

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A Community Effort to Support the Transition from Pre-K to Kindergarten

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Executive Summary

Early years are the most crucial for children’s development. Children’s experiences when they enter the educational system set an important foundation for ongoing engagement and learning. When children have positive early school experiences, they are more likely to enjoy school and have fewer absences, key indicators associated with school engagement and long-term academic and social well-being. At the same time, one study found that many children in the United States experience difficulties adjusting to kindergarten. These difficulties occur in areas such as following directions, negotiating differences in home and school culture, working independently, and working as part of a group. Systemic approaches to smoothing transitions between pre-K and early elementary grades—limited in today’s educational practices—present a promising model for improving the quality and coherence of children’s learning experiences at a critical moment in their learning trajectories.

In Chicago’s Altgeld-Riverdale neighborhood, the Pre-Kindergarten to Kindergarten Transitions Project (PKTP) offers a teacher co-designed, community approach. This program promotes an intentional approach to early educational transitions through the implementation of classroom and community transition practices. PKTP brings together teachers and families from across all schools and early childhood centers serving pre-K and kindergarten students in the Altgeld-Riverdale area. This program is staffed by Business and Professional People for the Public Interest (BPI), a public interest law and policy center.

Researchers at Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago (Chapin Hall) and the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research (UChicago Consortium)

studied the first full-year implementation of PKTP (2016–17), following a pilot year in 2015-16. The motivation behind this work was to provide our local school district (Chicago Public Schools) with information about the core components of PKTP and its ability to increase family engagement as the district was considering scaling up this community-wide approach to supporting the pre-K to kindergarten transition. These findings would also be used by BPI as they considered future iterations and changes to PKTP in the future. More broadly, studying this model offered an opportunity to add to a new and growing knowledge base about practice efforts to improve children’s transitions to and through kindergarten.

A Community Approach to Strengthening Transitions

Rather than offering a transitions curriculum, PKTP includes three core components:

1. A cross-grade, cross-school professional learning community for teachers
2. Common classroom practices across pre-K and kindergarten
3. Family learning activities (“Family Fun Hours” and field trips)

These components can be adapted to different community contexts and student needs by local implementers.

Together, these core components are intended to:

- 1) promote smoother transition experiences for families and children, both academically and social-emotionally;
- 2) support teachers by building a sense of community; and
- 3) strengthen connections across grades, schools, teachers, and families.

Research Methods

We addressed two overarching questions in this study:

Research question 1: Was PKTP implemented as designed?

Research question 2: In what ways did PKTP participation influence: 1) relationships among teachers and family members and 2) communication about the importance of transition?

We used a developmental evaluation approach to provide relevant feedback to the program developers to inform and strengthen future implementation. To address the study questions, researchers collected the following types of data across 18 classrooms in the six sites serving pre-K and kindergarten students in Altgeld-Riverdale:

- **Teacher surveys** completed and administered at the beginning and end of the school year (n = 16 in fall 2016; n = 20 in spring 2017)
- **Parent surveys** completed and administered at the beginning and end of the school year (n = 134 in fall 2016; n = 80 in spring 2017)
- **Teacher interviews** (n = 8)
- **Focus groups with families** of pre-K- and kindergarten-aged children (6 focus groups, n = 33)
- **Observations of PKTP events** across the school year (n = 6)

- **Documentation** developed by PKTP project staff (e.g., agendas, minutes, implementation logs)

We conducted descriptive analyses on survey responses and systematically analyzed interview, focus group, and observation data using a qualitative codebook developed for this study. To assess the fidelity of implementation, we examined data specifically related to PKTP’s three components. To explore the influences of PKTP participation on relationships among teachers and parents and communication about the importance of transition, we examined participants’ reports about changes in their relationships and knowledge about transition. Finally, we ensured validity of our interpretations by triangulating across these multiple data sources and conducting member checks with participants to ensure the accuracy of findings.

Key Findings

Was PKTP implemented as designed?

Consistent school and center participation in a cross-grade, cross-school professional learning community provided a critical space for deepening classroom and community implementation of PKTP. Participating in monthly teacher meetings allowed pre-K and kindergarten teachers to learn more about their community and how it influenced students and families, develop a network of support, and gain knowledge about strategies they could implement in their classrooms to lead to better student outcomes. Many teachers regularly attended the monthly meetings, an important factor supporting the development of a true cross-grade, cross-school community. School and center leadership supported meeting attendance by finding ways to cover teachers’ prep time and experimenting with strategies to communicate what happened at meetings to other pre-K and kindergarten teachers.

Teachers reported that students enjoyed and benefited from the three common classroom practices they had selected for PKTP: self-regulation practices, trauma-sensitive practices, and dramatic play. Teachers selected these common classroom practices because they seemed the most important. They believed in the need to better support their students’ social-emotional development and valued the opportunity for professional

development in this area. But pre-K teachers reported more consistent implementation of the common classroom practices compared to kindergarten teachers. Both pre-K and kindergarten teachers implemented the self-regulation practices consistently, but dramatic play and trauma-sensitive practices were implemented with less frequency, particularly among kindergarten teachers. For some teachers, PKTP's lack of clear alignment with their grade-level curricula was an implementation challenge. For example, the pre-K curriculum emphasizes play; thus, pre-K teachers implemented dramatic play with greater regularity than kindergarten teachers. In addition, PKTP's specific supports for each practice varied. PKTP provided teachers with specific tools and techniques to implement self-regulation practices, but the approach to supporting trauma-sensitive practices was more conceptual. Teachers' beliefs about the alignment of common classroom practices with the grade-level curricula, as well as the goals and visions of their sites, correlated with teachers' reports about how often they implemented each type of practice. In addition, teachers expressed wanting a more articulate vision for how these practices—which were being shared across classrooms and schools—contributed to the overall goal of PKTP as a transitions program.

