Smoothing the Transition to Kindergarten

BY ANTHONY J. SPARANO, JR.
A Pennsylvania school district’s early childhood committee engages area preschools and day care providers to establish a foundation of learning for students before they enter kindergarten.

In the past, students arriving for the first day of kindergarten in Upper Merion Area School District (UMASD) schools had frequently received different levels of foundational instruction. For example, handwriting instruction, which impacts how a child holds his or her pencil for letter formation and manuscript printing, varied and was often different than our district’s approach. As a result, students became frustrated with the unfamiliar handwriting method used in most kindergarten classrooms.
Although these students, who largely attended various area preschool and day care centers, benefited from early learning experiences, the district sought to provide a more consistent introduction to teaching and learning, so that all students entered kindergarten on the same level. As a result, UMASD decided to create an Early Childhood Committee that would offer relevant professional development by sharing ideas, best practices, materials, and curriculum. Committee members would consist of district representatives and preschool and day care providers.

The goal: Better prepare young learners to that they enter the district’s elementary schools with a similar foundation of learning, regardless of the preschool or day care center that they attended. It helps that UMASD’s superintendent is passionate about providing students access to early childhood education, and he values the relationships and professionalism that this committee fosters.

**Beginnings**

UMASD invited directors from the area preschools and day care centers to join the Early Childhood Committee. The committee also includes district staff members from the pre-K program, nursery school, kindergarten, and the before- and after-school childcare program that charges tuition. I serve as the facilitator for this committee as a district liaison and I represent elementary principals. The director of curriculum and instruction also attends meetings.

We schedule three meetings to occur throughout the year at the district’s administration building. Members can suggest topics for future meetings, and if the director, supervisor, or leader of a center cannot attend a meeting, then he or she is able to send a representative (usually one of their teachers). Even if centers can’t send a representative to the meeting, we still involve them via emails and other communications.

**Two Years Later**

The Early Childhood Committee thrives on open forums where committee members can discuss their experiences working with students and their families. During meetings, I frequently share relevant articles on early childhood to provide committee members with professional readings and discussions. We also watch videos and review websites on early childhood topics, and we allocate time to discuss and reflect on professional practice.

Over the past two years, UMASD has provided summer workshops and professional development for Early Childhood Committee members. Presentations have covered teaching students with disabilities and English-language learners, behavior management, and local services and interventions provided to preschool students by the district.

We also offer training at committee meetings. We introduce and demonstrate district kindergarten curriculum and materials, especially English-language arts and mathematics programs. As a result, some day care centers have purchased pre-K materials offered by providers that the district uses. These day care centers have also adopted district methods for teaching phonemic awareness, handwriting, and math concepts, as well as introducing the sight words that district elementary schools present in kindergarten classrooms.

District representatives review sample progress reports with day care centers so that they are aware of our behavior and academic expectations. We also encourage the day care directors to visit district kindergarten and first-grade classrooms with their students in the spring, especially if they know which elementary schools their students will attend the following year. These visits help to familiarize students with our schools and possibly reduce some of the anxiety that a student may have about attending a new school.

The sharing does not flow in only one direction. District representatives also learn from the day care providers, who have shared their materials and favorite lessons. This knowledge can be useful to district nursery and preschool teachers. They also share reports and checklists used to communicate ongoing progress to parents. This type of information helps schools...
understand parents’ expectations and students’ school readiness. In addition, day care providers inform the district of students who are receiving early intervention services, which helps prepare for the students’ transition to schools.

Our community-based committee members communicate district information to parents, including kindergarten registration requirements and dates of kindergarten orientations and benchmark assessments. They also ask parents for permission to share their child’s academic and social behaviors with the district. This information helps teachers prepare for their new students. Because of these collaborative strategies, students entering kindergarten or first-grade after attending a learning center run by an Early Childhood Committee member are better prepared and have a smoother transition to our elementary schools. Currently, 70 percent of the area preschools and day care centers are actively involved in the committee, but it’s an advantage we would like for all students. To help bridge the gap, some day care centers award grants for free or sliding scale tuition to assist families. Some of the companies where our parents are employed reimburse or subsidize for childcare.

Next Steps
In the future, the district will present its character education program, Community of Caring, to the committee, along with lessons day care centers and preschools can use from its Positive Action curriculum. Guidance counselors also plan to present on topics they introduce to students in the primary grades.

Our committee members have noted an increase in the number of non-English speaking children enrolled at their sites, as well as an increase in children who need early interventions and support. As a result, at an upcoming meeting, an emotional support teacher will share strategies to improve behavior, and an English as a Second Language teacher will provide activities for English-language learners.

Each year, our committee has grown in membership as the number of day care providers in our area proliferates and awareness about the benefits of participating in the committee increases. The Early Childhood Committee serves as an example of the professional partnership our district has developed with organizations and businesses in our community. The day care providers have commented that their collaboration with the district encourages parents to enroll their children in their programs knowing that they have information about the public school system in which their children will eventually be enrolled.

The committee is a winning strategy for the school district to achieve its goal of preparing young students to enter school with similar experiences. The committee also helps preschools and day care centers strengthen their curricula and attract enrollees. In the end, it’s the students who benefit most, because they receive a foundation of learning that eases the transition to kindergarten.

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