Draft Oklahoma Early Childhood Transition Toolkit

OKLAHOMA
Education

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Oklahoma School Readiness Toolkit

INTRODUCTION

Every child who enters public prekindergarten or kindergarten undergoes a meaningful change in the learning environment. Regardless of where prior learning has occurred, the public school has a responsibility to open its doors and the heart of the school community to every new pupil. The Oklahoma Early Childhood Transition Toolkit is a guide to support schools as they build positive, effective bridges into early elementary grades and ensure a continuum of learning across home, childcare, preschool, and school.

The Oklahoma State Department of Education's 8-year strategic plan, emphasizes the importance of serving the whole child in a safe, healthy, challenged, engaged and supportive school environment. Oklahoma Edge is grounded in the Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child Model (WSCC), a collaborative approach to the learning and health of children.

The framework in this toolkit supports key improvements for public education outlined in Oklahoma Edge, including aligning early childhood education and learning foundations to ensure at least 75 percent of students are "ready to read" upon kindergarten entry.

Oklahoma defines "ready to read" to mean that children have the necessary prerequisite skills needed to understand print, including meeting the needs of the whole child in cognitive, physical, social and language development as well as in approaches to learning. Achieving the "ready to read" goal relies heavily on the success students experience in prekindergarten classrooms. Oklahoma prioritizes early childhood education in both funding and policy initiatives and seeks to build on the state's long history of success in prioritizing early childhood education. Oklahoma is one of four states that offer universal prekindergarten.

Figure 1: Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child Model (WSCC)

The important role early childhood education plays in the long-term academic success of students is clear. Research on the effectiveness of high-quality prekindergarten and kindergarten experiences reinforces the need for quality early learning experiences and support for families, caregivers, and children as they transition to these critical years of schooling.

For many children and their families or caregivers, the movement from home or early learning centers to public school represents a significant milestone in their lives. Children and families meet this momentous change with both excitement and concern. While children may be excited to move to something new, they may feel anxious about leaving what is familiar – family members, friends, caregivers or teachers – for new people and settings.

The Oklahoma Early Childhood Transition Toolkit outlines the processes by which schools, communities, and families or caregivers can partner to ensure all children enter school feeling "ready," and, in conjunction, that schools are "ready" to serve all children. The framework is guided by the following principles:

- School leaders are critical to the effective transition of young children from home or early learning centers to school.
- Families, caregivers, and community members are important partners in supporting young children as they move into kindergarten and first grade.
- Young learners are members of diverse communities, and it is important to respect, affirm and meet their diverse needs.
- Young learners are unique in their growth and development and require developmentally appropriate curriculum, instruction and assessment that provides exploration, inquiry and play-based learning opportunities.

The Oklahoma Early Childhood Transition Toolkit encompasses five key ways schools can support early learners and their families or caregivers with positive transitions into early elementary grades:
1. Leading Successful School Transitions
2. Building Family, School and, Community Partnerships
3. Enacting Effective Transition Processes
4. Implementing Effective Curricula, Instruction and, Assessments
5. Respecting and Affirming Diversity
   ~ Adapted from North Carolina Ready Schools Toolkit, (2008)

This toolkit provides an **overview** of each component of the framework. These include:
- **Description of the key component**
- **Opportunities to reflect on current transition practices and beliefs**
- **Key strategies** for implementing effective transition practices
- **Recommended actions** schools can take for children entering school that support children and families or caregivers.

Recommendations outlined in this toolkit represent a shift from more traditional views and beliefs about school transitions. The toolkit moves away from the idea of students being ready for school to a vision for "ready schools" – schools that are prepared to welcome and serve their new students.

A ready school provides an inviting atmosphere, values, and respects all children and their families or caregivers and is a place where all children can succeed. **Educators in a ready school** are committed to a **well-rounded education** and cast a vision for deep connection among schools, families, caregivers and communities. Schools invested in being ready for students to understand that all stakeholders play a crucial part to success.

Table 1: Traditional Thinking Versus Ready School Thinking for Early Learners

Traditional Thinking	Ready School Thinking
Teachers and administrators focus on content and teaching and believe:	Ready schools put children first, focus on learning and believe:
Many children are at a disadvantage academically when they start school; therefore we can only do a certain amount in a regular classroom.	**All children start school with the ability to learn.** We must assess and find ways to narrow and close any learning gaps.
Some families/caregivers need to do a better job of helping their children get ready to start school.	**All children are ready to start school.** Some may need extra attention. We will work together with families/caregivers to ease the transition.
We should treat all children the same.	We help all children adjust to the norm and overcome their limitations. **By teaching all children to embrace their uniqueness and respect their differences, we are helping them prepare for a diverse world.**
Students' diversity means lower performance.	**We celebrate students' diversity** and leverage their abilities and backgrounds to make our school stronger.
Screenings provide data to determine a child's readiness for school.	**Screenings provide data that inform instructional practices,** the need for additional assessment and the need for supportive services.
Communication with families/caregivers is limited to the start of school.	**Communication starts early** in the preschool years and is ongoing, providing multiple opportunities for children and families/caregivers to visit the school.
The learning environment supports the 'typical' students.	The **school environment is prepared to support** the learning and development of all children.

