

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

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# The Transition from Pre-K to Kindergarten: Parent, Teacher, and Administrator Perspectives

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The present study aimed to identify commonalities and points of divergence in the ways that parents, teachers, and administrators characterize children's transition from public pre-K into kindergarten within a large, diverse school district. A wide range of transition practices were in use across the district, including practices designed to educate parents, connect pre-K and kindergarten stakeholders, train teachers, and provide transition experiences to children. Transition experiences were not uniform across programs, though. Using a consensual qualitative coding approach, we identified three crosscutting themes related to pre-K transitions: (1) pre-k programs and staff invest significant time and effort in supporting successful transitions; (2) preschool programs' school readiness efforts often center on the "mechanics" of the transition, like completing paperwork and teaching children basic school behaviors; and (3) there are concerns about a lack of alignment between pre-K and kindergarten in terms of readiness, behavioral expectations, and learning goals.

*Keywords:* public preschool; kindergarten; transition practices; fade out; school readiness

## INTRODUCTION

The transition into kindergarten is widely viewed as a consequential and challenging time for young children (Yelverton & Mashburn, 2018). Five-year-olds are rapidly developing new capacities to acquire knowledge, reason, complete tasks independently, and control impulses (Skinner, 2018). These capacities can be strained by the expectations that kindergarten places on them: typically, longer school days, more structured learning time, less play time, no nap (Bassok, Latham, & Rorem, 2016; Griebel & Niesel, 2009; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). In addition, parents of new kindergartners find themselves in a new position relative to their children's schooling compared with pre-K, one that often includes less choice in selecting their children's teachers, less contact with teachers, and balancing children's growing autonomy with the need to

encourage academic performance (Griebel & Niesel, 2009; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). The transition to kindergarten therefore represents a dramatic shift across many parts of a child's developmental system (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000).

With ongoing expansions of pre-K (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2019), there is intense interest in how early childhood experiences can be leveraged to support positive development in elementary school (Jenkins et al., 2019) as well as substantial interest in transition activities (e.g. Pears, Carpenter, Kim, Peterson, & Fisher, 2018.). This makes it critically important that early childhood researchers pursue a thoughtful program of research on pre-K to kindergarten transitions. That research should (and does) include high quality experimental and quasi-experimental research, but also benefits from qualitative work that seeks input from the primary stakeholders in early childhood education: parents of rising kindergarteners, teachers, and administrators of pre-K and elementary programs. Aligned with this goal, the current study sought to gain perspectives from parents, teachers, and administrators involved in kindergarten transitions from public pre-K programs in a large school district that reflects the nation's demographic trends: increasing economic, racial/ethnic, and linguistic diversity. Drawing from focus groups and interviews, we aimed to understand stakeholders' transition experiences, expectations for pre-K and kindergarten, and the factors that support or hinder children's successful transitions into school. The purpose of this work is to provide context that can support the development of new quantitative research and inform intervention efforts.

## THEORY AND RESEARCH ON THE TRANSITION TO KINDERGARTEN

Research suggests that the start of school is challenging for some children. Teachers report that about 16% of children have serious difficulties during this transition, and many more display less serious, but still concerning, problems (Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, & Cox, 2000). It is important to note that these children are not evenly distributed across schools but tend to be concentrated in schools serving higher-risk, lower income children (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2000).

Survey and qualitative data underscore the importance that parents place on children's transitions into kindergarten. Parents tend to report a high degree of satisfaction with their children's pre-K experiences and believe that their children are well-prepared for school (Bassok, Markowitz, Player, & Zagardo, 2017; Hatcher, Nuner, & Paulsel, 2012). Although little research has triangulated views from parents, pre-K teachers, and kindergarten teachers within a single study, there is substantial consistency in prior research as to the skills and qualities that these different stakeholders emphasize in preparing children for school. Stakeholders note the importance of children's social skills and self-regulation, with a strong focus on school-specific skills like following teacher directions, paying attention, finishing tasks, and separating from parents (Hatcher et al., 2012; McIntyre, Eckert, Fiese, DiGennaro, & Wildenger, 2007; Wildenger & McIntyre, 2010).

Parents consider children's kindergarten experiences to be important in setting the stage for later learning (Jarrett & Coba-Rodriguez, 2017). They are generally eager to participate in transition activities and report them as being largely positive experiences (La Paro et al., 2003), although low-income parents are less likely to participate than middle income parents (McIntyre et al.,

2007). Parents and teachers also note that transitioning a child into kindergarten is an ongoing process that spans several months, especially when parents' cultural experiences and expectations differ from the norms of their child's new school (Miller, 2015). Shortly after the transition into kindergarten, parents report relatively few concerns about their children but do state that they would have liked to receive more information about kindergarten academic expectations, their own child's readiness for kindergarten, and what else they could have done to support a successful transition (McIntyre et al., 2007; Wildinger & McIntyre, 2011).

