

AARON LOEWENBERG

# CONNECTING THE STEPS

State Strategies to Ease the Transition  
from Pre-K to Kindergarten

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## About the Authors



**Aaron Loewenberg** is a program associate with the Education Policy program at New America. He is a member of the early & elementary education team, where he provides research and

analysis on policies that impact children from birth through third grade. Before joining New America, he taught pre-K and kindergarten for four years in Washington, D.C. Loewenberg holds a bachelor's degree in government and a master's degree in educational policy and leadership, both from American University.

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# INTRODUCTION

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Children enter kindergarten with a wide variety of previous education experiences: some have participated in pre-K programs, whether private, state-funded, or part of Head Start, while others have spent time in a family child care setting or in informal arrangements with family, friends, and neighbors. Regardless of the setting, this transition is fraught with stress and uncertainty for many children and their parents. It is up to the educators in both elementary school and pre-K settings to ease the transition into formal education.

Kindergarten represents a markedly different environment for children who used to spend their days at home or even for children who participated in pre-K programs, especially those outside an elementary school. Interactions in a kindergarten classroom become more focused on academic progress with specific, targeted goals for literacy and numeracy that may not have been present in earlier educational settings. Kindergarten teachers typically spend more time formally teaching new skills rather than supervising unstructured activities, such as “center time” when children choose from mini learning stations set up around the room. Student-teacher ratios are often much higher in kindergarten than pre-K, changing the nature of teacher-child interactions and compelling students to be more independent and interact with a larger group of peers.<sup>1</sup>

This transition is significant for parents as well. Contact with teachers is often more formalized and less frequent than in a pre-K classroom. There is often less emphasis on parent-teacher and parent-parent contact than before.<sup>2</sup> This can leave parents feeling out of the loop when it comes to understanding their child’s academic and social progress and can lead to less parental involvement in the classroom.

Since evidence suggests that early education experiences can have a powerful effect on students’ later school and life outcomes, state and local policymakers have strong incentives for making the transition to kindergarten as smooth and stress-free as possible for children and families.<sup>3</sup> In fact, a 2005 study that examined data on more than 17,000 children established a link between the number of transition activities schools facilitated prior to and near the beginning of the kindergarten year, such as teacher home visits or parent orientation sessions, and larger gains in academic achievement by the end of the year. These positive gains were greatest for children whose families were low- or middle-income.<sup>4</sup> A separate study, which focused on pre-K programs, found a positive association between the number of transition activities practiced by pre-K teachers and kindergarten teachers’ later perceptions of student skills, particularly among low-income students.<sup>5</sup>

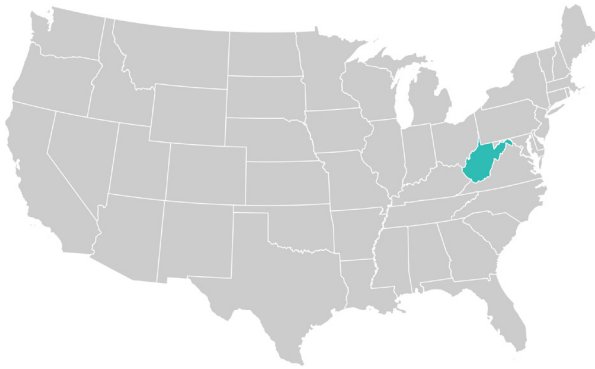
**While the planning of a stable, well-connected transition between early education and kindergarten falls largely within the purview of individual schools and districts, states can actively encourage intentional, local efforts to smooth transitions to kindergarten.**

Despite evidence illustrating the importance of the kindergarten transition point, many schools take a haphazard approach to this process. A 2016 study found that, to the extent that kindergarten transition activities take place, they are frequently low-intensity practices such as sending brochures home rather than more effective, high-intensity activities such as arranging for pre-K students to visit a kindergarten classroom or allowing for joint planning time between pre-K and kindergarten teachers.<sup>6</sup> The same study found that schools located in districts serving large numbers of low-income students were less likely to provide kindergarten transition activities compared to wealthier schools, meaning that students and families who might benefit most from transition activities are the least likely to receive them.