~ Adapted from the Ohio Department of Education Ready Schools Task Force (2008)

Leading Successful School Transitions

A school environment that supports successful transitions for early learners begins with school leaders who understand the importance of ensuring every child and family entering the school feels supported. This can be fully realized when the leader casts a vision for equitable transition structures, policies, and resources and provides teachers with the support they need to meet the needs of all children in their classrooms.

Building a school environment that supports the diverse needs of children entering prekindergarten and kindergarten is not an easy task for leaders. Children enter early grades with diverse backgrounds and experiences. Meeting the diverse needs of children **requires a leader to consider the following:**

- **Transition** from home or early learning centers to school represents a significant change in the lives of young children.
- **Working** with families as partners is critical for successful transitions for children.
- **Young learners are unique** in their growth and development.
- **Offering** a variety of community resources that support early growth and development is essential for early childhood development.

Reflecting on Current Transition Practices and Beliefs

- What transition structures and practices are in place and effective at our school for early learners and their families/caregivers?
- How effectively do we connect with families, caregivers, and communities to support children moving into and through prekindergarten and kindergarten?
- What opportunities do we provide families or caregivers to express the supports they believe could benefit them and their children as they move into early elementary grades?
- How do current support structures and policies respond to the diverse cultures of our learners and their families or caregivers?
- How do we ensure students entering school and moving through prekindergarten, kindergarten and primary grades are prepared for transitions from grade to grade?
- How are educators afforded opportunities to collaborate and share information about students as they move from one grade to the next?

Ensure High-Quality and Equitable Transition Experiences

Effective leaders ensure high-quality learning and development for each student through prekindergarten and kindergarten. Effective leaders:

- **Act as a bridge** between schools and communities to strengthen supports and resources for young children and their families or caregivers.
- **Create opportunities** for families or caregivers to visit the prekindergarten classroom before school begins.
- **Support teachers** in using observations, records, and portfolios of student work to guide early learners' growth.

- **Provide facilities and learning opportunities** that support children's health and safety.
- **Create transition programs** that ensure close contact among Head Start programs, preschools, daycare programs, and public schools.
- **Ensure that early childhood programs** meet the needs of the whole child, including independent and guided play-based learning.
- **Provide early education experiences** that are informed by young children's cultural and community experience.

Recommended Actions:
- **Identify** a group of diverse teacher leaders to serve as the **Early Childhood Transition Team** who reflect on current practices and beliefs regarding early childhood transitions and enact structures and policies that ensure high-quality and equitable teaching for early learners.
- **Read** Leading Early Childhood Learning Communities in Schools and discuss with the transition team.
- **Review** the resources provided by the National Association for the Education of Young Children and share one resource you find valuable with early childhood teachers in your building.
- **Provide** opportunities for early childhood teachers to meet regularly to share best practices, examine student assessment data and share strategies for communicating with families or caregivers.
- **Communicate** with families or caregivers directly via email, text, phone call, social media or documents sent home to students to build rapport with families and caregivers.

Building Family, School, and Community Partnerships

Cultivating family, school and community partnerships is critical. Each plays a unique, formative role in the growth and development of children. Four core beliefs serve as the foundation for school partnerships with family and community:

- All families or caregivers have dreams for their children and want the best for them.
- All families or caregivers have the capacity to support their children's learning.
- Families, caregivers, and school staff should be equal partners to address the academic, social, emotional and cultural needs of schoolchildren.
- The responsibility for building partnerships between the school and home rests primarily with school staff, especially school leaders.

Reflecting on Current Transition Practices and Beliefs

- How are we responsive to families or caregivers by listening to concerns, providing information and offering help when requested?
- How do we encourage families or caregivers to share information about their child's strengths and challenges as they move to a new setting?
- How can we connect on a personal level to understand each family's unique situations?
- What opportunities are available for families or caregivers to meet new teachers and visit classrooms?
- How can we develop fun and meaningful traditions for children as they enter and complete prekindergarten or kindergarten?

Create a Family, School, and Community Team

Create a Family, School, and Community Team to develop and enact a school transition plan that allows schools and communities to better coordinate efforts to support families or caregivers and children as they move to and through prekindergarten and kindergarten.