Teachers and families reported that family learning activities created opportunities to develop informal relationships. By intentionally creating community events, PKTP's family learning activities differed from existing family engagement and transition practices at participating schools and centers. Many teachers and family members noted that these events created space for informal conversations and opportunities to become more familiar with community context. Timing, communication, and historical community divisions, however, each influenced family participation.

In what ways did PKTP participation influence: 1) relationships among teachers and family members and 2) communication about the importance of transition?

Teachers and parents reported a greater sense of community as a result of their PKTP participation. Pre-K and kindergarten teachers reported feeling more connected to each other across grade levels and schools

because of their participation in PKTP. Parents and teachers also reported feeling more connected with each other through the family learning activities, with some describing their informal conversations during these events as contributing to a change in how teachers and parents communicated about children's academic progress and behavior. These opportunities supported the strengthening of relationships between children and home, school, peer, and community—all of which contribute to students' transition experiences.

PKTP influenced community perceptions of the importance of the kindergarten transition. According to teachers' and families' reports, PKTP helped contribute to a larger sense of community around children's needs in pre-K and kindergarten. However, at the close of the first full year of implementation, PKTP's communication about the importance of transitions was less clear to teacher and parent participants. Parents who participated in PKTP activities did not necessarily understand that there was a focus on the importance of transition. While pre-K teachers reported that PKTP contributed to their understanding of transitions, teachers from both grades indicated that a more explicit integration of transition into PKTP activities would be helpful for clarifying goals and intended outcomes.

Implications

- **Community building provided a foundation for the process of creating alignment between pre-K and kindergarten.**

Prior to implementation, project staff from BPI engaged pre-K and kindergarten teachers and administrators across the community in a series of knowledge exchanges and planning meetings. These efforts provided an important foundation for implementation across grades and schools. Teachers reported that the PKTP's community-wide focus was unique and central to their engagement and implementation work. They indicated that prior to participation in PKTP, they had limited to no opportunity to engage with educators outside of their sites and little familiarity with the teaching methods and philosophies used at other grade levels outside of the program. The significant growth in teachers' level of comfort discussing their challenges supporting students

and offering implementation advice to each other is one example of PKTP's successes in fostering the collaborative relationships that are fundamental to creating alignment between pre-K and kindergarten. Despite these connections across the community, in practice, philosophical and structural differences across participating education settings (school-based vs. center-based pre-K programs; neighborhood vs. charter elementary schools) and differences between pre-K and kindergarten curricula and expectations posed some barriers to consistent implementation in the classroom. These are important contextual nuances to attend to when implementing a community-wide approach.

- **Focusing on key components rather than a structured curriculum, and co-developing the program with—rather than for—teachers, allowed for flexibility in what practitioners could focus on.**

Teachers characterized the design decision to determine and focus on “key components” of the program, but not a specific curriculum, as both a facilitator and a barrier. For this program, not having a transitions curriculum created important flexibility to respond to teacher and student needs in local community context and across diverse educational settings. At the same time, variation in perceptions of PKTP's alignment with the curricula, goals, and visions of schools and centers created implementation barriers for some teachers. Teachers also reported that as co-designers of the PKTP common classroom practices, these practices aligned with student needs. They also developed the content for family learning activities and established priorities for their professional learning community. While there were important grade-level and site differences in implementation, participants reported that the components were mutually reinforcing over time and that the three core components in combination facilitated both

classroom and community transitions work. It will be important to ensure that this flexible approach also includes the communication of a consistent vision for PKTP to support engagement and participation in the future.

- **Having an external facilitator proved key for ongoing collaboration and successful implementation of PKTP.**

The time necessary to plan professional learning community meetings, field trips, and family learning activities was substantial. Having BPI as an external facilitator and coordinator provided leadership around these responsibilities (and teacher ownership of those responsibilities would have been hard to sustain). In addition, an external facilitator is uniquely positioned to reflect on how to design future meetings to better meet the needs of all teachers and families across the community. Those implementing programs that bring together staff from multiple schools should consider the support an external facilitator can provide in communicating a consistent vision of the work, particularly within the context of teacher and administrator turnover from one year to the next.

To improve the quality and coherence of children's learning experiences in the early school years, existing literature points to the critical importance of smoothing linkages between pre-K and those early elementary grades. PKTP represents an attempt within one community to start improving the transition experience of students and their families. While the focus of this study was a developmental evaluation for the PKTP program, key findings can inform a broader group of stakeholders focused on strengthening the transition from pre-K to kindergarten in Chicago and across the country.

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The views expressed in this report are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the position, policy, or views of agencies participating in the Pre-K-Kindergarten Transitions Project, including Chicago Public Schools and the City of Chicago Department of Family & Support Services. Although the UChicago Consortium's Steering Committee provided technical advice, no formal endorsement by these individuals, organizations, or the full Consortium should be assumed.

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