

Ease the Kindergarten Transition



As principal of a large elementary school in southeastern Kentucky, I've watched my wonderful staff and students break many of the stereotypes associated with poverty. Despite having a student body for which 85 percent qualify for free or reduced-price lunch and the vast majority live in transitional housing, Hunter Hills Elementary has achieved high scores on statewide assessments and has been recognized for numerous state awards. However, after first starting on our pathway to success five years ago, we had to ask ourselves the question: How do we keep this up?

A quote from Geoffrey Canada in Paul Tough's book, *Whatever It Takes: Geoffrey Canada's Quest to Change Harlem and America*, really struck home to our situation. Canada states, "To achieve sustainable success in a high-poverty environment, you have to change the culture of homes before kids ever come to school." Simply put, you must help parents become active partners in their child's education and, in many cases, change the way the parent views the educational process as a whole. Kindergarten College (K College) was born out of this desire to increase a child's chance of school success, even

before he or she becomes a student.

K College is a program where incoming kindergarten students can come into a classroom situation during the summer before their kindergarten year. During this summer program, children meet their kindergarten teachers, become familiar with the building, are introduced to school/classroom rules and procedures, and get a small sampling of kindergarten academic content. Correspondingly, while the students are introduced to school for the first time, parents also get to come to a pressure-free situation, where they can help

their child adjust, ask questions, and meet with administration one-on-one.

Academic Kickstart

The K College program has a simple structure. Parents register their children for K College when they register them for regular kindergarten classes. Students are assigned a starting date and someone from the school will call and remind the parents the week before K College starts. The program usually lasts from six to eight days, with the students meeting for part of the day. For example, a typical kindergarten college may meet from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m., Monday through Thursday for two weeks (eight days).

Our teachers break the day up into a shortened schedule that includes such kindergarten staples as calendar, physical movement, carpet time, ABCs, and more. All kids begin receiving instruction in Language for Learning, a scripted, direct instruction intervention from SRA. The basic academic goal of K College is to simply assess where the kids are and give them an introduction to the kindergarten basics.

Parent Partnerships

Entering kindergarten is also an important milestone for parents. Thus, it is essential that we initiate positive relationships with the parents/guardians as early as possible. K College gives the school an opportunity to meet each parent and discuss how we can work together to ensure the child's success.

We give parents a list of the content that will be covered in kindergarten, show them our online student support programs, and offer training dates conducted by our teachers, specifically geared toward parents of kindergarten students.

Another advantage this time gives us is to get to know the parents on a personal level. As with any school, but especially those in poverty, we typically have a high number of kindergarten students coming from a nontraditional family setting. Whether it be single parents, grandparents, foster care, or

another situation, often these parents have needs specific to their situation—both academic and nonacademic.

We have been blessed with a plethora of ministries and community programs that have assisted our students and their families. We have community resources and grants for everything from food and clothing to dental needs.

Results

For those who are looking for hard data, in general, we've found that students who attended K College usually score about 10 RIT points higher in reading and math on our first Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) computerized assessment. While there are numerous factors that could contribute to these numbers, our staff believe that K College definitely helps those students who might have limited access to technology at home to be more comfortable taking our periodic MAP assessments.

Another benefit is that in five years of K College, we haven't had a single crying child or parent on the first day of school who attended K College. Ask any kindergarten teacher what the toughest part of beginning a school year is and it won't be long before they mention crying kids and clinging parents. It's the same for principals, as I'm sure all of us have stories of first-day parents, tears freely flowing, having to be led away from their child's classroom and out the school doors. This no longer happens among K College participants.

Now, this isn't a guarantee—and it's not like we haven't had plenty of other criers, screamers, clingers, and the like. I'm simply saying that all of that happened at K College during the summer, without 600 other students around and many more adults to help. As one K College graduate so aptly put it this year as she watched another student cling and fight to keep his parent in the room on the first day, "Mr. Bond, that kid should have gone to college." 📺

Brian Bond is principal of Hunter Hills Elementary School in Corbin, Kentucky.

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