Tips for Terrific Transitions

Contact Head Start program leaders to prepare students for kindergarten

By Deborah Bergeron

More than 400,000 children from Head Start programs entered kindergarten this fall. If you knew more about their school readiness, would they have a smoother transition to "big" school?

When I was a principal, I spent a great deal of time working on transitions from one public school building to the next—elementary to middle, middle to high. Children who move from Head Start to public schools might face an even more difficult transition. Our children typically live at or below the poverty line, which adds stress to any household, and the change to a new school can be overwhelming for both children and parents. And because Head Start is a federal program, its standards might differ from those of the public kindergarten that lies ahead. But transitions can be easier, too. In fact, many children who receive special education services in Head Start make so much progress, they no longer need an IEP in kindergarten.

As with most things, successful transitions start with strong relationships, and I've found that children's transitions are most successful when principals and program directors are on the same page regarding school readiness goals.

Here are my top three tips to help get them there:

Head Start school readiness programs …

- Help children and families thrive. More than 1 million young children and low-income pregnant women enroll each year.
- Use research-based curricula and assessments so each child makes progress in language, literacy, math, and more.
- Support at-home learning and healthy habits such as parent-child reading, regular bedtimes, school attendance, and positive parenting.
- Coordinate comprehensive services so children and families can access community services.
- Identify and serve children with special needs and facilitate early interventions that reduce or eliminate delays.

1. **Meet and greet.** Find out whether Head Start serves your school. It might seem obvious, but identifying programs that support your future students is vital, and it might be even more important for Head Start families. Head Start is a federally funded program, but it is locally run; you might have more than one Head Start program feeding into your school. You'll want to meet the director or center manager to understand the strengths of each program and the children and families served.
2. **Visit and share.** Plan to visit your Head Start and/or host the director at your school. You and the director can see each other's priorities and classroom cultures in action. In addition to its own culture, your school has expectations for what children should know and do before entering kindergarten. Meet with Head Start management to discuss what you and your kindergarten team expect when children enter school.

   These visits can be fun *and* enlightening. When you're at Head Start, you can check out curricula and assessments, meet parents, and learn about the unique comprehensive services Head Start provides. While hosting the Head Start director, you can show off your own curricula, assessments, opportunities for parents, and whatever else makes your school unique and wonderful.
3. **Team up and transition.** August will be here before we know it, and now is the time to think about how to streamline the transition process. For instance, one thing that surprised me as a principal was how well Head Start supports children's health. Medical and dental records are available, and they can be packaged for your school. With a little early coordination, Head Start parents will have everything ready to go. Let them know what they need to make your job easier. Use the spring to lay out a few key transition activities.

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Whether you follow my three tips or have a formula of your own, make a note to contact your Head Start program today. By aligning school readiness plans, your teachers will be in a better position to build upon and accelerate the progress that each child and each family has already made. Those gains are well established. Did you know that Head Start children are more likely to finish high school, attend college, hold a job, and enjoy good health? None of those great outcomes can happen without a strong transition to your elementary school—and middle school, and high school, and beyond.

Since 1965, more than 34 million Head Start graduates have moved into all sorts of careers and accomplishments; it's a first step toward realizing the American Dream. Your engagement before the child enters your building is an important step in making that dream a reality.

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