associated with the beginning and end of the school day. While the children attended their program, parents met with school staff and support providers, reviewed the kindergarten curriculum, learned about the importance of school attendance, and developed strategies to support their child's learning at home.

Preparing ECE and Elementary Settings

Cross-setting alignment of curriculum, standards, and assessments. Teachers who are knowledgeable about the developmental characteristics of children ages 3-8 understand the importance of incorporating developmentally appropriate practices into their teaching. However, in light of the current national focus on academic achievement in the early elementary years, many early elementary teachers struggle to integrate developmentally appropriate practices into the scope and sequence they are required to teach. In response to this challenge, one district provided elementary teachers with an instructional coach who had expertise in child development and provided the teachers with individualized support to integrate developmentally appropriate practices into their classrooms. The same district provided teachers with funds to purchase materials that supported developmentally appropriate practices, such as a sand and water table and resources for dramatic play.

> *Developmentally appropriate practices provide "a framework of principles and guidelines for best practice in the care and education of young children, birth through age 8. … The core of developmentally appropriate practice is <u>intentionality</u> in making the many long-term and short-term decisions that add up to practice that promotes young children's optimal learning and development. To make good decisions, teachers must take into consideration what they know (1) about child development and learning, (2) about each child as an individual, and (3) about the social and cultural contexts each child lives in"* (*National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2012*).

In another district, kindergarten and ECE teachers felt that the absence of any common indicators for student growth and development hindered alignment across settings. In an effort to work toward improved alignment, a few kindergarten teachers began using the observation-based GOLD system for assessing children.[2] Primarily used in early childhood classrooms, but designed to be used through kindergarten, the GOLD assessment provided early childhood and kindergarten teachers with shared indicators of student growth across a number of developmental variables.

Cross-setting communication and collaboration to support student learning. When ECE and elementary teachers communicate and share data about students who are moving between their settings, they can think together about how to best support a child's learning and take action to ensure that the child and her family experience continuity of care (e.g., continuity of services from education specialists, counselors or access to school-based food pantries or health clinics). Low-income children and families are particularly vulnerable to gaps in important school-based services. In one school, an ECE and elementary school teacher co-developed students' kindergarten transition plans prior to the start of the school year to ensure that each family experienced continuity in services. In another region, kindergarten teachers observed their incoming kindergarten students in their pre-K setting and met with the pre-K teacher to discuss the observation and think together about how the kindergarten teacher could best support the child's transition to elementary school. In each of these examples,

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[2] Teaching Strategies GOLD is an assessment strategy based on 38 research-based objectives that include predictors of school success and are aligned with the Common Core State Standards, state early learning guidelines, and the Head Start Child Development and Early Learning Framework. For more information, visit www.teachingstrategies.com/page/assessment-early-childhood-overview.cfm

practitioners reached across traditional boundaries to ensure that their settings supported students and their families.

Preparing the System

Leadership development. K-12 educational leaders who understood ECE principles and practices were well-positioned to support and encourage policies and practices that promoted alignment between ECE and elementary education. One region organized a two-day training where 20 community school principals reviewed research on child development with a focus on how ECE supported the development of social and emotional skills. The training also helped principals think about how to encourage appropriate expectations and learning environments for their primary (K-3) students. This training was so well received by the community school principals that it was subsequently delivered at a statewide conference for administrators, principals, and superintendents.

Similarly, ECE leaders who understood elementary norms, expectations, and practices were able to adjust their practice to support linkages. For example, in one community, a regional ECE director implemented a policy which required her staff to ask families of infants and toddlers where their children would attend kindergarten. This question led to conversations regarding the relationship between early learning and kindergarten, the importance of kindergarten success, the process for on-time kindergarten registration, and various opportunities to connect with the local elementary school prior to the start of kindergarten.

