



Children Thrive in Connected Communities

The Neighborhood School Readiness Project

Investing in School Readiness

FAIRFAX COUNTY, VA



Dear Colleagues:

Children begin learning at birth as they engage and interact with those around them. Their earliest experiences with their families, caregivers, early childhood educators and others lay the foundation for academic and later workplace success.

As federal, state and local governments work alongside the private sector to identify effective ways to maximize limited resources and eradicate the achievement gap, there is widespread agreement that investing in young children yields a terrific return.

Fairfax County's long-term economic strength and fiscal sustainability depends on the skills, agility and flexibility of the future workforce. Today's youngest students must develop the critical thinking, team-building and problem-solving skills to reinforce the math, science, reading and technical skills that will be needed to help business remain competitive in the global marketplace.

Fairfax County's changing demographics demand more creative solutions to help ensure that all children enter kindergarten with a passion for learning and with the family, school and community support they need to be successful. The earlier we can engage young children and their families, the greater the prospects for a smooth transition and continued academic success in school.

Through the creation of relationships at the neighborhood level supporting school readiness, we can help ensure that tomorrow's workforce will be ready to tackle the many challenges and opportunities that are just around the corner.

When young children enter kindergarten well prepared for success, everyone wins.



Sharon Bulova
Chairman
Fairfax County
Board of Supervisors



Michael Harreld
Regional President
PNC Bank



Dr. Karen Garza
Superintendent
Fairfax County
Public Schools

Executive Summary

Supporting Young Children's Successful Transition to Kindergarten

As Fairfax County continues to change and grow, it is increasingly important that we pursue creative solutions to ameliorate the achievement gap well before young children enter kindergarten. This requires the support, engagement and collaboration of families, early childhood educators, school and county staff and community members who can work together to support young children's school readiness.

In 2004, Fairfax Futures, Fairfax County Office for Children and Fairfax County Public Schools partnered to create the Neighborhood School Readiness Project. The partners' shared goal is to facilitate systemic change and to promote stronger connections at the neighborhood level between early childhood educators, families, schools, county and the community to ensure children's smooth transition to kindergarten.

The project is implemented through the organization of teams comprised of early childhood educators, county, school and community representatives who understand the distinct social, emotional, economic and academic needs of young children and families within each neighborhood. Throughout the year, team members engage in conversation, participate in shared

learning experiences and discuss community needs, helping to break down traditional silos and foster new relationships. When communities work together to facilitate children's transitions and include families as partners in the process, children have a more positive experience and are likely to show progress more quickly when they enter kindergarten.

Several lessons have emerged since the launch of this project:

- The project has raised awareness across Fairfax County about the importance of addressing the achievement gap well before children enter the school system.
- Team strength has come from the breadth and depth of the relationships and connections formed at the neighborhood level.

- Each neighborhood team is unique and is more likely to be successful when developed organically, rather than through a prescribed approach.
- The project continues to decrease perceived barriers to communication, family engagement and student school readiness.
- Government agencies and community organizations are increasing collaboration and coordination based on a shared commitment to common goals surrounding young children at risk of school failure and their families.

As the reach of the project continues to grow, the partners envision increased local business engagement at the neighborhood level and an increase in the number of schools participating in existing and newly-formed neighborhood teams. The partners also plan an even greater emphasis on connecting educators across all early childhood education programs to enhance the school readiness of our county's youngest children.

Connecting Community to Kindergarten

Building Neighborhood Partnerships to Support Young Children's Smooth Transition to School

School readiness describes the capabilities of children, their families, schools and communities that will best promote student success in kindergarten and beyond. Each component – children, families, school and communities – plays an essential role in the development of school readiness. No one component can stand on its own.¹

Children's readiness for success in school is enhanced when families, schools and communities partner together, long before a child enters the kindergarten classroom. This partnership is pivotal, since the foundations for learning, healthy social and emotional development, and ways children relate to and interact with their world, are shaped during the early childhood years.

