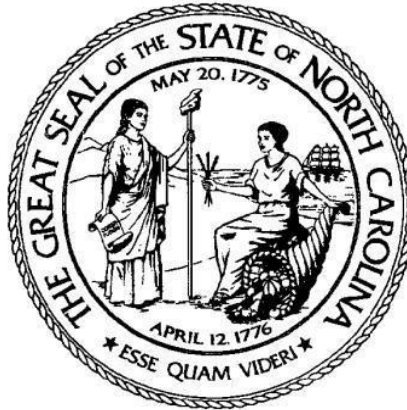


**State Agency Collaboration on Early Childhood Education /
Transition from Preschool to Kindergarten**

Session Law 2017-57, Section 11B.2.(d)



Report to the

**Joint Legislative Oversight Committee on Health and Human
Services**

and

Legislative Education Oversight Committee

By

North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services

January 1, 2018

STATE AGENCY CONTINUED COLLABORATION ON EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION/TRANSITION FROM PRESCHOOL TO KINDERGARTEN

SECTION 11B.2.(c) The Department of Health and Human Services, in consultation with the Department of Public Instruction, shall continue developing a standardized program to transition children from preschool to kindergarten. In developing this standardized transition program, the Department of Health and Human Services shall identify, at a minimum:

- (1) Methods to standardize student transition information such that it is quantifiable.
- (2) Recommendations for sharing data contained in a student's transition plan between preschool teachers and either kindergarten teachers or the schools that receive the incoming kindergarten students.
- (3) Recommendations for sharing data contained in a student's transition plan between preschool teachers and the parents or guardians of the child who is transitioning to kindergarten.
- (4) Recommendations for preschool teacher training and continuing education to support their role in completing transition plans for preschool children.
- (5) Recommendations for baseline information that should be compiled in transition plans for students transitioning to kindergarten.
- (6) Procedures for the management of transition plan documents, including recommendations for the length of records retention, provisions for confidentiality, and proper disposal.
- (7) Any other components the Department deems appropriate in the provision of information between preschools, students' families, and kindergartens.

SECTION 11B.2.(d) The Department of Health and Human Services shall report on the development of the standardized transition program required pursuant to subsection (c) of this section, including any findings and recommendations and any legislative proposals, to the Joint Legislative Oversight Committee on Health and Human Services and the Joint Legislative Education Oversight Committee on or before January 1, 2018.

Introduction

As required by Session Law 2016-94, SECTION 12B.5.(d), the Division of Child Development and Early Education (DCDEE), in consultation with the Department of Public Instruction (DPI), submitted a preliminary report on December 15, 2016 outlining a strategy to address transitions from preschool to kindergarten for children enrolled in the NC Pre-K program or receiving child care subsidy assistance in four and five-star rated child care facilities.

The 2016 report proposed a phased approach to fully implementing a required child transition plan, beginning with a small number of pilot counties. A phased approach allows time for policies to be developed, materials to be tested and piloted, and adjustments to be made prior to statewide implementation. This 2017 report serves to inform the Joint Legislative Oversight Committee on Health and Human Services and the Joint Legislative Education Oversight Committee on additional progress that has been made since the submission of the prior report, as required by Session Law 2017-57, Section 11B.2.(c).

Definition and Goals for Transition Planning

Transition Planning is a process to facilitate sharing of information, coordination of services, alignment of curricula and approaches to teaching, and development of knowledge, skills, and relationships that help students move successfully from one educational setting to another.

Transition Plans include an assessment of a child's strengths and interests and goals and activities that involve the child, the family, the early learning setting, the community, and the school. Transition plans assist in 1) communicating about children's development and needs; 2) welcoming children and their families to their new school or classroom; and 3) helping families, teachers and schools identify the best supports for young children's success.

Current DPI Kindergarten Entry Assessment (KEA) Process

When examining transition practices in North Carolina, the role of the Kindergarten Entry Assessment (KEA) must be considered. The KEA, which is required by DPI to be utilized in all North Carolina public school kindergarten classrooms, examines five developmental domains upon which each entering kindergartener is assessed. These five domains are: 1) approaches to play and learning; 2) language development and communication; 3) cognitive development; 4) emotional and social development and; 5) health and physical development. These same domains are also the basis for the *NC Foundations for Early Learning and Development (Foundations)* which is used by early childhood professionals working with children from birth to age five. The alignment of the KEA and Foundations guides provides a common set of goals and developmental indicators for children within the same five domains of development. This alignment means that there is a common language and indicators used in the assessments

completed in the preschool classroom as well as in the kindergarten classroom. The standardized transition tool will include common language and indicators so that it is meaningful, with data that can be used as part of the KEA completion. It should be noted that some schools and preschool classrooms utilize an assessment system technology platform that might be able to be used to automate the transfer of the transition data from the preschool to the kindergarten classroom. This opportunity will be explored further as the pilot progresses.