## Policies and Practices that Support Successful Transitions

Recognizing the significance of this issue for children and parents, many school divisions now have policies and practices in place to support the transition from pre-k to kindergarten, which can include one-off events or deeper levels of coordination across pre-K and kindergarten programs and teachers. There is some evidence that the intentional use of transition practices can support children's well-being in kindergarten and mitigate the preschool fade-out effect (Benner, Thornton, & Crosnoe, 2017). Transition practices include a wide range of activities initiated by administrators, teachers, or parents, including taking children on classroom visits, parent and child orientation events, and parent-teacher meetings (Ahtola et al., 2011; La Paro, Kraft-Sayre, & Pianta, 2003). Studies have also found that the use of more transition practices is linked with better child outcomes in the first year of school (Ahtola et al., 2011; Benner et al., 2017; LoCasale-Crouch, Mashburn, Downer, & Pianta, 2008; Schulting, Malone, & Dodge, 2005), and the use of transition practices may be of greater benefit for children of socioeconomic disadvantage (LoCasale et al., 2008). Despite this fairly robust evidence, analysis of more recent, large scale data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study – Kindergarten: 2011 Cohort showed few significant associations between transition practices and child outcomes either overall or when specifically examining disadvantaged children (Little, 2017).

Simple counts of transition practices provide one, very limited picture of transition efforts. From a more complex and comprehensive perspective, the concept of alignment across the various features of pre-K and kindergarten programs, systems, and experiences may be a more informative way to approach understanding these transitions. Evidence suggests that promoting continuity in a number of experiences across pre-K and early elementary school can have numerous benefits for student achievement and may play a role in reducing the fade-out effect (Abry, Latham, Bassok, & LoCasale-Crouch, 2015; Jenkins et al., 2015). A 2017 synthesis of pre-K – 3rd grade alignment literature points to the necessity of alignment between instruction (e.g., teaching practices, learning formats), content of instruction, and environment (e.g., behavioral expectations, classroom routines) in order to facilitate students' transitions to formal schooling (Stipek, Franke, Clements, Farran, & Coburn, 2017). The alignment of instructional and behavior management beliefs and greater coordination between pre-K and kindergarten teachers may not only result in higher teacher-rated academic and learning skills once children are in kindergarten, but also in higher achievement across grades (Abry et al., 2015; Jenkins et al., 2015). In spite of these benefits, there is evidence that pre-K and kindergarten experiences are becoming increasingly misaligned (Bassok, et al., 2016). A key area implicated in the pre-K fade-out effect is in the misalignment of content: evidence suggests that children who have attended pre-K are often re-taught information

they have already mastered, meaning that they benefit less from their kindergarten experiences compared with children who had not attended pre-K (Claessens, Engel, & Curran, 2014).

Another aspect of the transition process is the degree to which transition goals and practices articulated by administrators are implemented consistently throughout programs and schools. Education in the United States is highly decentralized, and publicly funded pre-K adds yet another layer to these complicated systems. Pre-K and kindergarten programs are supported by different funding sources and are therefore subject to different standards and accountability (Stipek et al., 2017); in fact, preschool children within a community or even within a single classroom may receive funding from multiple sources (Sandfort, Selden, & Sowa, 2008). Many communities lack integrated policies or governance structures that span across pre-K and elementary schools, resulting in disconnects in the vision for pre-K to kindergarten transitions, whether and how information is shared, and standards for children's learning and development (Geiser, Horwitz, & Gerstein, 2012; Marietta, 2010; Stipek et al., 2017). This suggests the need to gain perspectives from multiple stakeholders across these complex systems, including administrators, teachers, and parents who have experience with different types of programs operating under diverse auspices.

## The School District Context

The current study was conducted in a large urban and suburban school district that serves over 100,000 pre-K through 12th grade students each year. Many of the students come from diverse ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds: over half have a home language other than English and around 40% are identified as low income. A substantial number of students come from recent immigrant families in which neither parent is a U.S. citizen (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2017).

By blending funding from local, state, and federal sources, the school system provides public preschool to 3- and 4-year-olds whose families meet income and employment requirements. These funds finance three types of public pre-K programs: school-based, or pre-K classrooms that sit within schools; community-based, or pre-K classrooms housed within private childcare providers that reserve some spots for publicly-funded enrollees; and Head Start, which are housed both in stand-alone centers and within public schools. This allows programs to provide services that meet children and families "where they are" in the community, but also presents a challenge in guaranteeing that classrooms provide consistent, high quality experiences.

A governing office, working in close collaboration with the school district, maintains coordination of policy and procedures with the school system concerning transition policies and practices, eligibility and access to programming, and strengthening alignment of curriculum and assessment across grades, as well as providing information to families on how to access social services. One of their largest challenges is determining how to coordinate various government entities and organizations to blend funding streams, minimize programmatic fragmentation, and create consistent programming for young children (and families) across multiple administrative auspices and locations.

