

Transition to Kindergarten: Lessons from North Carolina’s Statewide Efforts

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Introduction

In recent years, North Carolina has engaged in efforts to improve the transition to kindergarten process for children, families, and teachers across the state. These efforts include the launch of North Carolina’s Transition to Kindergarten Pilot project in 2018 and activities funded by the state’s Preschool Development Grant Birth to Age 5 (NC’s PDG B-5). As part of the evaluation of North Carolina’s PDG B-5 work, Child Trends conducted a two-phased deep dive evaluation to learn more about transition to kindergarten efforts in counties across the state. The evaluation team gathered data from counties’ transition leadership teams, pre-K teachers, pre-K administrators, kindergarten teachers, local education agency (LEA) administrators, and families. This document briefly describes North Carolina’s recent efforts to support transition to kindergarten, followed by key evaluation findings and recommendations on how the state can continue to support counties’ transition work.

Transition to Kindergarten in North Carolina

North Carolina’s Transition to Kindergarten Pilot project was launched in 2018 in response to language in NC Senate Bill 740 (2016) directing the North Carolina Division of Child Development and Early Education (NC DCDEE) and the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NC DPI) to “study the transition from NC Pre-K [the North Carolina Pre-K Program] to public kindergarten and make any recommendations to ensure the successful transition of children from NC Pre-K to public kindergarten.” The Pilot began with an initial group of three counties and expanded to 18 counties. Pilot counties—and later all 100 NC counties—were expected to engage in activities to build their infrastructure for how pre-K and LEA settings will work together to support transition to kindergarten efforts. They were also expected to engage in specific practices to support a smooth transition to kindergarten. Finally, counties were expected to include plans for routinely evaluating the success of their transition efforts, consistent with a [continuous quality improvement \(CQI\) approach](#). Figure 1 illustrates the infrastructure building activities and evidence-based practices that, accompanied by a strong CQI approach, are needed for successful transition to kindergarten efforts.

Figure 1: Infrastructure Building and Evidence-Based Practices in Transition to Kindergarten



[Drawing from research on effective transition to kindergarten practices](#), counties were expected to:

1. Form a **transition leadership team** comprised of pre-K and LEA staff representing different roles (e.g., administrators, teachers), as well as family and community members. This team is responsible for guiding county transition efforts, including developing a community transition plan (described below), overseeing implementation, evaluating the success of the plan, and revising the plan as needed.
2. Create a **community transition plan** documenting the transition activities they plan to implement, how and when activities will be implemented, and who will be responsible for implementing them. Plans should also include how counties will evaluate the success of their transition efforts.
3. Engage in practices to achieve **alignment between pre-K and kindergarten settings**. Alignment practices might focus on educators, such as shared professional development and collaboration time for pre-K and kindergarten staff. Other alignment practices might focus on children's experiences such as curriculum, expectations for children's learning, and assessment approaches.
4. **Share information and data** about pre-K children with kindergarten teachers. These practices include strategies for pre-K teachers and families to share information with kindergarten teachers.
5. Create opportunities to **build relationships** among children and families, pre-K settings, kindergarten settings, and the broader community. Relationship practices also include building and strengthening relationships between pre-K and LEA staff.
6. As part of their transition plan, develop and implement a **CQI plan** to routinely evaluate the success of their transition efforts. Teams' CQI efforts should include determining whether their county is implementing transition activities as planned, and the impact of transition efforts on children, families, teachers and staff in pre-K and LEA settings and the broader community. Learnings from counties' CQI efforts should be used to revise and refine their community transition plan as needed.

NC DCDEE and NC DPI provided counties with a range of materials and experiences to support their transition efforts. These included:

1. A **Crosswalk of Required Transition to Kindergarten Activities** listing transition requirements for the Every Child Succeeds Act (ESSA), the Head Start program, and NC Pre-K.
2. A **Transition Planning Template** to support transition leadership teams in developing the details of their community transition plan, including the specific activities they will carry out related to evidence-based transition practices and their CQI approach.
3. A **Benchmarks of Quality Self-Assessment form**, linked to the practices in the Transition Planning Template, that transition leadership teams can use as part of their CQI efforts.
4. **Materials for kindergarten information packets** that pre-K and kindergarten settings can share with families.
5. **Child-specific information and data sharing forms and mechanisms** teachers and families can use to share information about individual children with kindergarten teachers. In 2022, NC DCDEE and NC DPI launched an electronic Transition Report within the Teaching Strategies® platform for this purpose, replacing paper forms for programs that had an active Teaching Strategies® license.
6. Opportunities for transition leadership teams to meet in groups and with NC DCDEE and NC DPI staff, such as **ESSA Regional Meetings** held throughout North Carolina to give counties dedicated transition planning time and support.