While the planning of a stable, well-connected transition between early education and kindergarten falls largely within the purview of individual schools and districts, states can actively encourage intentional, local efforts to smooth transitions to kindergarten. This brief will analyze actions taken by four states to improve the transition process: West Virginia, Colorado, Oregon, and Washington. These states came to our attention as we reviewed research on the transition to kindergarten and spoke to experts in the field. Each state has taken actions to address the difficulties that often arise in the transition to kindergarten. In this paper, we describe the steps each state has taken and discuss the opportunities and challenges with their various approaches. We conclude by identifying key takeaways for other states and offer four recommendations for sound policy around this question of transition.

# WEST VIRGINIA

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West Virginia has tackled the kindergarten transition period by codifying specific requirements for counties.<sup>7</sup> Board of Education Policy 2525, first established in 2003 and updated frequently since, outlines the criteria for approving and operating programs as part of the West Virginia Universal Pre-K program. A section of the policy mandates that certain activities take place at the county level to aid children in transitioning out of the West Virginia Universal Pre-K program and into kindergarten.<sup>8</sup>

Each county's collaborative early childhood team is required to create a written plan for transitioning students out of pre-K and into kindergarten. The collaborative early childhood core team is made up of representatives from the county pre-K program, the pre-K special needs program, a licensed community child care program, and a Head Start program in the county. The full county collaborative early childhood team is comprised of

other individuals, potentially including elementary school principals, kindergarten teachers, and family resource network representatives.<sup>9</sup>

These early learning transition plans must contain several components. Pre-K students and their families must have the opportunity to visit the prospective kindergarten setting, and counties are required to provide written information to parents about the kindergarten registration process and expectations for kindergarten students. Additionally, county collaborative teams are required to provide an opportunity for pre-K providers to meet on an annual basis with kindergarten teachers to discuss how to best prepare students to be successful in their transition to kindergarten. "The fact that each county collaborative team has to have a written transition plan is significant," Monica DellaMea, Executive Director of the Office of Early Learning in the state Department of Education, told us, "because it ensures that a process is in place for addressing the transition process."<sup>10</sup>

County collaborative teams also must establish a system for transferring assessment data that is documented as a part of each child's Kindergarten Transition Report to the student's future kindergarten teacher. Pre-K teachers use the Early Learning Scale (ELS), an observation-based performance assessment developed by researchers at the National Institute for Early Education

Research (NIEER), three times a year to assess children. These assessment results offer a snapshot of children's learning and development in the domains of social-emotional learning, language/literacy, math, and science.<sup>11</sup> Pre-K teachers can also write narratives that offer more detailed information about each child.<sup>12</sup> Some counties bring pre-K and kindergarten teachers together to interpret the data, while other counties provide a general overview to kindergarten teachers about the purpose and use of the transition report.<sup>13</sup> These assessment results and narrative comments are intended to help kindergarten teachers prepare to meet the individual needs of each incoming student.

The state's policy also requires county teams to use transition best practices detailed in the West Virginia Board of Education's Ready, Set, Go! School Readiness Framework established in 2011 and expanded in 2014.<sup>14</sup> The framework includes an early childhood transitions toolkit that breaks down transition activities into four components: Ready Children, Ready Families, Ready Schools and Programs, and Ready State and Communities.

Within each of these components, the framework provides suggested experiences and timelines for easing the transition. The "Ready Children" component, for example, includes recommendations such as allowing pre-K children the opportunity to take part in an elementary school cafeteria lunch in the spring of their pre-K year. Under "Ready Programs and Schools," schools are encouraged to offer collaborative meetings with pre-K and kindergarten teachers as well as develop methods for ensuring that Kindergarten Transition Reports are appropriately transferred from pre-K teachers to elementary school programs.<sup>15</sup> These suggested meetings are in addition to the annual meeting between pre-K and kindergarten teachers required by state policy.

## Opportunities and Challenges

State leaders have made it a priority to strike the right balance between setting expectations for counties when it comes to transition activities and

providing flexibility for county teams to take actions they feel are best suited to local needs. According to DellaMea, the beauty of being in a locally-controlled state is that communities and schools can identify where their specific strengths and gaps are and use guidance from the state to fill those gaps.<sup>16</sup> This flexibility also comes with costs, however. DellaMea mentioned that some county teams may only fulfill the minimum transition requirements spelled out by state policy rather than taking advantage of the state resources offered by the Ready, Set, Go! School Readiness Framework. A triennial state