Although there is a centralized administrative body, individual pre-K and kindergarten programs and schools have latitude in choosing their day-to-day programming. The governing office and school district provide a framework and program requirements, such as minimum education requirements for teachers, but preschool programs choose their curricula and make other key programming decisions.

## The Current Study

This context provides a unique opportunity to learn from a large, diverse school district with some degree of central oversight that is engaging with challenges faced by school districts across the country: the need to provide high quality early education to families that represent many different backgrounds, home languages, and cultural expectations, as well as substantial program decentralization. The purpose of this research was to identify commonalities and points of divergence in parents', teachers', and administrators' views of children's transitions from public pre-K into kindergarten. Using a combination of interview and focus group data, we examined the following questions pertaining to the transition from pre-k to kindergarten. First, what is the range of transition practices in use in this large, diverse school district? Second, is there uniformity in the use of transition practices, or are experiences from program to program highly variable? Third, what common themes emerge across these stakeholders' perceptions of the transition from pre-K to kindergarten, and what are the points of agreement and disagreement in how they discuss these themes?

## METHOD

### Participants

We recruited parents, teachers, and administrators engaged in a larger, longitudinal study to participate in this qualitative study. Participants included 9 administrators (3 district administrators, 3 center directors, and 3 elementary school principals), 10 preschool teachers, 13 kindergarten teachers, and 10 parents of preschoolers. Demographic information on participants is presented in Table 1. Teachers had an average of 12.8 years of experience (14.8 years pre-K teachers, 11.4 years kindergarten teachers); 22% of preschool teachers and 4% of kindergarten teachers reported having completed an early childhood major. Preschool and elementary administrators reported an average of 11.3 years of experience, and 17% had completed an early childhood major (three district-level administrators were not asked to provide demographic information).

Table 1

## Participant Demographics

	Parents	Teachers	Center Directors and Principals
<u>n</u>	10	23	6
Female	80%	100%	100%
<u>Race/Ethnicity</u>			
Black/African-American	20%	9%	9%
Hispanic/Latino	30%	4%	4%
White	20%	83%	83%
Asian	20%	4%	4%
Multiracial, Native American, or other	10%	0%	0%
	<u>Home</u>	<u>Spoken in</u>	
<u>Language</u>	<u>language</u>	<u>classroom</u>	
English	30%	100%	--
Spanish	30%	48%	--
Other	40%	17%	--
Income-to-needs ratio (mean, SD)	0.74 (.5)	--	--
<u>Program Type</u>			
School-based	90%	56%	56%
Private, not-for-profit center	10%	44%	44%

## Measures

We developed sets of semi-structured interview and focus group questions tailored for each stakeholder group (administrators, teachers, parents) to provide participants an opportunity to give open-ended perspectives on transition. Questions focused on three broad topic areas: funding and access to preschool, the transition to kindergarten, and support for diverse families. For the current study, we focus on our discussions related to transitions. Questions were structured to include an open-ended prompt with follow-up questions. The interviews and focus groups were semi-structured and allowed participants to lead the conversation and pursue themes as they arose. Questions included:

1. What role do you play in transition practices?
2. What practices, if any, do you have to help families and students transition to kindergarten? (teachers and administrators only)
3. What is the transition experience like for parents and children?
4. Do you find that there are particular populations of students and families for whom the transition process works smoothly and others for whom it doesn't? (administrators only)

5. What practices, if any, did your child's teacher or school have to help you and your child transition to kindergarten? (parents only)

## Procedure

Using Hill's Guide to Consensual Qualitative Research (1997) and Creswell's Handbook of Mixed Methods in Social and Behavioral Research (2003) to determine our methods, we conducted one-on-one interviews with the district-level administrators and small focus groups for the remaining participants, all face-to-face. Interviews were used with the upper-level administrators due to scheduling constraints and to allow for administrators to speak individually about their experiences. One-on-one interviews with the three district-level administrators were conducted in the spring of the first study year when study children were in preschool.

Focus groups were used with school-level administrators, teachers, and parents to give participants a safe space for open-ended discussion, to empower individuals to speak within a group setting, and to facilitate comparisons of individual and shared experiences. Focus groups are best used for capturing and understanding knowledge related to social processes (Patton, 2002) and were therefore an appropriate format for these discussions. The focus groups involved groups of 2-10 participants. We used a snowball sampling approach to recruit participants: school principals and center directors recommended teachers to be contacted, and administrators and teachers recommended parents. All participants were fully consented for participation. Interviews and focus groups lasted 60-90 minutes and were audio-recorded and then transcribed for coding to facilitate analysis.

We held one focus group of three school principals and another group of three early childhood center program directors. After the administrator-level meetings, we conducted three pre-K teacher focus groups (n = 10 teachers) which were divided between school-based and center-based programs. School-based teachers were a mix of teachers from five elementary schools. The two private, not-for-profit childcare center-based focus groups were conducted with two groups with two teachers each from their respective preschool centers.