Young children's development is intricately linked and dependent upon their relationships and experiences in many different settings – with their family, in their early care and education program, school, and in the broader community. When reliable connections are developed between these settings, children can journey to and from each environment buoyed by an effective, collaborative system designed to meet their unique developmental needs. These connections are the essence of kindergarten transition planning and help pave the way to kindergarten and to sustained success in school and life.

“Education is the most important thing we do; it's the most important economic development tool we have.”

*Sharon Bulova,
Chairman,
Fairfax County
Board of
Supervisors*



¹Virginia's Definition of School Readiness, January 31, 2008. School Readiness Task Force Governor's Working Group on Early Childhood Initiatives. http://www.doe.virginia.gov/instruction/early_childhood/school_readiness/va_school_readiness_definition.pdf

Creating Smooth Transitions to Support Children's Success in School



“The care and overall well-being of our children is a community issue; we all need to partner and work together to support children and prepare them.”

Dr. Karen Garza, Superintendent, Fairfax County Public Schools

Successful transition initiatives can have important benefits for children such as increased motivation and openness to new experiences, enhanced self-confidence, improved relationships with other children and adults, and a greater sense of trust between teachers and children.² When children are curious, self-confident, and excited about learning, they have greater opportunity for school success.

Families have the most important role in a young child's life. They are essential partners in their children's education and are an integral part of the kindergarten transition process. Transition research recommends that schools take a proactive approach to involving and engaging families prior to the start of school and suggests that schools should base transition practices on three interrelated principles:

1. *Reach out* to link with families and early childhood settings.
2. *Reach backward in time* to establish links before the first day of school.
3. *Reach with appropriate intensity* to develop a range of practices and contacts.³

Opportunities for families to have direct contact with schools and teachers prior to kindergarten entry are an important component of transition planning. Outreach efforts must consider where the children are and how to connect to their families. A community-wide approach may include the involvement of early care and education programs, libraries, faith-based organizations, health, housing and family service agencies, and local businesses in information sharing and outreach to families of young children. Early care and education programs have a great deal of contact with families and can help share resources

²Head Start Information and Publication Center (HSIPC). *Easing the Transition from Preschool to Kindergarten: A Guide for Early Childhood Teachers and Administrators*. Washington, DC: HSIPC

³Pianta, R.C., Rimm-Kauffman, S.E., & Cox, M.J. (1999). Introduction: An ecological approach to kindergarten transition. *The Transition to Kindergarten*.

on school readiness and information about kindergarten transition.

Quality early care and education programs promote and nurture children's sense of wonder and joy in discovery and learning; this sets the stage for future success in school. Early education professionals should conduct transition learning experiences with children as part of their daily curriculum. Offering transition practices

year-round to provide an exchange of information and activities creates continuity as children move to kindergarten.

Kindergarten teachers receive children with a wide variety of early childhood experiences. They can effectively support children's smooth transition by developing connections with early care and education programs and families before children begin kindergarten.

"Years ago, children used to be afraid of coming to school. Now they come into the school and they are excited. They know me, they know our community, they see familiar faces and they are excited to begin their learning journey in a school setting."

*Mary McNamee, Principal,
Lynnbrook Elementary School*





Guiding Principles for Successful Transitions

Transition is not a singular event but a process that occurs over time. Successful transitions are the shared responsibility of many individuals and institutions recognizing the dynamic nature of the relationships between children, family, schools and community.

Successful Transitions

- **Foster Relationships as Resources:** Supportive, effective relationships are resources for children. When a child is involved in and surrounded by supportive relationships, the transition to kindergarten occurs more smoothly.
- **Promote Continuity from Early Care and Education to Kindergarten:** Fundamental to a smooth transition are relationships that serve as a bridge between the family and school and provide continuity from early care and education to kindergarten.
- **Focus on Family Strengths:** Relationships between schools and families, reflecting the strengths of families can be developed through supportive positive interactions.
- **Tailor Practices to Individual Needs:** The actual set of transition practices enacted with a given family or classroom must be based on the needs and strengths of that child, family, teacher, school and community.
- **Form Collaborative Relationships:** Collaboration among the key players in the transition process is fundamental in developing and implementing successful transition practices.