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pre-K review carried out in each county helps teams identify what elements are missing in pre-K programs, including transition plans, and address these shortcomings with the help of individualized technical assistance.<sup>17</sup> The review includes classroom observations and interviews with members of county collaborative early childhood core teams.<sup>18</sup>

While it is important to preserve flexibility at the county level, West Virginia's kindergarten transition efforts would likely be strengthened by making a few changes to Policy 2525. Currently, elementary schools are not represented as members on the county collaborative early childhood core teams that oversee implementation of the state pre-K program and the transition out of pre-K and into kindergarten, though many counties have elementary school principals on their full teams.<sup>19</sup> Adding an elementary school representative, such as a principal, to the core team would set a foundation for collaboration between pre-K and elementary schools. An elementary school representative would add an important perspective to the county core team as it works to ensure all

children leave pre-K ready for the challenges awaiting them in kindergarten.

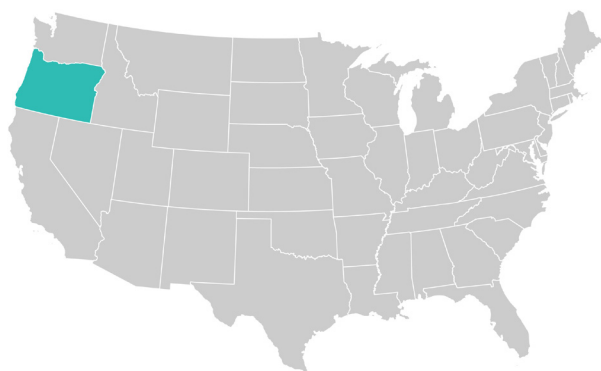
And, while state policy currently requires county collaborative teams to have a plan for transferring the Kindergarten Transition Report to kindergarten teachers, counties are not required to train kindergarten teachers in understanding the data contained in the report. The data gathered in the report are only useful if they are properly understood by the kindergarten teachers receiving them. Therefore, it would be useful for the state to require county collaborative teams to implement a training program to assist kindergarten teachers in understanding the data contained in the report.

This training could take place during the required annual joint meetings between pre-K and kindergarten teachers.

And the joint annual meetings could be expanded beyond teachers by requiring center directors and elementary school principals to also meet to discuss transition practices. Principal leadership is an important lever in strengthening connections between pre-K and kindergarten, and requiring directors and elementary school principals to meet to discuss the transition process would enable principals to gain a better understanding of the early education programs feeding their elementary schools.

## OREGON

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Oregon has taken a different approach, encouraging local innovation for improving transitions to

kindergarten via its Early Learning Kindergarten Readiness Partnership and Innovation grant program (KRPI). Created by the Oregon Legislature during the 2013 session and initially funded at \$4 million for the 2013–2015 biennium, the program gives grantees considerable discretion to implement approaches in one or more of the following areas:

- supporting successful transitions into kindergarten
- engaging families as partners in children's learning and development

- providing opportunities for shared professional development between early learning and elementary school educators
- increasing alignment, connection, and collaboration within the prenatal to third grade continuum<sup>20</sup>

According to Brett Walker, P–3 Alignment specialist with the Early Learning Division of Oregon’s Department of Education, the idea behind the grant program is to learn what is working at the local level and then attempt to replicate promising models on a larger scale. The exciting part of the grant program, Walker told us, is the attempt to shift from an innovation space and toward a space of long-term, sustainable practices by understanding what methods have been most effective at the early learning hub level.<sup>21</sup>

KRPI funding flows through the 16 regional early learning hubs that were created by the Oregon Early Learning Council in 2013.<sup>22</sup> The early learning hubs are directed by Oregon statute to accomplish three goals: 1) create an aligned early childhood system, 2) ensure that children arrive at school ready to succeed, and 3) work to ensure that children live in healthy, stable, and attached families.<sup>23</sup>

The first KRPI grants were distributed during the 2014–2015 school year. Since the KRPI grant program was established, the grants have funded a wide variety of programs designed to ease the transition into kindergarten for students and families.