Subsequently, administrators and teachers helped us identify and recruit parents interested in joining focus groups. We met with two English-language parent groups (n = 3, n = 4) and with one Spanish-language group (n = 2) in late spring 2017. All parents had children enrolled in public pre-K at the time of the meeting, and all groups met at local libraries. The parent focus group allowed us to understand how parents learned about and used transition practices, communicated with schools and teachers, and evaluated their children's school readiness. A subset of these parents (n = 4) agreed to speak with us in the fall of the following school year, when their children were in kindergarten. Parents were able to report on transition practices in the summer and early months of kindergarten, their communication with schools and teachers, as well as discuss their perspective on their children's transition into kindergarten.

Finally, in the fall of the study's second year, we conducted two focus groups with kindergarten teachers (n = 5, n = 8). We reached out to teachers consented in the larger longitudinal study, and teachers from eight different schools agreed to meet with us. These conversations were largely around transition practices used, how practices are implemented, and their evaluation of the

successes and challenges with transition. Interview and focus group participants received a small honorarium for their participation.

## DATA ANALYSIS

Data were analyzed using a four-stage coding process based on Hill's (1997) consensual qualitative research process and facilitated by the Dedoose online qualitative coding application. First, using a grounded theory approach, the coding team (the first three authors) read through a random subset of transcripts, collaboratively developed a set of basic descriptive codes to characterize the broadest categories of responses, and used these codes to define excerpts within the transcripts (e.g., funding and access to preschool, transitions to kindergarten). All transcripts were then coded independently by at least two coders using these broad codes, and the coding team met to resolve discrepancies. Second, we pulled out all excerpts that had been coded as related to transitions. Coders independently read through each stakeholder group's set of excerpts and identified main themes; coders then met to resolve discrepancies and identify core themes from each stakeholder group. Third, an auditor who had not been involved in coding to that point reviewed each set of themes and offered comments and edits, and the coding team met to review the auditor's suggestions and revise the themes accordingly. Fourth, the coders cross-walked the themes from different stakeholder groups to identify cross-cutting themes, which are presented below. To protect identities, we jointly refer to preschool center directors and upper-level administrators as "preschool administrators".

## RESULTS

### Transition Practices

We compiled a list of all of the transition practices mentioned by administrators, teachers, or parents during interviews and focus groups (see Table 2). They described a range of practices that fell into several broad categories. First, the most frequently mentioned practices were efforts to connect with and provide information to families. Practices that fell into this category included hosting in-person and online panels to answer parents' questions, sending information home with children, using apps to connect parents with kindergarten teachers, and holding kindergarten orientations or open houses for families to visit the schools. Second, there were practices that focused on coordination between elementary and preschool staff. These included meetings between administrators, joint planning on the part of teachers, and sharing information about individual students, among others. A third category involved professional development for teachers: workshops on transitions, training on state standards, and providing teachers with a suggested calendar of transition activities across the year. (Of note, several teachers told us that training opportunities specific to transitions occurred but were not very common.) Finally, there were a range of activities that directly involved children. Children visited kindergarten classrooms and participated in orientations. Some schools conducted assessments or observations of children before they started kindergarten or identified children for inclusion in special summer readiness programs. Pre-K teachers spoke to children about what kindergarten would be like and adjusted routines to better match kindergarten routines. Some schools also organized social activities to

connect entering children and families. In sum, responses underscored the diverse and wide-ranging approaches to transition that were in use across the district.