Early kindergarten registration. One obstacle to smooth transitions is that many families register for kindergarten in the few days before, and sometimes after, kindergarten begins (Smythe-Leistico, 2012). When anticipated enrollment is far different from the actual enrollment at the start of the school year, schools spend the first few days or weeks of the academic year adjusting classroom arrangements and reconfiguring staffing and the transition into kindergarten is far from smooth. In contrast, when families register during the spring prior to the start of kindergarten, schools are able to plan appropriately for the beginning of the year and connect incoming kindergartners and their families to various supports for a smooth transition (e.g., summer transition programs). Kindergarten registration efforts are often the responsibility of individual schools, but in one region, district leaders assumed full responsibility for branding, marketing, and coordinating kindergarten registration. As a result of this new practice, families received consistent and widespread messaging about kindergarten registration, districts saw an increase in early registration, and schools reported a noticeably smoother start to the school year.

Conditions that Facilitated Improved Linkages

When the research team looked across the nine demonstration sites and the three participating regions, they found patterns in the conditions that facilitated and hindered improved linkages. Across regions, five conditions proved to be particularly important. The implication is that while it is important to implement system- and setting-level practices to improve linkages, it is equally important to intentionally cultivate and sustain these conditions.

Regional Leadership Teams and a Linkages Coordinator

Regional leadership teams included ECE and community school staff as well as leaders from key intermediary and community-based organizations. In most cases, these participants had decision-making authority, which enabled them to translate the team's ideas and decisions into actionable steps. Members of the leadership team valued collaborating with their colleagues in a way that had not been possible prior to the Linkages project. For example, one district administrator noted, "I went to an ECE collaborative meeting and they were so glad that I was there. I never realized that we hadn't been at the table." A regional family service provider added, "Aside from the steering committee, I don't have any interaction or contact with ECE providers or sites. That has been more interesting and complex than I had ever imagined." These comments reflect statements made by team members in every region. In addition to the regional leadership teams, the presence of a dedicated coordinator was vital to brokering relationships and connections between individuals and agencies, providing support and mentoring to all involved with the project, sustaining the effort within the local context, and connecting the work to regional, state-wide and national efforts that complemented their effort to improve linkages.

Proximity between Elementary Schools and Early Childhood Centers

Within the Linkages Project, there was variation in the proximity between community schools and ECE centers; seven sites had co-located community schools and ECE programs and two did not. However, *proximity* did not necessarily translate to *relationships.* Some co-located sites had never interacted prior to the Linkages project and others had interacted but described those experiences as "difficult" or "negative." Through the Linkages project, almost all of the co-located sites leveraged their proximity to experiment with low-cost and high-value practices that facilitated linkages. For example, staff from co-located sites observed each other's classrooms and attended events at each other's school (or center). There were also examples of ECE students visiting co-located elementary schools to attend assemblies with kindergarteners and elementary students visiting ECE centers in order to read to students. Several ECE and elementary staff members reported that improving relationships with nearby sites led to "early successes" which prompted cross-site conversations about how to develop linkages with sites located farther away.

Support from Experts and Champions

Multiple individual and organizational experts and "champions" supported and advocated for the Linkages project. National organizations, such as Attendance Works, Families and Work Institute, and Children's Aid Society provided research, planning tools, community engagement resources, and technical assistance that informed and facilitated each region's effort to improve linkages. Regional and district-level entities, such as university partners, ECE experts and working groups, policy advocates, and curriculum and pedagogy experts introduced theoretical and conceptual frameworks to regional leadership collaboratives and situated the Linkages project in the context of larger regional priorities (e.g., chronic absence initiatives, cradle to career initiatives). In one region, a district-level administrator with a passion for early childhood education spearheaded the development of a summer transition program and secured funding for its implementation. Garnering support from influential practitioners and policy makers helped schools and regions refine their thinking about

linkages, expand the dialogue regarding linkages to include a broader group of constituents, and acquire additional resources to support improved linkages.

Opportunities to Learn and Innovate

Multiple role groups (e.g., teachers, administrators, policy makers) had opportunities to visit different sites engaged in improving linkages which allowed them to observe initiatives at various stages of development and build relationships with people engaged in similar efforts. Participants valued the opportunity to step outside their work, exchange ideas and knowledge with other practitioners, and reflect on how to adapt new practices in their own settings. For example, after seeing how a school in a different region was developing relationships with families, one teacher was inspired to strengthen his school's approach to family engagement. He felt confident and well equipped to approach his principal with his idea and successfully piloted a new school-wide initiative. Providing diverse constituents with opportunities to learn from one another helped them explore new ideas and adapt them to their own improvement efforts.

