



## **Experts are putting more emphasis on the transition from preschool to kindergarten as a cornerstone for long-term success in school.**

By Rebecca Harris June, 2011

Kindergarten teacher Kate Durham of Chicago International Charter School in Bucktown pulls out files and starts reading out loud information about her students' previous educational experience. Seven of the children never went to preschool.

Some attended preschool at one of a dizzying array of elementary schools—McAuliffe, Yates, Henry, Belmont-Cragin, Mozart, Cameron, Burbank and Schubert. Other children went to one of at least nine different child care centers or community-based Head Start programs.

All in all, the children's experiences are so varied that there's no way for Durham to become familiar with each of them. "A lot of times, I don't really pay attention because I'm not from here, so I'm not really familiar with [the school] names," she says.

Many kindergarten teachers face a similar conundrum each year. Faced with getting to know families and children for the first time, they have little information on children's learning backgrounds and how well-prepared they are for the critical first year of formal schooling.

The notion that kindergarten should be better-aligned with preschool isn't new. It was touted in a National Education Goals Panel report, among others, in the 1990s, as well as in a 1988 National Association of State Boards of Education report, "Right from the Start."

But the idea is gaining more traction with early childhood experts and policymakers, who stress the need to help children transition smoothly to kindergarten and the primary grades to set a firm foundation for success.

Yet a number of hurdles stand in the way. As in Durham's class, kindergarteners come from a wide variety of backgrounds—from Head Start to state-funded preschool, private preschool, child care centers or home care—and there's no system in place to make sure that teachers and schools get information from these institutions that would help them ease the transition.

School choice has made it more challenging for some schools to know exactly who will be enrolling in kindergarten from year to year. The district has no money specifically targeted toward transition activities. And not every kindergarten

teacher has training in early childhood development, although experts believe it would be helpful.

As schools and policymakers take steps to bridge the divide, their goal is to sustain the learning momentum of preschool and prevent “fade-out,” a phenomenon in which the academic advantage gained in preschool disappears after a couple of years.

“Some people have the idea that early-childhood education programs are a vaccination,” says Barbara Bowman, the head of the Office of Early Childhood Education at CPS. “[They think] if we just have this when you’re 3 and 4 years old, you need never go to a good school, you need never have a good teacher again.”

Teachers say that as students start kindergarten, many have trouble adapting to structure and meeting behavior expectations, such as the length of time they are expected to sit in one place.

Sometimes teachers’ expectations aren’t developmentally appropriate. But often the sheer newness of the environment can throw children for a loop, and the lack of continuity can cause more than disoriented students. University of Minnesota researcher Arthur Reynolds theorizes that it might contribute to fade-out.

The district’s Kindergarten Readiness Tool is designed to give kindergarten teachers information about children’s preschool learning and help make ease the transition.

But its impact has been spotty so far. On the ground, many kindergarten teachers did not notice that information from the tool was available. Others said that their own assessments, done after summer break, provided a better picture of student learning.

At a state level, Illinois State Board of Education Superintendent Christopher Koch says that the implementation of the national Common Core Standards—Illinois has signed on to the project—and the assessments that will accompany them will make it even more important for information to be shared across the preschool-kindergarten divide (although the standards are already drawing fire from some educators who feel they are not developmentally appropriate for young children).

“We have a bridge to build,” Koch says. “The standards expect educators to know not just what the standards are for their level, but for the level before and the level after.”

A new state assessment for kindergarteners could be piloted as early as fall 2012. It will likely be based on teacher observations of student behavior and learning. At Belding Elementary in Irving Park, school-level activities aim to smooth the transition.

Principal Heather Yutzy says the area office doled out money last summer for teachers to come to the school in August and assess incoming students. Kindergarten teacher Leon Schrauben assessed 20 of his 24 students, making it easier for him to plan lessons. Plus, he adds, “they got to see the classroom; they got to meet me.”

Yutzy has also developed Project On Target, which lists specific milestones every student should be able to meet four times a year. Next, the kindergarten targets will be used to set guidelines for preschool.

Belding has also added more indicators to the district’s Kindergarten Report Card.

“We felt like the reading [requirement] was a little weak,” Yutzy says. She is planning to launch a parents’ website, with links to online educational games, and wants to give primary parents educational flashcards to use with their children to build their skills.

“Our hope for preschool is that we meet with the parents and say, “This is where we want your kid to be,” Yutzy says. “Our school, as diverse as it is, there are vastly different parent expectations about what kids should be able to do.”

At the end of this year, teachers will use professional development days to meet with each other, in pairs, about the students they are handing off to the next grade level. Students’ Response to Intervention documents—detailed plans to help them with their trouble areas—will be passed along and explained.

“We’re working on a one-page summary for each child,” Yutzy says. The idea is to save teachers from having to hunt for information among the three different CPS data systems.