Evaluation Methods

The first phase of the evaluation took place in spring 2022. Child Trends interviewed representatives from 13 of the 18 counties that participated in the Pilot program and analyzed extant data such as counties' transition plans and Benchmarks of Quality self-assessment forms. The second phase of the evaluation, which went beyond the Pilot counties, took place in fall 2022 and spring 2023. Child Trends collected survey data from 1,302 pre-K teachers, 951 kindergarten teachers, 208 pre-K administrators, 29 LEA administrators, and 38 transition leadership team representatives. The evaluation team also conducted focus groups with a total of 11 families and analyzed transition plans from 32 counties that were using the Transition Planning Template revised by NC DCDEE and NC DPI in 2022. Across both evaluation phases, the analyses focused on how NC counties were supporting transition to kindergarten efforts through infrastructure building and evidence-based practices. (For more information on the counties that participated in the Pilot program, see box titled "Lessons learned from NC's Transition to Kindergarten Pilot project" on page 6.)

Key Findings

Infrastructure to support transition to kindergarten efforts

Transition leadership team

- Pre-K and LEA teachers and administrators often did not know their county had a transition leadership team, which may compromise counties' transition to kindergarten efforts.
- Teachers and administrators who had heard about their county's transition leadership team felt positively about its responsiveness and its efforts to get input from teachers and families. Still, they

felt more could be done to get teacher and family input, which could be achieved by including more teachers, family members, and community members on the transition leadership team.

Community transition plan

- At the time of the evaluation, about one-third of NC counties used the 2022 Transition Planning Template developed by NC DCDEE and NC DPI. In their planning templates, nearly all of these counties showed how their pre-K and LEA settings will collaborate on transition efforts and specified plans to carry out many different transition activities across the evidence-based practices of alignment, information and data sharing, and relationships.
- At the individual county level, transition plans varied in their comprehensiveness and quality, particularly regarding CQI approaches.
- Transition leadership team representatives as well as pre-K and LEA staff often reported that their counties were implementing many different interactive and informational transition activities, including those rolled out state-wide (e.g., Transition Reports in the Teaching Strategies® platform), and these activities were seen as helpful.
- Transition leadership team representatives identified barriers that have interfered with their county's efforts to successfully carry out their transition plan. Some of these barriers are persistent (e.g., reaching all families, such as those that are not enrolled in a pre-K program) and other barriers have intensified since the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., limited staff capacity and high turnover).

Evidence-based practices that support effective transition to kindergarten efforts

Aligning settings

- There were mixed opinions about whether there was strong alignment between pre-K and kindergarten settings. Kindergarten teachers were perceived as less knowledgeable about pre-K settings than pre-K teachers were about kindergarten settings.
- Alignment practices focused on educators, specifically joint professional development opportunities and collaborations between pre-K and kindergarten teachers, are taking place and are perceived as helpful.
- Families also had concerns about continuity between pre-K and kindergarten settings, such as concerns about whether their child's individual needs would be met and practical concerns like transportation.

Information and data sharing

- There were several successes in the recent launch of the Transition Report in the Teaching Strategies® platform, which allows pre-K teachers to share information about individual children with kindergarten teachers. There are high rates of Transition Report creation by pre-K teachers, as well as strong encouragement for pre-K teachers to create the reports and for kindergarten teachers to use them. Overall, transition leadership team representatives and pre-K and LEA staff had positive perceptions of the Transition Reports.
- However, despite these successes, rates of kindergarten teachers accessing Transition Reports were low, which is concerning. Kindergarten teachers reported that their primary reason for not accessing the reports is that they did not know about them.

- In some counties, paper forms or other strategies (e.g., portfolios) are used instead of, or in addition to, the Transition Report. As the Transition Report is not designed for families to directly share information about their child with the kindergarten teacher, some counties may also use an All About Me or similar form to share this information. These practices suggest potential limitations to the Transition Report.

Relationships

- Regular communication about transition to kindergarten is happening between transition leadership teams, educators and staff, and families, and families are learning about transition to kindergarten in many ways. Counties are also building relationships and forming collaborations with parents and caregivers, teachers, and community members in support of transition to kindergarten efforts.
- Still, there is an ongoing need for improved communications between pre-K and kindergarten settings. Pilot counties raised these same concerns in Phase 1 of this evaluation, suggesting this is a persistent challenge that requires intentional and targeted strategies to address.
- Similarly, challenges continue in connecting with specific settings and groups about transition to kindergarten, such as private child care programs and families, especially those with children not enrolled in a pre-K program.

In addition to these findings related to infrastructure and evidence-based practices, families, educators and staff, and transition leadership team representatives had high confidence in their transition knowledge, resources, and preparedness. At the same time, there was a feeling that all these groups could benefit from more ways to increase their knowledge about transition to kindergarten. These groups also indicated that general improvements to collaboration and communication (e.g., between pre-K and kindergarten settings, within settings, or with families) would make transition to kindergarten efforts feel more supportive. Finally, there is demand for increased funding and a better infrastructure to support transition to kindergarten efforts (e.g., dedicated transition staff, protected time for staff to collaborate).