For example, Early Learning Multnomah, the early learning hub for the Portland area, has used a portion of its grant funds to establish the P–3 Schools Project. This project funds eight full-time P-3 coordinators in eight high-need schools across the county; they are charged with coordinating early learning activities such as Play and Learn groups where children aged zero to five can come together with their parents to play educational games while parents learn more about what is expected once children reach kindergarten.<sup>24</sup> The P–3 coordinators also accompany kindergarten teachers on visits

to the homes of incoming kindergarten students and families, and they help organize and staff the Early Kindergarten Transition Program, a two-to-three-week summer program in which incoming kindergarteners are given the opportunity to become familiar with their new school and parents learn about ways to support learning at home.<sup>25</sup>

KRPI funds have also been used to establish joint training sessions between early learning providers and kindergarten teachers. Within the Portland

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Public School System, Head Start and kindergarten teachers participated in trainings about positive behavioral intervention and supports.<sup>26</sup> The Blue Mountain Early Learning Hub, made up of three rural counties in northeast Oregon, formed professional learning communities that included early learning providers and kindergarten teachers. According to Walker, these groups met monthly and focused on implementation of the Conscious Discipline model in an effort to better support social-emotional development among students in pre-K and as they transitioned into kindergarten by establishing a consistent approach to classroom management.<sup>27</sup>

During the first year of the KRPI grants, the 16 communities that received grants provided professional development events for hundreds of early learning providers and elementary school staff throughout the state, many of which were joint professional development events. According

to a Portland State University evaluation of the grant program, early learning providers who participated in joint training sessions reported higher levels of understanding of kindergarten teachers' expectations after attending the sessions and, conversely, teachers reported increased levels of understanding of the early care environments children participate in prior to kindergarten entry.<sup>28</sup>

Grantees also hosted events and workshops to support families of young children in preparing for the shift to kindergarten. According to the Portland State University evaluation, a majority of families reported that the events helped them feel more confident in their ability to support learning at home and in their understanding of how best to prepare for the academic expectations of kindergarten.<sup>29</sup>

## Opportunities and Challenges

State support for recipients of KRPI grants is limited due to the small staff size of the Oregon Early Learning Division and the fact that the grants are disbursed by the regional early learning hubs rather than the Early Learning Division. However, the Early Learning Division does provide support to grant recipients by organizing occasional webinars, sharing of best practices in an online P-3 toolkit of resources,<sup>30</sup> and funding an evaluation report of the grant program which elevates what is working well and what is not.

There are advantages and disadvantages to the way in which the KRPI grant program has been established. Because the grants are distributed through the early learning hubs, grantees have a large degree of flexibility in using the funds in the best way they see fit. Decisions regarding the best method of allocating funds are made at the regional hub level by local stakeholders rather than the state level. The rationale, according to Walker, is similar

to West Virginia in that the local community itself should have a better idea of how, based on local context and needs, to improve the transition to kindergarten.

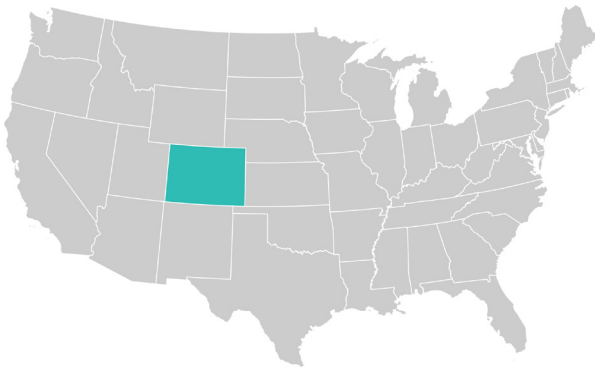
While this flexibility can be a positive because it allows for funds to be controlled by officials close to the community, communities have varying levels of readiness to engage in comprehensive P-3 approaches. Since the small staff size of the Early Learning Division prevents it from providing a large amount of technical assistance when it comes to the KRPI program, some early learning hubs can be left without needed guidance regarding how to most effectively implement P-3 approaches.

Another consideration is how best to incentivize certain transition activities over others. For example, a two-week summer kindergarten transition program for entering students will likely prove more popular than efforts to create combined professional development opportunities for early learning providers and kindergarten teachers because the summer program is a lighter lift and does not require breaking down barriers between previously siloed providers. The states could incentivize collaborative activities between early learning providers and kindergarten teachers by providing additional funding for those kinds of activities or by prioritizing those activities over others when distributing grants.