On a wider scale, a more comprehensive effort by the Erikson Institute stretches beyond kindergarten to the primary grades: the New Schools Project, now in place in six schools. While the number is down from 11 last year because of funding constraints, the Project hopes to add more schools in the fall.

Over the last decade (the Project was launched in 2002), about 20 schools have participated, with teachers receiving a wide range of training. An instructional coach spends one to three days a week at the school, leading workshops on topics such as independent reading time for children and giving teachers feedback on their teaching.

Other activities include having coaches model lessons for teachers; school-level meetings among teachers at the same grade level and across grades, including preschool; coaching to help primary-grades teachers spend more time on math, science and social studies so that teaching focuses less on “the facts” and more on helping students develop inquiry and critical-thinking skills; consulting with principals; and meetings that bring together teachers from different schools to share ideas.

Teachers can also take advantage of professional development events at the Erikson Institute.

Preschool through 3rd-grade teachers work together to examine their expectations for entering students, as well as “the teaching strategies they use, the curriculum, to make sure what happens in kindergarten really builds upon pre-K so it’s not an abrupt change for children,” says Chris Maxwell, the Project’s director.

Preschool teachers are enlisted to introduce families to kindergarten teachers, sharing their insights so that kindergarten teachers aren’t “reinventing the wheel,” Maxwell says.

In turn, kindergarten teachers are encouraged to do face-to-face outreach to families who haven’t been to preschool, and to have open houses before school starts so children can start getting comfortable in the classroom.

Among teachers who participated in the New Schools Project in 2009-10, 93 percent rated the coaching as “valuable” or “extremely valuable,” according to an Erikson Institute survey.

As with many smaller programs, lack of money, time and other barriers make it difficult to scale up. Maxwell estimates that the total cost of the New Schools Project is around \$50,000 per school per year, of which schools generally contribute between \$10,000 and \$15,000 out of their own budget.

Other costs are covered by foundations, the Erikson Institute, and in some cases, the district. Some schools have solved the time dilemma with creative scheduling or asking teachers to stay after school—not always for pay.

“Unfortunately, sometimes it’s more piecemeal than they would like because of budget constraints,” Maxwell adds.

Accountability is another barrier. Maxwell says the emphasis on 3rd-grade test scores has filtered down, affecting curricula and how young children are assessed early on.

As a result, administrators tend to focus on bringing older children up to speed, ignoring the need for “a solid foundation that in the long run could really prevent some of the remediation problems they have later on,” Maxwell says.

Erikson Institute Director Sam Meisels said at a recent symposium that the Project’s approach works best when schools don’t have rigid grade-level structures, when teacher teams are given decision-making power, and when preschool programs and full-day kindergarten are grade-level structures, when teacher teams are given decision-making power, and when preschool programs and full-day kindergarten are available.

The Academy for Urban School Leadership has adopted the Project’s approach. With the help of Erikson Institute staff, primary-grade teachers and administrators from AUSL’s

network of turnaround schools have formed the Early Childhood Task Force.

The Task Force recently began meeting to hammer out strategies to better align preschool, kindergarten and primary grade teaching and assessment, while making sure instruction is high-quality and appropriate to young children's needs.

Reynolds, for his part, advocates expanding the preschool-through-3rd-grade approach of Chicago's child-parent centers, which offer preschool and kindergarten in the same location, parent engagement staff that focus on improving student attendance, and an aligned curriculum and lowered class sizes through 3rd grade.

His decades-long study showed that the centers produced healthier, more successful students than a control project, which just offered Head Start and full-day kindergarten classes.

But now, many of the child-parent centers lack the full complement of health, mental health and parent involvement staff they once had.

Eight of the district's child-parent centers were closed in 2005. Today, 11 are in operation, and just 3 percent of the district's Title I money goes to the centers.

But as Reynolds points out, "It makes the implementation of [other] efforts so much easier when we have these models to build on."

Magnet and charter schools face a unique challenge when it comes to the preschool-to-kindergarten transition: Admission is governed by a lottery, which means schools often send away graduating preschoolers while bringing in kindergarten students who have never been to the school.

Disney Magnet School Principal Kathleen Hagstrom says principal discretion used to provide a way for students who didn't win the lottery to get into kindergarten at these schools. Disney admits 196 kindergarteners each year via the lottery, and graduates 60 preschoolers.

But since principal discretion has been reined in by the district, "we have crying children, disgruntled parents, lots of complaints,"

Hagstrom says. "They think it's like a divorce. They think they've done something wrong to not be allowed to come to the school. We've developed such an outstanding program and to tell kids they can't come to our kindergarten is just absurd."

The Ounce of Prevention Fund's Educare early childhood center is working with North Kenwood-Oakland and Donoghue charter schools, run by the University of Chicago's Urban Education Institute, on a solution: a "birth-to-college" pipeline.

Starting this fall, parents who enroll their students as infants in Educare will get an

opportunity to immediately reserve a slot in the charter schools. So far, 17 parents out of 24 new Educare families have completed the application process and will be guaranteed a slot when their child is ready for kindergarten.