Table 2. Transition Practices Identified Through Interviews and Focus Groups

Practices that were organized, planned, or attended by:			Practices that were attended or experienced by:	
The District	Administrators /Schools	Teachers/ Classrooms	Parents	Students
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coordinating local readiness networks</li> <li>• Hosting panels of administrators for parents to ask questions</li> <li>• Hosting live online forums to address parents’ transition questions</li> <li>• Events with multiple agencies – sign up for library card, K registration, health services</li> <li>• Open door for parents to come into office to ask questions</li> <li>• Creating team of parent liaisons, education specialists to assist schools/teachers/ parents on transition</li> <li>• Provide pre-k teachers with transition forms to share data with kindergarten teachers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meeting between pre-k administrators and elementary principals</li> <li>• Kindergarten and pre-k staff create joint communication to the public about school readiness</li> <li>• Kindergarten and pre-k staff cooperatively run open house/parent orientation</li> <li>• Kindergarten holds informational meeting for parents of pre-K children about transition</li> <li>• Phone calls to children or families before school began</li> <li>• Send home information about the kindergarten program to parents</li> <li>• Inform and train teachers about state standards</li> <li>• Provide joint planning or collaborative time for pre-K and kindergarten teachers</li> <li>• Provide year-round transition calendar/rubric to teachers</li> <li>• Set up information sessions with parents of school-age children</li> <li>• Identify children eligible for a kindergarten readiness summer program</li> <li>• Support individual parents with registration (e.g., translate forms)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Home visits by teacher or other pre-K staff</li> <li>• Meeting(s) between pre-K teachers and kindergarten teachers</li> <li>• Kindergarten and pre-K staff plan and implement transition practices together (e.g., kindergarten registration)</li> <li>• Pre-k teachers provide transition forms to the kindergarten teacher or school</li> <li>• Kindergarten and pre-K teachers participate in joint training</li> <li>• Provide parents with information about their child’s progress toward development goals</li> <li>• Assess and observe rising kindergarten students at orientation</li> <li>• Kindergarten teachers prepare and distribute picture books introducing their schools</li> <li>• Use apps to connect with families</li> <li>• Send home questionnaires for families to fill out</li> <li>• Give presentations to children and families</li> <li>• Attend school readiness workshops if offered/available</li> <li>• Talk about kindergarten with pre-k students</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A spring orientation about kindergarten for parents of pre-K students</li> <li>• An open house or classroom visit for parents and children before the school year began</li> <li>• Home transition activities provided/suggested by teacher or school</li> <li>• Home transition activities not provided by teachers (e.g. reading with kids, social-emotional conversations)</li> <li>• Parent-teacher conferences</li> <li>• Receive information about their child’s progression toward development goals</li> <li>• Family service workers at center-based pre-k reach out to parents</li> <li>• Parents complete teacher questionnaires</li> <li>• Use apps to connect with teachers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Visits by incoming pre-K students to the kindergarten class before school begins</li> <li>• A spring orientation about kindergarten for children</li> <li>• Attend playdates in the summer (organized by PTO, school principals, or readiness networks)</li> <li>• Arrange for upper grades buddies</li> <li>• Exposure to kindergarten routines (eating in the cafeteria, calendar time, taking the bus, etc.)</li> <li>• Reduced nap time during lead-up to kindergarten</li> <li>• Assessed by Kindergarten teachers at orientation</li> <li>• Receive goodie bags (e.g. crayons and play doh) from kindergarten teachers at orientation</li> <li>• Supplementary summer school if determined necessary</li> </ul>

## Variability In Transition Practices

Conversations with stakeholders indicated that there was considerable variability in schools' and families' engagement in children's transitions. Pre-K administrators, especially district-level administrators, reported setting out a framework and guidance around the transition to kindergarten, but noted that individual schools and programs had a lot of leeway around implementation. One pre-K administrator noted:

We provide access to different ways of looking at transition for principals, but they decide how to do that. We can encourage, we've had conversations, we've had information on why kids' transitions are more successful [...] And we have [over 100] elementary schools [...] I think schools who are connected to us because of their pre-K programs often do more than schools who are pulling from community programs that they may or may not be connected to.

Kindergarten teachers also noted that differences in transition practices largely came down to differences in school leadership, with some schools planning multiple activities to support children and parents while others were limited to a single orientation event. In one focus group, a teacher described her school's practices, which included having an evening orientation for parents followed by individual appointments to help parents fill out paperwork while teachers conducted basic evaluations of their children. A teacher in the same group but from a different school noted "We just do a kindergarten orientation during the day, and the parents come in, and the PTO has a room near the cafeteria... We don't really do anything. We used to, but I've been at this school for six years, and I'm on my fourth principal, and every time you turn around, they're changing."

Pre-K teachers noted that it was easier to collaborate with kindergarten teachers when children were going to stay within the same school for kindergarten. One school-based pre-K teacher noted "There is a huge advantage for base-school kids because you have that constant communication and relationships with the team. My kids are split between being base-school and another neighborhood school... we don't really receive communication from the other school."

Similarly, some parents took advantage of multiple transition activities and placed a high value on preschool and school support, sending their children to supplemental summer programs, getting help filling out paperwork, and attending meetings hosted by the pre-K or elementary school. Others were unable to attend, meetings ("I don't remember well because I never got to go, they usually schedule [orientation events] at work hours") or relied on teachers to lead transition activities. One parent noted, "During the transitions, the teachers are in charge of the transition. That is why this program is so beneficial to us, because we don't have to do much. It is easier because the kids already know the ABC, and that is the nice thing about this program."

It was also clear that some preschool teachers provided a high level of personalized support for parents. One parent noted that her child's pre-K teacher was personally calling all of her students' kindergarten teachers and had completed registration materials for parents. Other parents described participating in various transition activities (orientation events and meetings) but received less individual support from the pre-K.

## Crosscutting Themes

*Theme #1: Pre-K Investment In Successful Transitions.* Related to the provision of transition practices, it was apparent across all stakeholder groups (including those from elementary schools) that much of the energy, enthusiasm, and sense of responsibility for children’s successful transitions was borne by preschool, rather than elementary school, administrators, teachers, and parents. Preschool administrators described a multi-faceted, multi-touch approach to engaging families around transitions. This included holding kindergarten registration events that brought multiple community service agencies together, making translation services or one-on-one support available to families completing paperwork, educating parents about what to expect from public schools, training teachers about transitions, and conducting extensive outreach to connect with diverse communities. One pre-K administrator noted, “I think that our goal with all of our planning and collaborative work is to make sure that everybody is well equipped to talk about transition, so that transition doesn't mean in August, you're helping people get their immunizations or whatever, it starts months and months in advance.”