Mature Stage of Community School Development

Community schools in more advanced stages of development were well positioned to improve linkages because they tended to embrace norms and structures that facilitated connections with early childhood education centers and systems. Of the nine elementary schools in the study, five exhibited characteristics of mature community schools, including a systematic and intentional focus on supporting the needs of the whole child and the capacity to engage in collaborative relationships and partnerships. These five schools viewed themselves as one of several interdependent settings supporting children and families and saw partnering with other organizations as essential to their capacity to support families. Through staffing (e.g., a community school coordinator) and school structures (e.g., policies and procedures for initiating and sustaining partnerships), more mature community schools also possessed the technical capacity to facilitate relationships with partner organizations. Schools in earlier stages of community school development also implemented creative and promising strategies to improve linkages; however, their efforts tended to emerge as a result of (and were therefore dependent upon) one individual's hard work rather than the vision and support of a cross-agency partnership.

Policy, Practice, and Research Implications

While there are multiple issues that need to be addressed at the federal, state and local levels to support smooth and effective transitions for families, the findings did suggest that four efforts in particular may facilitate improved linkages.

Cultivate shared responsibility for smooth and effective linkages. By framing an effort to improve linkages as an effort that involved attention to children, families, settings, and systems, project participants shifted the responsibility for this work from one person or agency to the collective work of a number of different constituents. Every effort to cultivate shared responsibility and mutual respect furthered the discourse and practice associated with improved linkages.

Expand leadership expertise to reflect a preK-3 continuum. Findings from this study demonstrate that leaders with expertise in both elementary education and early childhood education are able to develop creative and appropriate strategies to improve linkages. When this knowledge is coupled with the skills and habits of those fluent in the work of community schools—one who is both committed to and capable of supporting effective partnerships—then the leader is poised to support and sustain improved linkages.

Identify opportunities to align ECE and elementary curriculum and pedagogy. Elementary and early childhood teachers in all three regions found that any effort to align their practice (e.g., curriculum, instruction, assessment) fostered a sense of continuity and coherence for children and families. As schools prepare to implement the Common Core Standards, elementary educators and parents are poised to expand their current discussions regarding learning in the early elementary grades to include ECE colleagues. Researchers and policymakers involved with teacher preparation well-positioned to promote continuity between ECE and elementary education. For example, Stanford and UCLA researchers are creating a model for promoting continuity in preK-3 math instruction through a renewed approach to teacher preparation and instructional coaching designed to serve both pre-K and elementary teachers (Erickson, 2012).

Secure funding to support and sustain improved linkages. Participating regions leveraged modest amounts of project funding to pilot setting- and system-level practices designed to improve linkages. When diverse stakeholders experienced the value of these strategies, they began to explore how other funds could be used to sustain and expand their efforts. For example, one school used linkages funds to pilot a summer transition program that served approximately 20 children and their parents. When the school found that the program supported both literacy goals and linkages goals, it reallocated some of the funds assigned to the library and other literacy programs to expand the summer transition program in year two. While points of synergy provide promising pathways for sustaining funding for improved linkages, the research found that a modest amount of funds specifically designated for linkages was an essential catalyst for focusing cross-sector attention on improving the experiences of children and their families as they transition into elementary school.

Conclusion

At the conclusion of three years of planning and implementation in three different regions, the Linkages project has supported concrete changes in discourse and practice, elevated the importance of improved linkages, and fostered improved capacity to sustain and scale improved linkages within the project's demonstration sites. These improvements were complemented by a national discourse regarding how communities and schools can work together to serve vulnerable children and families. As the country turns to implementing the Common Core Standards and other policies designed to promote coherence among and between educational programs, attending to key transitions and the needs of the whole child could not be more important. As other large-scale national initiatives that hinge on collaboration (e.g., Campaign for Grade Level Reading) consider their implementation strategies, they can look to the Linkages project for examples of the conditions that help to translate the vision of a large-scale initiative into practices that improve the experiences and outcomes for vulnerable children and their families.

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