Customize the team to fit each community's needs, resources and realities.
The team may include:
- Families with children ages 3-8
- School personnel, including administrators, support staff and teachers
- Central office staff, including superintendents, school board members, curriculum specialists and support service staff
- Early childhood care and education providers
- Social services providers and medical professionals
- Community, business and faith leaders
- Higher education representatives
- Tribal representatives
- Public libraries

Develop a School Transition Plan

A local transition plan allows all stakeholders, educators and community partners to develop a shared vision for the transition supports provided to children and families or caregivers. It also serves as an agreed-upon plan that school personnel can reference as they support children transitioning in prekindergarten and kindergarten. Consider the following steps when developing a school transition plan:

- **Invite** relevant and diverse stakeholders to participate in the development of the transition plan.
- **Hold** community conversations to get community input and involvement.
- **Evaluate** effective transition practices and policies for students and families.
- **Ensure** that the transition team is representative of the community, with special attention to race, age, geographic location, and socioeconomic status.
- **Implement** transition practices based on family input.

Recommended Actions:

- **Review** the Building Family and School Partnership Strategy Tool to gain strategies for local school district transition plans.
- **Share** Oklahoma Family Guides with family members prior to or at the start of school to provide families or caregivers with information about what they can expect and how they can support their children in prekindergarten and kindergarten.
- **Use** the following guidance from the Community Resources for Families Template to develop a list of community resources to share with families or caregivers.
- **Review** The Early Years: Assets-Based, Language-Focused Family Engagement for Dual Language Learners. These World-Class Instruction Design & Assessment (WIDA) resources can be utilized in a local transition plan.
- **Make** the following books available to educators and others supporting school transitions and conduct book studies: (1) Engaging Every Family: Five Simple Principles (2) Powerful Partnerships: A Teacher's Guide to Engaging Families for Student Success (3) Successful Kindergarten Transition: Your Guide to Connecting Children, Families & Schools
- **Share** the following infographics to support planning school transitions.
    - Preparing a School-Ready Child (REL Southeast)
    - The Ready Child (REL Southeast)
    - The Ready Community (REL Southeast)
    - The Ready School: The Ready Family (REL Southeast)
    - The Ready School: Preparing a School-Ready Child (REL Southeast)

Enacting Effective Transition Process

When children move from home or child care to prekindergarten or from preschool or prekindergarten to kindergarten, they are expected to adjust to new settings and situations, including new rules and expectations, new ways of learning, new relationships to peers and adults and new physical surroundings. Intentional connections between a child's home, child care, preschool, and the school they are entering can provide greater consistency across these settings and minimize the adjustments children must make as they enter school.

Reflecting on Current Transition Practices and Beliefs

- What practices are in place to easily and effectively move children from early childhood into prekindergarten and from prekindergarten to kindergarten?
- How have school representatives and local child care providers connected to discuss the alignment of learning goals across age levels?
- What practices are in place for families or caregivers to share information about the learning experiences their children engaged in prior to entering school and the support structures their children need during school transitions?
- How are families or caregivers, school representatives, the child care community, previous service providers and community members involved in developing school transition plans?
- What is the comprehensive district or community-wide transition plan or process that ensures consistency for school transitions across school sites?

Promote Alignment and Collaboration Between Early Child Care Providers and Schools

Research suggests that collaborations between early child care providers and the schools their children attend can lead to stronger curriculum alignment, shared expectations for children and, ultimately, smoother transitions for children as they enter school. To promote collaboration, alignment and shared expectations:

- **Create transition teams** comprised of representatives of early child care providers and early-grade teachers and identify liaisons that interact with local early child care providers on a regular basis.
- **Provide joint professional development** opportunities for early child care providers and early-grade teachers.
- **Share data** and common data points across systems.
- **Use common forms** for school transitions across multiple programs.

Recommended Actions:

- **Develop and enact transition activities** that engage families or caregivers, early child care providers, educators, and community resources throughout the school year.
- **Review** the Early Childhood Transition Activities Strategy Tool for ideas that can be inserted into a local school transition plan.

- **Provide early-grade teachers with opportunities** to review and reflect on the Oklahoma Department of Human Services Early Learning Guidelines to consider how the learning goals connect to the Oklahoma Prekindergarten and Kindergarten Standards.
- **Utilize** some of the communication tools provided or develop communication templates that can be utilized broadly in your school or district.
- **Review guidance** for Early Childhood Education Preschool Transition for Special Needs Families and consider how the school might implement these strategies in local transition plans and practices.

Implementing Effective Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessments

Naturally curious, young children work and play to make sense of the world around them. They learn best when they are provided with meaningful instructional experiences that build upon and connect to their previous experiences and everyday lives. Young children's learning is determined most significantly by the curriculum and instruction teachers provide and how their teacher interacts with them. Curriculum and instruction that support children as they move into early elementary grades and through school are critical to ensuring they feel successful.