The KRPI grant program is highlighted in Oregon's ESSA plan, indicating that the state plans to continue to invest in the program.<sup>31</sup> However, the program could face budget cuts due to a state budget deficit.<sup>32</sup> In April 2017, Oregon's Joint Committee on Ways and Means proposed a 20 percent cut in funding to early learning hubs and the KRPI program.<sup>33</sup>

# COLORADO

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Colorado is working to improve local transition planning for children entering kindergarten by improving the collection and organization of assessment data. Results Matter, first implemented in 2006, is a statewide program that promotes the use of ongoing, observation-based assessment in early care and education settings.<sup>34</sup> While Colorado Shines, the state's Quality Rating and Improvement System, rates the quality of early learning centers, Results Matter is designed to streamline the system for measuring the development of children aged zero to five in early care and education programs by training educators in the use of authentic, observational assessment and enabling those assessment results to be tracked from year to year.

Results Matter is open to any early care or education program that chooses to participate. Participation is required for children enrolled in the Colorado Preschool Program and pre-K students who receive

special education services. While it is not required for Head Start, 98 percent of Head Start programs in the state participate in Results Matter.<sup>35</sup> In all, the program provides assessment for over 47,000 children annually throughout the state.<sup>36</sup>

Through the use of a variety of professional development opportunities, teachers of children aged zero to five are trained to administer observational assessment tools. Currently, the primary tool in use among early care and education programs is the GOLD by Teaching Strategies (GOLD) assessment. This assessment measures a wide variety of academic and developmental domains, including markers of social-emotional development, language development, math, science, and cognitive skills. The state maintains a comprehensive online catalog of training videos to assist educators in topics such as accurately observing and recording student skills, effectively communicating assessment results to parents during conferences, and using assessment data to improve child outcomes.<sup>37</sup>

The Results Matter program has been a helpful tool in creating partnerships between pre-K and kindergarten teachers when it comes to transition planning. It has also helped non-profit foundations, such as the Buell Foundation (see page 11), to more precisely identify where technical assistance is most needed when working with districts and schools.

Many school districts have chosen GOLD for their kindergarten readiness assessment, increasing opportunities for collaboration between pre-K and kindergarten teachers as they look at common data.<sup>38</sup> The Results Matter program enables teachers to look at student growth over multiple years and settings, according to Cathrine Floyd, director of the program.<sup>39</sup>

The Colorado Department of Education publishes a detailed handbook each school year to assist teachers and administrators in understanding the timeline for administering authentic assessment, the proper steps for assessment administration, and the expectations for documentation of student records.<sup>40</sup> The department also provides training on early childhood observation skills at no charge for pre-K educators in publicly funded programs if they did not receive this training in college or through another program.<sup>41</sup>

As kindergarten school readiness assessment rolls out in Colorado, one challenge to P–3 system alignment has been that portfolios cannot be electronically transferred between pre-K and kindergarten classrooms, but the state is working on a solution to this barrier to collaboration.<sup>42</sup> The department recommends that pre-K teachers take steps to collaborate with kindergarten teachers, such as sharing printed copies of assessment data to summarize student strengths and needs, if it is known which school students will be entering after pre-K.<sup>43</sup> Printed copies of assessment data can also be shared with parents so that they can carry the information to the kindergarten teacher. In the meantime, the assessment vendor is collaborating with the state on a solution that would allow the sharing of information between pre-K and kindergarten staff.

According to Floyd, the program helps bolster the case for early learning in the state legislature because the data provide tangible proof that increased state spending is leading to better outcomes among students.<sup>44</sup> The information compiled as a result of the program are included

in an annual legislative report submitted to the Colorado General Assembly. The data illustrate the growth made during the year by students enrolled in the Colorado Preschool Program.<sup>45</sup>

Funding provided by the Race to the Top–Early Learning Challenge, a federal program that awarded state grants from 2012 to 2014,<sup>46</sup> enabled the state to expand the project to include more child care centers and family child care homes. Over a two-year period, child care providers received training and technical assistance to support the use of age-appropriate assessment in these settings. Over 3,500 additional children are now participating in Results Matter as a result of the expansion.<sup>47</sup>

While Results Matter is not specifically referenced in Colorado’s draft ESSA plan, the plan does outline additional support the state plans to provide districts to address transitions into kindergarten. For example, the state plans to use a needs assessment to help districts develop their plans and services for students transitioning from pre-K to kindergarten.<sup>48</sup>

## Opportunities and Challenges

The largest challenge facing Results Matter is the current inability for assessment portfolios to be electronically transferred between pre-K and kindergarten programs. The state acknowledges that this is a critical issue that needs to be addressed and is currently working to find a long-term solution. However, until a fix is made it is up to individual pre-K teachers and administrators to connect with kindergarten teachers and share assessment data for incoming students. While this step is not a heavy lift for students enrolled in pre-K located within elementary school buildings, it is more difficult for pre-K classrooms operating in private child care centers, Head Start, and family child care homes since no formal system currently exists to assist pre-K teachers in connecting with the elementary schools where students will eventually enroll.