Likewise, preschool teachers spoke of how the transition to kindergarten was a year-round process beginning well before the start of kindergarten and involving multiple touch-points with families. One teacher stated, “I feel like all year, we're teaching our families how to advocate and be part of the school system because most of the [parents of] children in my classroom went to school in other countries, they're all immigrants here, so they're not familiar with it. [...] All those conferences and home visits are really valuable for helping parents with those transitions.” Several parents and teachers described the high degree of personal investment that preschool teachers put into reaching out to children’s future kindergarten teachers to ensure that important information was passed along. Parents also reported feeling highly satisfied with their children’s preschool experiences and with the level of support they had received around their children’s transitions into kindergarten. Speaking about the experience of her current preschooler in comparison to one of her older children, one parent said “I see the difference with one of my girls. Out of my four kids, one didn’t go, and you can notice the difference. She struggled to adapt to K. [...] Even when she was in first grade, it was challenging for her.”

Elementary school principals and kindergarten teachers were more limited in their descriptions of the transition to kindergarten. Principals described holding kindergarten orientations and similar events, but they also relied heavily on processes led by the county’s early childhood office. For example, responding to a question about whether she required or recommended certain transition practices, one principal said: “I think the county has some, and I'm sure I'm familiar with what those requirements are.” For teachers, it seemed much easier to support children who were transitioning from preschool classrooms co-located within their schools; they had more difficulty obtaining information from or collaborating with external programs. Elementary school administrators and teachers described substantial demands on their time and attention that prevented them from focusing very heavily on any one specific group of kindergarteners.

*Theme #2: School Readiness Centered on the “Mechanics” of School.* Pre-K administrators (including principals with pre-K programs) and teachers tended to place much of their focus on supporting children and families around the “mechanics” of the transition into

kindergarten. In supporting families, this meant helping parents keep track of important dates, complete paperwork, and learn about the norms of public schools. In supporting children, this meant making sure that children were comfortable with school behavioral expectations and routines. For example, one preschool teacher noted that she needed to “[get parents] used to checking your child's book bag, reading the information, and making sure you're writing it down in your calendars...” because parents would “not [get] so many reminders” once their children were in kindergarten. A kindergarten teacher similarly noted that they used time during orientation to let parents know some of the expectations for children, including “that they can put their coat on by themselves or attempt to tie their shoes or pack their backpacks.”

Despite this focus on the mechanics of the transition, some parents and teachers did mention the importance of more traditional school readiness skills. One parent, asked about satisfaction with her child’s preschool experiences, highlighted how well social-emotional skills had been addressed, including “emotions, [...] how to act with other students, they give them schedules, they give them confidence.” Other parents mentioned their pride in seeing their children write their names or sound out words. One parent stated, “I’m proud of all 17 kids in that classroom...I’m proud of the way they have succeeded and the way that they have grown”. After her child started kindergarten, another parent reflected on her child’s readiness for school: “I feel like we were probably ahead of so many of the other children. Just the first week when she came home and they were practicing writing their name I was like, we've been doing this for a year now.”

*Theme #3: Concerns About Alignment Between Pre-K and Kindergarten.* Across stakeholder groups, there were consistent descriptions of experiencing a lack of alignment or a lack of attention to alignment across preschool and kindergarten. There were clearly substantial efforts underway to foster alignment: for example, many schools created opportunities for preschool and kindergarten teachers to visit each other’s classrooms, and preschool teachers completed detailed transition reports on each child with assessment scores and notes about children’s behavior, likes, and dislikes. However, preschool teachers - especially those not working in school buildings - did not feel that kindergarten teachers received or utilized the transition reports. This concern was validated by kindergarten teachers, some of whom did not know that the reports existed or how to access them, with one stating to other teachers: “But you should keep your heads up, because a lot of times [the pre-K transition report] gets lost in the shuffle, [although] I think it's getting better.”

For preschool administrators, alignment efforts seemed to center on three things: aligning curricula, promoting alignment through the use of standards, and getting preschoolers ready to meet kindergarten expectations. Overall, though, discussions of alignment were characterized by vague descriptions or the notion that processes were already in place to support alignment. For example, when asked about curricular alignment, one preschool administrator noted, “But I think it’s aligned, and I talked with both elementary schools throughout the year, saying was there something we could’ve done more to prepare kids [...] And it’s always been pretty positive.” Another preschool administrator discussed using state standards to foster alignment: “I look at the [state standards] for kindergarten and hand them to my staff and say hey, this is what we should be doing toward the end of the school year.” Notably, some preschool administrators and teachers resisted efforts to push preschoolers to meet kindergarten standards. For example, one preschool administrator said “But I have seen push down of curriculum expectations in kindergarten, right?