Activities Following Submission of Initial Legislative Report

Survey and Focus Groups:

Since the submission of the 2016 report, DHHS and DPI collaborated with the North Carolina Partnership for Children to develop and field a survey to assess the types of preschool to kindergarten transition activities that were taking place in local communities across the state. Additionally, staff completed a review of existing practices and held focus groups with parents and teachers across the state to learn more about existing transition processes. Key lessons learned from these activities are:

- Families are generally unaware of the statewide definition of “kindergarten readiness” and the process for enrolling in kindergarten.
- Most current transition activities are designed to help families enroll their children in kindergarten and facilitate opportunities for children and families to visit the school environment through tours, open houses, and classroom visits.
- Some schools require or encourage kindergarten teachers to make home visits at the beginning of the school year, and
- Some preschools do share child portfolios with kindergarten classrooms.

While these activities are important for easing children’s and families’ anxiety about going to kindergarten, they do not address the need for specific sharing of information between preschool and kindergarten programs about each child.

The families and teachers that were surveyed also identified several barriers to successful preschool to kindergarten transition, including:

- Both groups identified a disconnect between the preschool and kindergarten curricula and daily structure of activities.
- Preschool and kindergarten teachers noted there is a lack of communication between preschool and kindergarten teachers and administrators.
- Kindergarten teachers agreed that transmission of preschool materials such as portfolios and assessments would be helpful, but there was mixed feedback about when and how this should occur, and what information should be included.

Overall, the survey and focus group results demonstrated that, while there are some transition practices occurring in some communities, those efforts are limited and inconsistently implemented across the state. Few communities have standardized transition activities in place that facilitate sharing individual child level information that could assist the kindergarten teacher and schools in better supporting each child's success.

Review of National Best Practices:

In addition to assessing the current transition practices in North Carolina, staff reviewed national research on preschool to kindergarten transition practices. The review found that research has largely focused on a select number of practices offered by elementary schools such as: 1) sending information home to preschool parents about kindergarten; 2) providing school orientation to parents and families; 3) coordinating times for preschoolers and parents to visit a kindergarten classroom or school; 4) shortening school days for entering kindergarteners at the beginning of the school year; 5) providing staggered school entry for kindergarteners to start the school year in smaller groups before meeting with the full class and; 6) allowing kindergarten teachers to conduct home visits.

Studies have documented a wide degree of variability in the use of transition practices. In addition, there is limited evidence indicating that the use of any specific practice or set of transition practices are directly related to child outcomes in kindergarten.^{2,3} One recent study did find that the use of staggered entry into kindergarten – introducing small groups of children and working with those children in small blocks of time – was modestly related to children's academic and executive function skills.

Beyond the scope of preschool to kindergarten transition, scholars and policy makers have proposed a number of policies to facilitate the alignment of educational practices across preschool through third grade. These include: 1) aligned learning standards; 2) aligned curricula; 3) aligned assessments; 4) communication and coordination between preschool programs and elementary grade teachers; 5) aligned communication with parents; 6) data sharing between preschool programs and elementary programs and; 7) aligned quality monitoring.

Selection of Pilot Counties:

Following the completion of the statewide survey, focus groups, review of current state practices, and research on national best practices, DCDEE and DPI convened a state level team to develop a plan to work intensively with a small number of counties to pilot transition planning. The state level team was comprised of staff from the North Carolina Partnership for Children, the Division of Child Development and Early Education, including staff from the NC Pre-K Program, and the Department of Public Instruction's Office of Early Learning, Exceptional Children and Title I programs, and the Head Start State Collaboration office.

In determining the counties to involve, the team agreed that it was important to start with counties that had fully implemented the Kindergarten Entry Assessment (KEA) because those kindergarten

teachers would already be completing the initial assessment of the entering kindergartener using those aligned data elements that had been assessed in the preschool classroom. Additionally, the team felt it was important to select at least one county that had multiple local education agencies (LEA), as well as counties that were both rural, and urban or urban-adjacent. Outreach was made to multiple counties, and three volunteered to participate in the project: Davidson County, Iredell County and Craven County.

Local data on these three counties is noted below:

District	Pre-K Private Sites	Pre-K Private Site Classrooms	Pre-K Public Schools	Pre-K Public School Classrooms	Pre- K Head Start Sites	Pre-K Head Start Classrooms	Kindergarten Elementary Schools	Kindergarten Elementary Classrooms
Craven (one LEA)	3	4	6	12	3	4	15	69
Davidson (three LEAs)	9	10	8	20			19	100
Iredell (two LEAs)	7	8	8	8			18	75
TOTALS	19	22	22	40	3	4	52	244

Davidson County's NC Pre-K program is administered through Smart Start of Davidson County, and the school system selected for the pilot is Davidson County Schools. (Davidson County is also home to Thomasville City Schools and Lexington City Schools). Iredell County's NC Pre-K program is administered through the Iredell County Partnership for Young Children and the school system for the pilot is the Iredell-Statesville Schools. (Iredell County is also home to the Mooresville Graded School District.) In Craven County, the NC Pre-K program is administered through Craven County Schools. Craven County only has one school system.