## Buell Foundation's Transition Work with Local Districts

The Temple Hoyne Buell Foundation, a non-profit philanthropic organization, launched a district-based, school transitions initiative in 2014<sup>49</sup> and began awarding implementation grants to three Colorado districts in 2015.<sup>50</sup> The grants, which range from \$50,000 to \$150,000 per year for each district, support efforts to bridge the gaps between pre-K and kindergarten programs. While each district has taken an individual approach to improve the transition to kindergarten, priorities for all three districts include increased parental engagement in the transition process and shared professional development for pre-K and kindergarten teachers, with an emphasis on vertical alignment through the PreK-third grade span and horizontal alignment within each grade.<sup>51</sup>

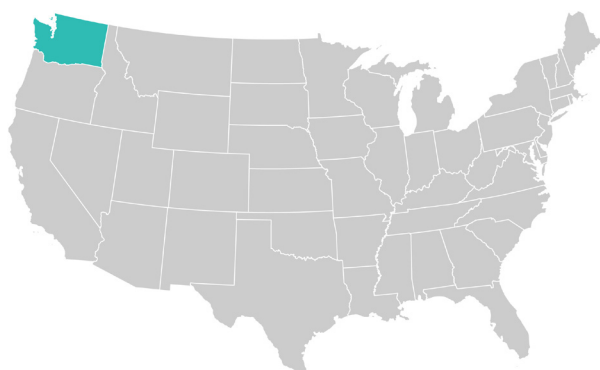
In Aurora, for example, pre-K and kindergarten teachers participated in joint training days centered around topics such as understanding developmentally appropriate practice and helping establish common environments between pre-K and kindergarten to reduce student difficulties with the kindergarten transition.<sup>52</sup> School districts have also implemented home visiting programs

to meet with kindergarten students and families prior to the first day of school, and arranged for two-week “Jump Start” classes targeted at entering kindergarteners without pre-K experience that take place prior to school officially beginning. In Dolores, the “Little Cubbies” program specifically targets children receiving informal care from relatives and friends and provides them with opportunities to visit their prospective elementary school several times during the year for enrichment activities.<sup>53</sup>

The Buell Foundation provides technical assistance to the districts in implementing their plans. The Butler Institute for Families at the University of Denver performs annual evaluations of the grant programs and provides each district with detailed data about the progress they have made in meeting their transition goals. According to Laura Carlson of the Buell Foundation, the standardized data reporting system provided by Results Matter has enabled the foundation to more easily work with districts and child care centers to understand their strengths and opportunities for improvement.<sup>54</sup>

# WASHINGTON

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Washington, like West Virginia, has passed specific legislation aimed at improving the kindergarten transition process. In 2011, then-Governor Christine Gregoire signed legislation that established a transition process known as the Washington Kindergarten Inventory of Developing Skills (commonly referred to as WaKIDS).<sup>55</sup> WaKIDS is led by the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) in collaboration with the Department of Early Learning and Thrive Washington, a well-known advocacy organization.<sup>56</sup> At one time, WaKIDS was funded with state, federal, and private dollars, including funding provided by the Race to the Top–Early Learning Challenge grant and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.<sup>57</sup> As of 2017, it is entirely state-funded.

State-funded, full-day kindergarten programs are required to implement WaKIDS. State funding for full-day kindergarten was available to all schools in 2016-17, when approximately 77,000 kindergarteners

took part in the WaKIDS program. The number of participating kindergarteners is expected to increase slightly in 2017-18 when state law requires all kindergarteners to have access to state-funded full-day kindergarten.<sup>58</sup>

Implementation of WaKIDS consists of three components designed to help ensure a smooth transition process: family connection, whole-child assessment, and early learning collaboration.<sup>59</sup>

## Family Connection

The family connection component requires schools to invite families to individual meetings to discuss goals and expectations for the kindergarten year and allow parents to share information about their child with the teacher. These meetings typically take place during the first few days of the school year, but schools also have the option of fulfilling the family connection requirement through the use of home visits or meetings that take place prior to the start of the school year.<sup>60</sup> State law permits districts to use up to three school days to engage in the family connection meetings.