Demand for the option is evident: Nearly 50 preschoolers will complete Educare this spring, and 26 applied to the charters. Fewer than 10 got in.

Parents have had the opportunity to go to family events at the charters, says Brenda Eiland-Williford, director of program and curriculum at the Educare Center. And Educare's staff is glad to have schools they can recommend to parents so that children don't end up in "a totally different world," where they will be expected to spend large amounts of time doing seat-work rather than hands-on and exploratory learning.

Eiland-Williford says parents struggle to help children complete a flurry of homework and worksheets—"more than what the child that particular age can handle." Adjusting to seat work can be difficult, she says.

Educare chose to work with the University of Chicago charter schools because of their reputation for high-quality instruction, student support and family engagement, which will help to prevent some of the transition difficulties.

To strengthen the connection, staff from Educare and the charter schools will meet to set goals. Teachers will share techniques, use common assessments and share data. Having teachers work together will help prevent conflict that Eiland-Williford believes stems from a lack of understanding about what is age-appropriate for young children.

"We want those conversations. It will be a learning opportunity," Eiland-Williford says.

Such learning opportunities could help solve perhaps the biggest challenge: the difference in teaching philosophies and training of early childhood and elementary educators.

In Illinois, a majority of early elementary teachers have K-9 teaching certificates, which allow them more flexibility in teaching assignments and may be preferred by principals.

But they are not required to have training in early childhood development, which would give them a better grounding in developmentally appropriate instruction. (The CPS Office of Early Childhood said it does not have information on the number of kindergarten teachers with early childhood certificates.)

A New America Foundation report on early-childhood teacher preparation, "Getting In Sync," found that a majority of states have similar overlapping licensure issues, with many content courses for elementary teachers weighted heavily toward upper-grades instruction.

Nationally, just 14 states require kindergarten teachers to get a certificate that is specific to early childhood.

Preparation in birth to 3rd grade early childhood programs focuses more on learning processes, hands-on activities, family collaboration, literacy, and social-emotional learning, Maxwell says, while elementary preparation gives more weight to content knowledge and curriculum.

“We have a lot to learn from each other,” Maxwell says. “We need to look at more balanced teacher preparation across the content areas. Early-childhood teachers very often get a lot of preparation in language arts, and literacy, but not in mathematics.”

Results from the New Schools Project are beginning to convince people, from back-to-basics administrators to reluctant teachers, that better alignment is beneficial to students.

Participating elementary schools, on average, experienced a three times higher increase in the percentage of 3rd-grade students meeting and exceeding ISAT standards in reading and math as compared to the district average.

“We can make progress school by school, but what we really need is to look at the systems and policies that provide the framework” for what Project schools do, Maxwell says.

On a late August morning, not long after the start of the school year, Ashe Elementary kindergarten teacher Monica Hamilton is teaching her students how to sit on the carpet. It’s just one of several lessons in which she uses explicit, step-by-step explanations to help children adjust to the reality of school.

Hamilton has an early childhood certificate, but did not study early childhood education in college; she earned the credential “in the trenches,” through a program that gave her credit for kindergarten teaching experience.

“When we’re seated on the carpet we need to cross our legs Indian-style, and keep our hands folded. It helps us keep our hands to ourselves,” Hamilton says to the class. “All this is for a reason. It helps you to be disciplined. Being disciplined helps you do the right thing when you’re tempted to do the wrong thing.”

Later, Hamilton leads the children in an arm-lifting game that reinforces the difference between right and left and requires them to listen for her direction on when to put an arm down. Then, it’s time for roll-call.

“Fold your hands. Don’t put your hands in your mouth,” Hamilton tells a boy. “When I say your name, your response is, ‘I am here.’”

There’s an air conditioner in the window, but it’s not operating properly and the room is sweltering. So Hamilton has the children line up to go across the hall, to a room with working air conditioner that is at least 10 degrees cooler, to cool off briefly.

“Everybody’s shirt must be inside their pants,” she says.

As the students stand in line for a few minutes in the borrowed classroom, Hamilton drills them on math and letters. “Show me how to make a ‘1’ in the air,” she says, then does the same with the letter “m.” She writes the letter “m” and the letter “a” on the board and points alternately at them. “Tell me which one I’m touching,” she says.

She asks them the meaning of plus and equal signs, then draws a series of triangles on the board. “When two and one get together, how many do we have?” she asks.

When her students struggle to finish lunch in the few minutes allotted, she notes: “You think they already know [how to behave], but they don’t. That’s why kindergarten is so hard to teach.”

Hamilton taught 2nd grade last year and explains why teaching kindergarten has been a readjustment for her. “You’re teaching a baby again,” she says. “They didn’t know how to walk in a straight line, and listen, and follow directions.”

It’s made harder, she notes, when students arrive without knowledge of how to act in a school environment.

“You have to tell them what you want. Nobody has told them what to expect before they come to school.”