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# Understanding policies and practices that support successful transitions to kindergarten<sup>☆</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

The entry into kindergarten is a key transition children experience and has lasting consequences for their academic development. In light of this, many schools have implemented transition practices designed to foster positive development for children during this time. This study uses qualitative interview data to examine the policies, practices, and barriers that shape how school districts support children during the kindergarten transition. Data from interviews with teachers and administrators in eleven school districts reveal a diversity in the number of kindergarten transition practices implemented and a number of structural barriers related to communication and collaboration that prevent more intensive transition efforts. These barriers included a lack of communication about children's experiences prior to kindergarten and practical challenges related to bringing early childhood educators and elementary personnel together. They also highlighted external policy factors, such as quality rating systems, that shaped transition practices. These findings point to a number of future directions for both research and policy related to the kindergarten transition.

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## 1. Introduction

Transitions are key points in developmental trajectories in which individuals need to adapt to their changing environments (Elder, 1998). One of the earliest transitions children in the U.S. experience is the transition to formal schooling, which for many children begins with kindergarten. The success of this transition has lasting consequences, as the kindergarten year is considered a critical developmental period for shaping children's short- and long-term well-being (Duncan et al., 2007; Entwisle & Alexander, 1989). Despite the importance of this transition, many children struggle during the transition, as they are experiencing dramatic shifts in both environmental experiences and expectations (Mashburn et al., 2018).

In light of these challenges, education professionals and researchers have sought ways to ease this transition, and in turn, promote children's school success. For example, the recent PK-3 movement focuses on ways to increase alignment across policies, practices, and curricular experiences across these early years (Drummond et al., 2016). Other intervention work has focused on increasing practices directly related to the kindergarten transition (e.g., Head Start REDI Parent; Bierman et al., 2015). However, success in all of these efforts requires collaboration across multiple distinct systems that serve preschool and elementary school students and little research has focused on such collaborations and the barriers to making them successful (Cook et al., 2019).

In the present study, we use in-depth interviews to understand current kindergarten transition practices and barriers to implementing more comprehensive practices in today's policy landscape. Such work is highly relevant to a shifting landscape in which a rising number of children are attending preschool prior to kindergarten entry (Child Trends, 2015), making the transition between preschool and kindergarten an increasingly important area of research and practice. As states and cities expand preschool programming, an increasing number of children are provided with

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opportunities to adjust to the school environment prior to kindergarten, and school districts may be better positioned to engage in activities that facilitate children's transition into kindergarten. Indeed, understanding children's transitions to kindergarten is critical to both ensuring their long-term academic success and to maximizing the benefits of their prior preschool experiences. By focusing on this transition, we seek to better practices used to support children and families during this transition, systemic supports and barriers to transition-related practices, and the role of other policies in shaping districts' ability to implement best practices. In doing so, we are able to identify policy and practice issues that both contribute to our empirical understanding of the kindergarten transition and point to new directions to optimizing the transition for children.

### 1.1. Children's transition to kindergarten

When children enter kindergarten, they are entering a new context that is unlike their prior environments, even if they have attended preschool. Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta (2000) first conceptualized the transition to kindergarten in this way and noted that the drastic changes children experience during this transition make it a time of vulnerability, with potential consequences for later schooling. Many of these same themes are highlighted in more recent work (Mashburn et al., 2018). This transition is particularly challenging because children are experiencing a multitude of significant changes simultaneously. For example, in the kindergarten setting, children are likely to experience increased academic demands, with more explicit expectations placed on them and more time spent in instructional activities (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). Their social interactions are also different from prior contexts as well. In particular, the nature of their interactions with adults changes as children experience larger teacher-to-child ratios, relative to both preschool and obviously to home environments they have experienced. These changes lead to other new expectations for children, such as being able to follow routines and act more independently (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). Not surprisingly, seminal work revealed that kindergarten teachers believed that approximately 16% of their students experienced serious adjustment problems when entering kindergarten (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2000) and another one-third of students experienced more minor challenges. Although this research is dated, more recent research suggests that the demands of kindergarten have increased in recent decades (Bassok et al., 2016). Taken together, the conceptual and empirical evidence clearly suggest that kindergarten entry is in fact a challenging transition for children to experience and that attention related to reducing these challenges is warranted.

### 1.2. Improving children's transition to kindergarten

In light of these challenges, schools have implemented practices to improve children's kindergarten transition, many of which are grounded in Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta's (2000) ecological model. This model focuses on the importance of relationships to facilitating children's transition to kindergarten. They posit that positive relationships, particularly those between children, their teachers, and their parents, are crucial for facilitating children's transition to kindergarten. For example, a child who develops a close relationship with a new teacher may feel more supported as she encounters new expectations. Similarly, parents who have good communication with their child's teacher may be better able to help their child adjust to their new experiences. Because of the importance of these relations, many transition practices focus on building these relations early in children's kindergarten transition.

As a way of facilitating positive transitions early, preschool programs engage in transition practices to help prepare children for kindergarten before they enter elementary school. In fact, preschool teachers may be particularly important in the process of engaging parents in the transition to kindergarten as, parents have historically reported greater closeness and communication with preschool teachers as compared to elementary teachers (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 1999, 2005). Results from the National Center for Early Development and Learning (NCEDL) Multi-State Pre-Kindergarten Study revealed that pre-kindergarten teachers implemented a number of transition-related practices (LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2008). The most frequent practice was sharing written records with kindergarten teachers (79%) but other activities such as taking their children to visit a kindergarten class (74%) or holding a spring orientation for pre-kindergarten parents (65%) were also common (LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2008). More recent research on Head Start has found more collaborative transition activities (Cook & Coley, 2018), but Head Start may be particularly well-suited to provide supports during the kindergarten transition given its long history, program-level administration, and continued commitment to involving families. It is important to note that although many children attend preschool at family-based childcares (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Childcare, 2019), there is virtually no research on what transition practices look like in these settings. There is a clear need for more current research on practices implemented during the preschool years in settings beyond Head Start.