Building a Neighborhood School Readiness Team

“When we’re all around the table, I’m able to share some of the successes we’ve had at my preschool classroom but also hear great ideas from colleagues down the road or around the block.”

Cheryl Clarke, Head Start Teacher

“It’s nice to be part of a holistic way of meeting the needs of the community.”

*Jane Ampah, Librarian,
George Mason Regional Library*

“The wisdom, the knowledge I gain, helps me with my family child care business.”

*Gita D’Souza Kumar,
Family Child Care Provider*

Creating connections to develop a shared vision for school readiness and to implement a transition to kindergarten requires focused effort and leadership. Transitions work best when strong relationships and effective partnerships linking children, families, schools, and early childhood programs are established before kindergarten starts.

All partners contribute their strengths and resources and work together as a team to ease the transition between home, early childhood programs, and elementary school and to ultimately support the healthy social and emotional development and educational achievement of the children.

Based on experience to date, successful teams reflect the following essential elements:

- ✓ Commitment to shared goals by all stakeholders.
- ✓ Connection with families.

- ✓ Shared understanding of the importance of quality early learning experiences.
- ✓ Support and encouragement from school principals.
- ✓ Active engagement of early care and education programs.
- ✓ Ready access to community resources and support.



Developing Communication Strategies

Effective communication is critical for successful partnerships to build relationships, create understanding, and strengthen connections. Communication is enhanced when neighborhood school readiness team members are familiar and comfortable with each other and develop relationships based on a clear understanding of the important roles that each has in the transition process. The flow of information and cooperation between

members of the team is ongoing and multi-directional. Teams can increase educational program continuity by sharing information about their programs, standards, and expectations. In planning together with families, they can ensure that everyone who works with and cares about the children can support them in their entry to kindergarten and in this pivotal phase of their development.

NEIGHBORHOOD SCHOOL READINESS TEAMS IN ACTION

In Springfield, the elementary school created a more welcoming Family Learning Center where parents and children come to learn new skills, make connections and become more comfortable being at the school.

Some communities, including the team in Fairfax, have decided to hold kindergarten orientation activities from March through August, including separate activities for the children and their parents. These include informational sessions, visiting the school library, participating in play dates, and walking by the cafeteria line to receive apple juice and crackers.

Many children were not entering kindergarten on time because they lacked the required physical exam or immunizations. In Reston, team members worked with the county's Health Department to schedule more convenient times for families to bring their children in, including evening and Saturday clinics.

The Annandale team worked together to ensure that kindergarten orientation puts a greater focus on the children. The goal was to make the experience more child-friendly and help lessen children's anxiety when they enter kindergarten.



Partnering with Key Stakeholders

“Early childhood learning is part of the spectrum of educational investment; increasingly, we understand that this investment is really important to the achievements at the other end of that spectrum.”

Congressman Gerry Connolly, VA-11th District, U.S. House of Representatives



Across Fairfax County, there is a shared interest in ensuring that all young children are able to enter school prepared to succeed. The better prepared young children are for a smooth transition to school, the less likely the need to spend additional funds on remediation down the road.

Families may care for their youngest children on their own or in partnership with early childhood educators in early care and education programs. Schools welcome young children to kindergarten from every experience level and from different cultural and language backgrounds.

Building connections to additional community stakeholders can greatly strengthen support for children and families preparing for successful transition to kindergarten. These stakeholders include:

- County agencies, such as local libraries, parks, health department, and family services.