[...] My children sleep for two hours until August 28 when they leave, because I refuse to decrease what is appropriate, play and sleep and socialization.”

Concerns about the lack of alignment were most apparent in comments from parents. Nearly all parents felt that their children were academically over-prepared for kindergarten and worried that children would feel bored and disengaged. A typical parent comment after the transition to kindergarten was: “I asked her [the teacher], do you think that because he had Head Start he will feel bored, [...] because some kids have had it and some kids not?” Another parent stated, “There should be a more comprehensive list of what the school expects so that the kids come in on an even scale. Because I feel like [...] our kids were so far ahead, and I worry that [my child]’ll get bored.” This was in contrast to kindergarten teachers who often seemed more concerned with children’s ability to follow school routines and had relatively low academic expectations for students, exemplified in the fact that they assessed children on “...basic stuff. Do you know any letters? Can you count a little bit? Do you know some colors and shapes?”

## Secondary Themes

There were three additional themes that were clear across the transcripts and are worth mentioning briefly, although these were raised with somewhat less frequency and prominence. First, the transition to kindergarten was a transition for parents nearly as much as it was a transition for children. This is apparent in many of the excerpts cited above from teachers and administrators describing how they support parents but was also clear in what parents said after their children started kindergarten, such as “He seems to like his teacher. He seems to like his classroom. But I barely know anything about it. I get a weekly email and the weekly email just pinpoints subjects and that’s about it.”

Second, data sharing across pre-K and kindergarten was both a major focus for the school district and a source of frustration at multiple levels. Upper-level administrators and preschool center directors clearly described efforts to provide information to kindergarten teachers via transition forms. As noted above, preschool teachers expressed uncertainty as to whether their transition forms were utilized by kindergarten teachers, and kindergarten teachers confirmed that they often did not receive the ones from outside of their own schools or received them too late to be of use. An additional, interesting subtheme was that, for kindergarten teachers, the value of preschool data was mainly in creating balanced classrooms, so that no teacher had all of the late birthdays or children with the lowest skills. They did not talk about using preschool data to inform instruction or behavioral approaches, and instead expressed the need to assess children on their own once the school year started.

Lastly, this community has invested substantial resources into creating local readiness networks - groups of neighborhood stakeholders that meet to identify and address barriers to school readiness. These were viewed as a great success by some stakeholders, particularly at the administrator level, but many teachers and parents were not aware of them and it appeared that their potential was not yet felt throughout the school district.

## DISCUSSION

The present study provides a snapshot of areas of alignment and misalignment between two large systems, a pre-K system serving low-income, ethnically diverse children and families, and an overlapping, large pre-K-12 school system serving over 100,000 children. Together, these two systems have multiple accountability pressures and competing priorities that drive their decision making. Although both systems are working toward the same positive outcomes for children, and despite their high level of collaboration, there are some notable points of friction. Below, we discuss findings from our qualitative analysis and how this research may inform future work.

### What Should Transitions Involve?

The stakeholders we spoke with described a wide range of transition activities that included high-level collaboration all the way down to playground meet-ups for children. Notably, these activities went far beyond the limited number of transition activities described in some research studies: for example, the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (ECLS-K) surveyed practitioners about six specific practices, which did not include curricular alignment or other forms of coordination between kindergarten and pre-K teachers (Schulting et al., 2005). There were also technology-enabled practices in use in this district which have not shown up in survey research, like holding online panel discussions or using apps to connect parents with kindergarten teachers. This suggests the need for more comprehensive surveys that include a greater range of practices, including social activities to connect incoming children with each other and practices that rely on technology. It also underscores a challenge with survey research, which is that basic counts of transition practices may fail to capture the complexities or potential impact of different transition activities. Does holding an orientation have the same potential for impact as children visiting kindergarten classrooms, or as coordination at the district level to align expectations across grades?

Responses also underscored the variability in implementation. Schools had wide latitude in determining how to support transitions. This may be appropriate, if schools are being responsive to the needs of the families they serve, but it may also mean that some families receive a much higher level of support than others with similar needs.

### Who is Responsible for Successful Transitions?

In the current study, preschool administrators and teachers felt a strong sense of responsibility to get children ready for school but needed involvement from elementary schools to make transitions successful. Likewise, the central early childhood office set forth strategies for promoting successful transitions but relied on individual programs to enact the recommendations. The investment and energy directed toward promoting children's well-being were clear, but it was not always clear who was responsible for different parts of the process.

One area that exemplified this variability and diffusion of responsibility was the practices related to child assessment and data use. Preschool teachers reported spending substantial time completing transition forms. When children changed schools, it was unclear what happened to these forms or

whether they ever reached the child's kindergarten teacher. When teachers received them, it was not clear how they were used or what purpose they served: kindergarten teachers preferred to assess children themselves and mostly used the transition forms from pre-K to form balanced classrooms. It is understandable that teachers want more up-to-date information on children's skills and want to assess children themselves, but also understandable that pre-K teachers feel frustrated that data they provide are not often used.