## Whole-Child Assessment

Kindergarten programs participating in WaKIDS are required to use GOLD by Teaching Strategies

## **Implementation of WaKIDS consists of three components designed to help ensure a smooth transition process: family connection, whole-child assessment, and early learning collaboration.**

to assess several areas of child development and learning: mathematics, literacy/language, physical development, cognitive, and social-emotional skills. Some school districts choose to use the GOLD data to help create individual student report cards throughout the year.<sup>61</sup> School districts receive reimbursement from the state for each state-funded, full-day kindergarten teacher who participates in assessment training as well as for reimbursement for substitute teachers needed when training occurs in September and teachers are on contract.<sup>62</sup> GOLD is also the assessment tool used in the state pre-K program;<sup>63</sup> kindergarten teachers have access to the most recent scores of students previously enrolled in the state pre-K program through an Individual Child Report.<sup>64</sup>

### **Early Learning Collaboration**

Unlike the other two WaKIDS components, the early learning collaboration component leaves a great deal of flexibility to individual districts and schools to decide how to work with early learning providers. By law, districts are required to establish relationships with early learning community providers and engage in kindergarten readiness activities with those providers and parents, but the specific methods used to accomplish these tasks are up to individual districts. According to Kathe Taylor, Assistant Superintendent of Learning and Teaching at OSPI, one outcome of the WaKIDS work is that more principals and superintendents are embracing the notion that any child in their catchment area is their responsibility, whether the child has just been born or is about to enter kindergarten. Taylor views WaKIDS as a means to mobilize the energy of multiple agencies and resources around the

common cause of school readiness.<sup>65</sup>

The state encourages principals to bring kindergarten teachers and early learning providers together for professional development sessions that include reviewing WaKIDS kindergarten data and transition forms completed by pre-K programs. Washington has developed an Early Learning Collaboration Framework to help guide schools and districts in this work. The framework is used at regional convenings where kindergarten teachers, principals, and early learning providers discuss steps for collaboration and analyze assessment data.<sup>66</sup> The state has also created a voluntary kindergarten transition form that early learning providers and parents can use to share information about incoming students with kindergarten teachers.<sup>67</sup>

Districts have approached early learning collaboration in different ways. For instance, Rochester School District used WaKIDS funds to allow kindergarten teachers to serve as ambassadors to early learning centers in the area. Kindergarten teachers periodically visited and observed early learning centers and met with pre-K teachers to share WaKIDS data and discuss trends in the skills of incoming kindergarten students.<sup>68</sup> In Carbonado School District, school staff invited early learning providers to a “Come and See” night at the district’s elementary school. School staff shared expectations for kindergarten students in areas such as numeracy, literacy, and communication skills. Kindergarten teachers visited the classrooms of early learning providers in the area throughout the year in order to observe instructional practices and hear from the early learning providers about instructional strategies they have found effective.<sup>69</sup>

And in Quincy School District, WaKIDS funds were used to survey early learning providers in the area about existing resources and unmet needs. Partnering with Child Care Aware to assist with outreach to local early learning providers, the district used the results of the survey to provide shared professional development opportunities for providers and teachers.<sup>70</sup>

In order to improve collaboration with early learning providers, Child Care Aware of Washington has started the “Bridging Communities and Making Connections” program. This program allows elementary school principals throughout the state to submit a data request form to receive a report of licensed child care providers in their area. Principals receive a list of local child care providers and regional Child Care Aware of Washington offices provide follow-up resources and services to facilitate communication between the providers and elementary school principals.<sup>71</sup> Child Care Aware produces about 200–250 individual reports in response to principal requests each year.<sup>72</sup> By building connections between early learning providers and local principals, the program helps principals form relationships with the families of incoming students prior to the start of kindergarten.