- Public School programs such as the Family and Early Childhood Education Program, Child Find, Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters, and Family Center Liaisons.
- Child care centers and preschools and licensed or permitted family child care providers who care for and educate young children from birth to age five.
- Area businesses and philanthropic organizations committed to the ongoing education of our county's children, from cradle to career, prepared to support school readiness at the neighborhood or county-wide level.

Partnering with key stakeholders requires willingness to step outside of traditional boundaries and a willingness to learn from others. Building new relationships in support of young children's school readiness takes time, patience and the ability to build trust. It is a process that encourages creativity; there is no one prescribed approach that stands above the rest.



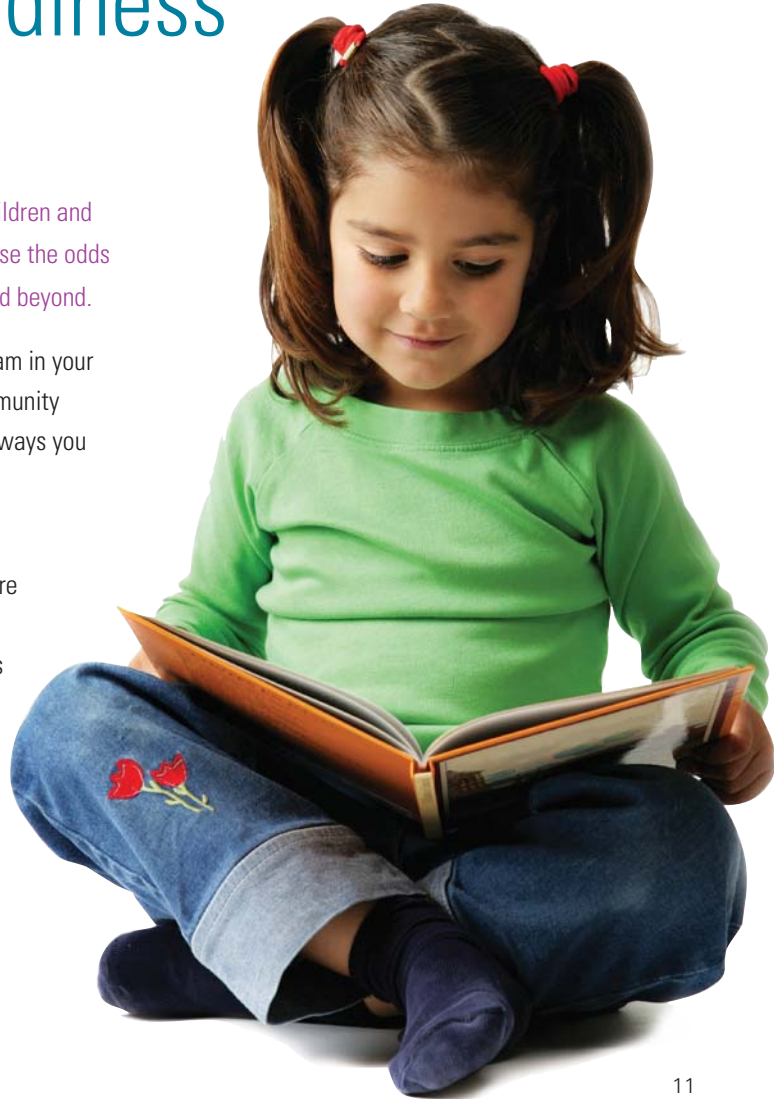
How Can You Support Young Children's School Readiness in Fairfax County?

Creating community relationships, assuring continuity of support for children and families and partnering with parents during the early years can increase the odds that children will experience early and sustained success in school and beyond.

You can become part of a current or new Neighborhood School Readiness Team in your community. Whether you are an early childhood educator, administrator, community representative or area business or professional organization, there are many ways you can lend your support to this effort:

1. Learn more about efforts in the neighborhood where you live or work.
2. Connect with early childhood programs in your community to see if they are already involved on a Neighborhood School Readiness Team.
3. Find out about your elementary school's kindergarten orientation activities and lend your support.
4. As a local business, "adopt" your Neighborhood School Readiness Team by ascertaining its specific needs and ways you can lend your support.
5. Support candidates who are committed to quality early childhood education and school readiness.