These challenges may ultimately be related to managing across these complex systems. Researchers who study implementation point out that variability is inevitable in executing any program or practice (Durlak, 2010). One option for further work in this area might include trying to identify the core components of successful transitions – more contacts with families? greater coordination between pre-K and kindergarten teachers? better connections between children and families in the new school? – and focusing efforts on implementing those specific components with greater consistency (Durlak, 2010; Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, Friedman, & Wallace 2005). Another option would be to look at the accountability and incentive structures that surround transition practices and work within those structures to encourage better uptake (Sandfort et al., 2008).

### What is School Readiness?

Another challenge that emerged was that parents, teachers, and administrators did not have a single, unifying definition of school readiness that could serve as a link or handoff across the pre-K and kindergarten period – an outcome for pre-K and a starting point for kindergarten. It was clear that administrators and parents were proud of children's academic skills, but nearly all participants spoke more elaborately about helping parents fill out forms or teaching children how to sit still than they did academics. Kindergarten teachers also expressed low academic expectations for children entering their classrooms and reported emphasizing to parents the importance of basic skills like packing a backpack.

This tendency to discuss school-specific skills and some aspects of social-emotional development over academic skills puts our respondents in line with prior research, which has repeatedly found that parents and teachers are most concerned about social-emotional and behavioral readiness (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2001; Hatcher et al., 2012). This is particularly striking because the quantitative literature as well as federal and state early childhood program standards are heavily focused on academic readiness (Snow, 2006), and research indicates that preschool programs spend much of their time on academic topics (Cabell, DeCoster, LoCasale-Crouch, Hamre, & Pianta, 2013). These findings highlight interesting disconnects between the types of skills participants endorse as important versus the skills and practices they talk most about; what parents notice about children's readiness versus what pre-K and kindergarten teachers think is most important; and between research literature and standards versus the daily experiences of teaching young children. More research is need in this area to better understand how these school-specific skills are related to children's adjustment to school and how academic and social-emotional skills independently predict adjustment.

### What Needs to be Aligned?

Lastly, our conversations highlighted the complexity of the transition from pre-K into kindergarten and the many moving parts that may be aligned or misaligned. Most concerning is the idea expressed by parents that kindergarten classrooms may not capitalize on their children's academic skills. In fact, this is emerging as a plausible explanation for pre-K fade-out: children may come to school with strong academic skills, but teachers focus on teaching basic skills; and without instruction that builds on their skills, children's pre-K advantages fade over time (Claessens et al., 2014; Engel, Claessens, Watts, & Farkas, 2016). In the current study, it seemed that despite efforts to promote academic alignment, there was not a deep understanding of what alignment means, what it might look like, or how to go beyond assumptions about standards or curricula being aligned to think about alignment as environment- and skill-based.

There were concerns about other types of alignment, as well. To what extent should pre-K programs be readying children for kindergarten routines by focusing on academics, reducing nap time, or having lunch in the cafeteria? What types of assessments should be used, and when should they be given? Recent work to define meaningful types of alignment highlights content that builds on children's knowledge, but also pedagogical techniques, routines around learning tasks, classroom management, and parent involvement at school (Stipek et al., 2017). Here, again, it seems important to understand the core components of alignment and focus efforts on those as a priority (Fixsen et al., 2005).

## LIMITATIONS

This work has several limitations worth noting. First, we attempted to represent the diversity of this school division, but our sample was limited to the stakeholders who agreed to meet with us and who spoke English or Spanish well enough to participate. This may have affected the perspectives that we were able to represent. Of particular concern was our inability to connect with parents who primarily spoke languages other than English or Spanish (e.g., Arabic, Urdu), of whom there is a sizable population in this district, or parents who might hesitate to engage with us in person due to concerns about their immigration status.

In addition, it is important to note that all of the elementary school administrators in our focus groups housed pre-K programs within their schools. Our conversations therefore do not represent the practices of schools that serve kindergarteners but do not have pre-K classrooms. There may be substantive differences in the way those principals approach kindergarten transitions.

## CONCLUSION

This work points to the complexity of supporting children's transitions into school. Pre-K and K-12 administrators face serious challenges in promoting alignment across these decentralized systems. Despite efforts on the part of the early childhood office and school district, it was apparent that there is still a need to build consensus around a series of topics: what aspects of school readiness are important for children, what schools should do to support successful transitions, and what transition practices are most effective for children. Research has a role to play in resolving these questions. Future research on these topics should re-examine school readiness skills, and

especially how school-specific skills are related to early school adjustment, to better understand their importance. Researchers should also examine whether and how specific transition practices can ease the start of school and promote adjustment. Information on these topics could help practitioners construct and implement a clearer, evidence-based roadmap to support children as they transition from pre-K to kindergarten.

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