Recommendations

1. Build on the success of counties, including Pilot counties, with strong transition plans and success carrying out transition activities by having them serve as models and resources for other NC counties.
2. Continue to offer state-supported mechanisms and resources for counties to create or enhance their transition to kindergarten efforts in key areas (e.g., transition leadership team engagement, communications, and alignment), ideally culminating in a comprehensive transition toolkit.
3. Identify and offer supports for counties' CQI plans to help them generate usable information to evaluate transition plan success and inform revisions (e.g., training in CQI approaches; sample tools to collect information from families and staff; guidance in collecting information to understand implementation success versus evidence of transition plan impact).
4. Utilize a range of approaches to get families' perspectives on their needs and experiences related to transition to kindergarten (i.e., systematic and proactive efforts to get family input on transition efforts).
5. Make plans to address gaps in Transition Report access and use by kindergarten teachers as well as other unmet needs related to information and data sharing. These efforts should especially include informing kindergarten teachers about the Transition Reports, exploring how to make the reports more useful, and identifying new ways for families to share information with kindergarten teachers.
6. Seek specific input from counties on their funding and infrastructure needs that could, if addressed, reduce implementation barriers and help make their transition efforts more successful. Gathering this information should include learning what it would take to address these needs (e.g., cost, feasibility, potential unanticipated consequences).

Lessons learned from NC's Transition to Kindergarten Pilot project

In 2018, the North Carolina Division of Child Development and Early Education (NC DCDEE) and the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NC DPI) launched the state's Transition to Kindergarten Pilot project. The project aimed to support 18 NC counties to enhance their transition to kindergarten efforts by building their infrastructure and engaging in specific practices to support a smooth transition to kindergarten. In 2022, as part of Child Trends' evaluation, Pilot counties reflected on their experiences as project participants, much of which coincided with the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2023, Child Trends' evaluation included comparing the transition efforts of Pilot and non-Pilot counties from the perspectives of transition leadership team representatives as well as pre-K and LEA staff.

Pilot county reflections on project participation

Infrastructure Building

Transition leadership team: Teams primarily included pre-K and LEA representation, with less representation from others partners, including families.

Community transition plan: Plans often lacked detailed descriptions; most counties were not making progress on their plan due to the pandemic, but intended to scale-up their transition efforts at a later date.

Evidence-Based Transition Practices

Alignment: Counties were most successful in developing infrastructure-building activities (e.g., transition leadership team, community transition plan) and specific transition activities (e.g., kindergarten orientation). Counties varied in whether they were carrying out educator- and child-related alignment efforts.

Information and data sharing: Counties said their efforts to share transition information with families were highly successful. Most counties had positive experiences using the Child Development Information Form (predecessor to the Transition Report) and the All About Me form to share information about pre-K children, though they also encountered many challenges (e.g., getting forms completed and shared).

Relationships: Many counties built successful relationships across pre-K and kindergarten settings. Still, relationship challenges included engaging kindergarten teachers and principals, siloing and territorialism, and limited opportunities for meaningful family engagement in transition activities.

Despite encountering challenges such as limited bandwidth, staff burden and turnover, and other stressors, including those from the pandemic, Pilot counties described several successes from their participation in the program. Many counties felt that the Pilot program's expectations, templates, and other resources helped them to successfully create an intentional and systemic approach to their transition efforts. Many counties also said that the greatest experience from the Pilot was improved collaborations and better individual relationships across pre-k and kindergarten settings.

Pilot program trends

As of spring 2023, Pilot counties had higher rates of full implementation of their transition activities compared with non-Pilot counties. Pilot counties more often reported carrying out different activities related to:

- Alignment practices, such as understanding pre-K and kindergarten expectations as well as joint professional development for pre-K and kindergarten teachers
- Information and data sharing practices, such as creating Transition Reports

Pilot counties also felt more supported in their transition efforts (e.g., that staff have needed resources) compared with non-Pilot counties.

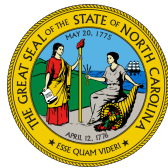
Compared with non-Pilot counties, Pilot counties reported more barriers in implementing their transition efforts. They also had less positive perceptions of Transition Report feasibility and related supports. These differences could be due to Pilot counties having strong transition efforts leading to increased knowledge about high-quality transition efforts, higher expectations or increased demands for carrying out enhanced transition efforts, and a greater understanding of the supports needed to engage in enhanced transition efforts. Factors such as these could have increased the likelihood of Pilot counties' identifying barriers to implementing transition efforts.

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