Next Steps

The NC Pre-Kindergarten program contractor and school system's elementary education program in each of the three pilot counties identified staff who were knowledgeable and available to participate in the pilot for the 2017-18 school year.

All three counties have worked with DCDEE and DPI to provide information and a timeline of their historic and ongoing transition activities and forms. This information is also being shared among the pilot counties to facilitate sharing of best practices. Each of the three counties chose two NC Pre-K classrooms and identified the kindergarten/public schools that those Pre-K classrooms primarily feed into so that transition processes could be closely followed throughout the 2017-18 school year. For the first year, the pilot sites will include children in NC Pre-K

classrooms. In the next year, the pilot counties will expand to include children receiving subsidy assistance.

Each of the participating counties are evaluating the strengths and areas for improvement for the processes and forms they, and each of the other two participating counties, are using. The groups individually, and then collectively, will determine a standard transition plan and process that will be implemented with all their pilot NC Pre-K classrooms at the end of the 2017-18 school year.

Families in all three pilot Pre-K classrooms will be active partners in providing input to their child's transition plan, and will be asked to bring the transition plan from the preschool to their child's kindergarten teacher at the beginning of the 2018-2019 school year. Giving families the responsibility for sharing the transition plan with their child's kindergarten teacher and new school will serve multiple purposes. First and foremost, families will be engaged in their child's transition process. Secondly, because transition out of preschool often takes place several months before the formal beginning of kindergarten, the process of discussing the transition plan with the preschool teacher will allow families to identify activities that they can participate in with their child while they are out of a classroom during the summer. Lastly, when families maintain their child's transition plan, there are no concerns related to privacy or security of education records.

Evaluation

An evaluation tool is being developed to be completed by kindergarten teachers in the Fall 2018. The evaluation will assess how transition data was used, the extent to which kindergarten teachers found the information useful, and if the transition information was helpful to teachers as they completed children's kindergarten entry assessments (KEA). Kindergarten teachers will also indicate any additional information they would like to receive in future transition processes. Because not all children entering the kindergarten class will have come from an NC Pre-K classroom, the evaluation tool will also collect information on what transition process, if any, took place for children who were not enrolled in the NC Pre-K classroom.

Families of NC Pre-K children will also be surveyed to collect feedback on their perception of the transition process for their child. When possible, families of non-NC Pre-K children will also be surveyed regarding the transition for their child.

Feedback from the pilot participants will be used to create a final standardized transition plan and process, as well as training and communication materials for both preschool and kindergarten teachers and staff.

Key Considerations for Statewide Roll-Out:

As the pilot progresses, there are several areas that will be evaluated to determine what will be necessary for transition plans and activities to be successfully implemented statewide, including:

- **What is the most effective method for sharing transition information?** While families are key participants in the transition process, there are also challenges related to making sure transition plans are maintained from the time when the preschool program ends in May, to when kindergarten starts in August. There is no guarantee that all kindergarten teachers will receive transition plans from transmitted from families.
- **What communication tools and activities will best support families in understanding the importance of transitioning children from preschool into kindergarten?** Based on the survey results, few families are aware of what kindergarten readiness includes and how the process of transitioning their children from preschool to kindergarten occurs.
- **What training and onsite support will be needed to help preschool and kindergarten teachers and administrators most effectively use transition plans and engage in transition activities?** Assessing and documenting children's strengths across developmental domains may be new for some teachers, as will including transition activities within the preschool or elementary school's schedule.
- **How can technology be leveraged for transition plan sharing, training, and ongoing documentation and communication between schools and families?** As previously mentioned, some preschool classrooms have invested in an online assessment tool that maintains the data that will be included in the transition tool. For school systems that use this same system, it is possible that access to the data could be provided to the kindergarten teacher, if the family has granted permission.
- **What financial and other resources will be needed for statewide implementation?** Training, technology, and communications tools all have cost considerations.
- **Will standardized transition planning be a voluntary or required activity?** If the intent of the General Assembly is to standardize transition plans and activities statewide, changes in legislation or rules will be needed.

Recommendation:

The newly created Birth through Third Grade Interagency Council can review the results of the pilot effort and make recommendations for statewide implementation. The Department believes the Council's structure provides the best opportunity to make progress on transitions implementation and continued alignment across early childhood and the kindergarten through third grade system.