## **Opportunities and Challenges**

The recent passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) offers Washington the opportunity and flexibility to further invest in early learning. The state’s draft ESSA plan notes that it will be making efforts to expand enrollment in the state pre-K

program so that eligible low-income students have access to the program. The state also plans to use ESSA to increase the number of districts engaging early learning providers in working collaboratively to smooth transitions into kindergarten. A large part of this work will happen through expanding the Early Learning Feedback Report pilot program. This program shares WaKIDS assessment data with pre-K programs so that the programs know how their students perform on the GOLD assessment once they enter kindergarten.<sup>73</sup> This sharing of data can help with the transition process as pre-K providers have a better idea of where to focus their efforts to ensure their students arrive at kindergarten with the skills necessary to be successful. The state also plans to use ESSA funds to create a guide that summarizes the opportunities ESSA provides districts in collaborating with early learning providers to plan joint professional development.

The biggest challenge the state faces is related to the early learning collaboration component of WaKIDS. Unlike the other two components of WaKIDS, a large amount of discretion is left to individual districts about how best to work with local early learning providers. Districts are required to establish some sort of relationship and engage in readiness activities with early learning providers, but currently there is not much state tracking around these efforts. The planned expansion of the Early Learning Feedback Report pilot program as well as the continued use of the Early Learning Collaboration Framework should provide districts and early learning providers with the data and information necessary to continue to make progress in this component.

# CONCLUSION

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Because the transition to kindergarten is so significant for both students and parents, it's critical that states play a role in ensuring a smooth transition process. While much of the work takes place at the individual district and school level, the four states profiled here offer examples of different methods states can employ to encourage local actors to move beyond standard practices, such as sending home brochures about kindergarten, and instead engage in more substantive work such as encouraging relationships between early learning providers and elementary schools.

Each approach offers its own unique benefits and challenges, and it will be up to individual states to decide which one makes the most sense for their population of students and families. Whether states approach this work by enacting specific legislation and policies (West Virginia and Washington), establishing a grant program (Oregon), or developing a streamlined data system (Colorado), the key takeaway is that states must be engaged in the process of making the transition to kindergarten less difficult for students and families in order to ensure successful academic and life outcomes for all children.

# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STATES

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## **Use ESSA funds to finance transition activities.**

With the recent passage of ESSA, states and districts now have greater flexibility to invest in early learning. Under Title I of ESSA, federal funds can be used to assist pre-K students in the transition from early childhood education programs to elementary school programs. Title I plans must specifically include a description of how local education agencies will “support, coordinate, and integrate” Head Start services to enable smooth transitions between Head Start and elementary school programs. ESSA requires that districts reach agreements with Head Start programs and other early education programs. These agreements should include plans to organize joint transition-related training between child care providers and kindergarten teachers and specific instructions regarding the transfer of student records.

## **Provide tools and guidance to assist in local planning of transition activities.**

While it is important to preserve local flexibility when it comes to decision-making, states have a role to play in establishing best practices around the

transition process. Resources such as West Virginia’s Ready, Set, Go! School Readiness Framework and the Colorado Department of Education’s catalog of training videos are good examples of how states can set up local actors for success by providing tools that can be easily modified for a local setting. State resources around transitions work best when they provide a wide array of options and allow local actors to choose which resources will best meet the needs of families and children in their community.

## **Consider establishing a grant program to incentive districts to prioritize transitions.**

A grant program can be an effective means of allowing for local flexibility and innovation in decision-making while still allowing for state guidelines around the most effective use of funds. States can use a grant program similar to Oregon’s KRPI program to encourage districts to make the kindergarten transition process a priority. Grants can be structured to incentivize more meaningful transition activities, such as joint professional development, by providing higher amounts of funding for those activities or by prioritizing those activities over others when distributing funds.

**Bring directors and principals together to help improve transitions and alignment between early learning and elementary school settings.**

Bringing center directors and principals together to discuss transition practices, share data, and coordinate standards and curricula is an effective method for breaking down barriers that have traditionally hindered a smooth transition between early education settings and elementary schools. The opportunity for principals and directors to connect also makes it more likely that principals will begin building relationships with students and families prior to kindergarten entry. In a recent New America survey, only seven states reported that they offer joint professional development for principals

and center directors.<sup>74</sup> States should learn from the collaboration between elementary schools and Head Start programs that is required under ESSA and expand collaboration opportunities to other early learning programs. The Certificate in P–3 Executive Leadership offered by the University of Washington is a promising example of cross-sector professional development. The program brings together a cohort of elementary school principals and center directors to learn ways to implement a P–3 approach to early education instruction with an emphasis on building a continuum of learning that begins at birth and extends through elementary school.

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