To learn more about how you can become involved, please visit: www.fairfax-futures.org or call 703.324-8126.



Additional Transition Resources/Publications

Publications

Bohan-Baker, M., & Little, P.M.D., (2004). *The Transition to Kindergarten: A Review of Current Research and Promising Practices to Involve Families*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Family Research Project, Harvard Graduate School of Education: Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Pianta, R. C., & Kraft-Sayre, M. (2003). *Successful Kindergarten Transition Your Guide to Connecting Children, Families, and Schools*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing.

Pianta, R. C., Cox, M. J., & Snow, K. L. (2007). *School Readiness and the Transition to Kindergarten in the Era of Accountability*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing.

Rous, B., & Hallam, R. (2006). *Tools for Transition in Early Childhood: A Step-by-Step Guide for Agencies, Teachers, & Families*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing.

Stepping Into Kindergarten: A School Readiness Guide for Families. Fairfax County Office for Children. Fairfax, VA.

National Initiatives

Terrific Transitions: Supporting Children's Transition to Kindergarten
A collaborative effort of the SERVE Regional Educational Laboratory and the National Head Start Association, this website provides a variety of transition information and resources for families, professionals, and community partnerships to use as they address children's transitions into kindergarten.

<http://center.serve.org/TT/>

SPARK – Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids, an initiative of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation is designed to unite communities to create coordinated systems and smooth transitions so that all children can be successful both before and after they enter school. The SPARK initiative includes grantees in the District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Mississippi, New Mexico, North Carolina, and Ohio.

<http://www.wkkgf.org/resource-directory/resource/2006/01/spark-what-is-it>



Sample Transition Activities/Strategies

- Early childhood professionals attend workshops that focus on school readiness activities (e.g., experiences using blocks, art, literacy, music/singing, play, as well as daily routines) important for success in kindergarten.
- Schools distribute kindergarten registration information throughout the year.
- Share information about community resources, including School Age Child Care programs, Child Care Assistance and Referral Services, Library programs, Healthy Families.
- Invite kindergarten teachers to present learning experiences that build children's school readiness skills at a family gathering in an early care and education program.
- Invite families with rising kindergarten children to attend community events at their neighborhood school (e.g., health fair, community resources fair, play time on the playground). Information about school and community resources (e.g., School Age Child Care/SACC, Family Resource Center, and Health Department) is shared as children enjoy visiting their future school.
- Hold several Kindergarten Orientation meetings (e.g. daytime, evening, Saturdays at a local library or community center) for parents and rising kindergarten children that describe kindergarten registration requirements, upcoming school activities and resources.
- Encourage kindergarten teachers to visit early childhood programs in the community to learn about daily routines, environments, and the experiences and skills of children transitioning into kindergarten.
- Principals invite early childhood professionals from early care and education programs to visit kindergarten classes in the fall to share the expectations of the beginning of the kindergarten year.
- Early childhood professionals send written information with parent approval (e.g. Transition Forms) describing a child's individual skills, accomplishments, and needs, to the designated public school staff to be shared with the child's kindergarten teacher.
- Individual public school principals reach out to families, early childhood professionals, and other community members throughout the year before children transition to kindergarten; offer a variety of activities (e.g. Open House with a school tour, visits to kindergarten classes to meet teachers and staff, snack or lunch in the cafeteria, and an opportunity to check out books from the school library.)



For More Information:

- Fairfax County Office for Children
www.fairfaxcounty.gov/ofc
- Fairfax County Public Schools
www.fcps.edu/DIS/OECFS
- Fairfax Futures
www.fairfax-futures.org



Investing in School Readiness

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