Reflecting on Current Transition Practices and Beliefs

- How do our current transition policies and educational practices support the learning of all students?
- How are we implementing research and evidence-based best practices to support the whole child, including social and emotional growth for prekindergarten and kindergarten transitions?
- How can the Oklahoma Academic Standards Curriculum Frameworks support effective instruction for early childhood learners?
- How are we utilizing research-based curriculum and instructional practices for developing language, reading, mathematics, science and social-emotional skills and leveraging play-based learning?
- How are teachers incorporating culturally responsive teaching practices into their classroom instruction?

Design Effective Learning Experiences

- **Employ** evidence-based educational methods and materials that are effective in supporting a diverse population of children to achieve appropriate academic growth aligned to the Oklahoma Academic Standards.
- **Accommodate and include** children with disabilities and other special needs in regular instructional programs.
- **Align** standards, curriculum, instruction and assessment within a classroom, grade level and across grade levels from preschool through the elementary grades and beyond.

- **Create** a learning continuum for all young children to develop and learn at their own pace.
- **Use** research and data to help drive instructional practice within and across grade levels to ensure alignment and multi-level intervention strategies.
- **Require** an in-depth analysis of instructional practices and learning environments to determine if any achievement gaps exist for students in historically underserved groups.
- **Link** assessments directly to curriculum and instruction to generate meaningful data needed to inform instructional practice.

Recommended Actions:
- **Review** the [Effective Curriculum and Instruction for Early Childhood Education Strategy Tool](#) for strategies for local school district transition plans.
- **Provide opportunities for teams** of early-grade teachers to examine the [Oklahoma Curriculum Frameworks](#) for their respective grade levels to better understand the intent of the standards and gain ideas for instruction.
- **Allow teams of early-grade teachers opportunities** to examine the alignment of curriculum and assessments to the [Oklahoma Academic Standards.](#) The Oklahoma Curriculum Frameworks can support teachers with this analysis.
- **Allow teachers time to review** [five culturally responsive strategies to support young children](#) from the National Association for the Education of Young Children and this article on [Becoming and Culturally Responsive Early Childhood Educator](#) to determine classroom practices and self-reflection techniques that can assist early childhood education teachers with developing culturally responsive [curriculum.](#)
- **Review NAEYC's** [guidance for appropriate use of early assessments.](#)
- **Review NAEYC's** [article on 10 Effective Developmentally Appropriate Practices (DAP](#)**)** and incorporate these research-based practices into classroom instruction.

Respecting and Affirming Diversity
All children deserve to feel accepted and respected and to know they are celebrated. Diversity is complex and includes race, ethnicity, culture, language, socioeconomic status, cognitive and physical ability and differences in early education experiences. As schools support young children as they move into the early elementary grades, it is important to view their differences as a strength and recognize that diversity is present in some way in all children.

Reflecting on Current Transition Practices and Beliefs

- How does the school recognize and celebrate the diversity of early learners and families or caregivers?
- How do instructional practices reflect the diverse learning styles of early learners?

- How do we ensure students with physical disabilities have the supports needed to be successful in the classroom and throughout the school and grounds?
- How can the school ensure that activities for students entering early elementary grades are culturally relevant and meaningful for all early learners?
- How does the early childhood curriculum integrate the knowledge and traditions of diverse cultures?
- In what ways are the leaders of the school and staff culturally responsive and conscious of inclusion issues?
- How do instructional practices reflect an understanding of how culture may influence children's learning and engagement?
- In what ways does the school communicate with children and families or caregivers in their native language?

Incorporate Culturally Responsive Teaching Strategies

Culture is central to learning and connecting classroom learning experiences to the background of early learners and can help them feel more confident about school. Culturally responsive teaching recognizes the importance of including students' cultural references in all aspects of learning.

- **Conduct a cultural inventory** and learn about the language, daily rituals and customs students practice at home and incorporate them into school routines.
- **Create a classroom atmosphere** that is representative of the community and students. Students should be able to see themselves in the books and posters around the room.
- **Focus on what children communicate** rather than how they communicate.
- **Develop** understanding and acknowledge the impact of race, prejudice and discrimination on school experiences of children.

Recommended Actions:
- **Read** the Principal's Guide to Building Culturally Responsive Schools to better understand the importance of leadership in creating a school climate supportive of student diversity.
- **Allocate** time for early childhood educators to review the relevant early-childhood OAS standards and WIDA Kindergarten Can Do Descriptors and reflect on how content standards can be taught in a culturally relevant manner while still accounting for the language abilities of individual students.
- **Review** Valuing Diversity: Developing a Deeper Understanding of All Young Children's Behavior to foster a discussion around teaching strategies and potential professional development ideas regarding practices inclusive of all students.
- **Review** Contexts of Cultural Diversity Professional Development in Schools for additional insights on how culturally sensitive professional development initiatives may be most effectively structured and implemented.
- **Adapt** the Knowledge of Students' Interests and Cultural Heritage resource as a cultural inventory framework to provide teachers with a greater contextual understanding of the students they serve.