In fact, most research on transition practices has focused on those implemented by kindergarten teachers. For example, both older and more recent national data have shown that kindergarten teachers take steps to reach out to both parents and children before and after the school year starts (Cook & Coley, 2017; La Paro et al., 2000). However, the most commonly used practices did not directly afford engagement between teachers and parents, such as sending letters home to parents and children, and may not facilitate relationship development. More direct relationship-building practices were much less common, with less than 5% of teachers conducting home visits with families and only 54% talking with parents before the school year started (La Paro et al., 2000). Recent nationally representative research also found that that general outreach to parents, such as sending letters home and parent orientations, are the most common transition practices reported by kindergarten teachers (Cook & Coley, 2017).

Importantly, recent work has directly examined whether kindergarten practices have changed over time using the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study – Kindergarten Cohort studies of 1998 and 2010 (Little et al., 2016). Overall, study findings showed that schools' offering of kindergarten transition practices has increased over time but only slightly. Additionally, some practices, such as having preschoolers visit kindergarten classes, have decreased over time. Thus, it does not appear that the use of kindergarten transition practices in elementary schools has changed in recent years.

The lack of increased transition activities is surprising given the consistent and growing evidence that these transition practices are positively associated with children's success in kindergarten. For example, Cook and Coley (2017) found that parent orientations were associated with greater gains in reading and math, perhaps because the orientations provided a way to communicate about the academic expectations of kindergarten (Cook & Coley, 2017). Similarly, data from the earlier cohort of the ECLS-K study showed that transition practices were associated with academic achievement in part through increases in parent-initiated involvement throughout the school year (Schulting et al., 2005). Associations between transition practices implemented in pre-kindergarten and children's adjustment have also been found. Specifically, children who were in

pre-kindergarten classrooms with more transition activities were rated by their kindergarten teachers as being more socially competent (LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2008).

### 1.3. Communication and collaboration around the transition to kindergarten

Given the importance of these transition activities, it is critical to understand why there has not been greater increase in their usage in recent years (Little et al., 2016). In recent decades, access to preschool has expanded (Child Trends, 2015) which may provide an opportunity for children to experience more transition-easing practices, such as those described above. However, access to transition activities that connect preschool and kindergarten environments, such as visiting a kindergarten class the spring before enrollment, require communication and collaboration across the two schools and this may be challenging to implement. For example, although children are increasingly attending preschool programming, these often span a variety of auspices, including school districts, non-profit programs, and for-profit programs and the sheer number of programs in an area may be hard for elementary schools to coordinate with on transition issues. Furthermore, for many children, the preschool they attend may not be in the catchment area of the district they will eventually attend. In light of this, it is not surprising that studies of transition practices often report that practices that involve coordination between preschools and elementary schools, such as visiting community preschools or coordinating curriculum across the two environments, are among the least frequently implemented (La Paro et al., 2000).

Understanding the ways in which districts do coordinate with preschool systems to implement these practices as well as the challenges that prevent them from doing so is critical to advancing our ability to improve children's kindergarten transitions. Recent frameworks that have been developed to understand more general PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade approaches are instructive in understanding the complex nature of these efforts and the challenges inherent in implementing them. Most recently, Cook et al. (2019) applied the P-3 framework to the kindergarten transition. In their model, which they refined based on data collected in Head Start settings focuses on three specific coordination practices: knowledge transfer, alignment, and connecting families. In turn, each of these practices is hypothesized to improve children's experiences in preschool, elementary school, and at home, and to ultimately, improve children's transition to kindergarten and school success. *Knowledge transfer* focuses on information provided by preschools to elementary schools. This often focuses on specific information about individual children's strengths and challenges. *Alignment*, on the other hand, focuses on information shared by elementary schools to preschool providers. This information is often about the content of kindergarten, including curricula and assessments, and can allow preschools to develop practices that will prepare students' for their kindergarten experiences. Importantly, research from Finland has shown that providing information about individual students to elementary schools (knowledge transfer) and cooperation between preschools and elementary schools on curricula issues (alignment) both positively predicted the growth of children's learning from preschool to kindergarten, underscoring the importance of these practices (Ahtola et al., 2011). Furthermore, research from Norway has shown that information sharing between preschools and elementary schools is also associated with positive social adjustment at the start of elementary, and that this boost led to later advantages in both academic and social domains (Cook et al., 2017). Lastly, *connecting families* focuses on using preschool settings to provide a bridge between families and elementary schools. These practices may include traditional efforts such as holding a spring orientation

about the kindergarten transition, and are hypothesized to reduce family stress about the transition.

Understanding challenges to implementing these types of coordination activities is also critical to understanding the current state of transition practices. As laid out by Kauerz and Coffman (2013), these efforts require engagement by elementary school teachers and administrators with multiple preschool sectors and require significant time investment, which may be challenging for school personnel to do given their other work commitments. For example, providing alignment information that is deep and detailed enough to be useful to preschools is likely to require multiple meetings and a school district may need to communicate this information to many preschool organizations. Nevertheless, understanding these challenges to communication and collaboration around these issues can help improve them in the future.

### 1.4. The current study

Thus, the goal of the current study was to utilize in-depth interviews with a wide variety of school-related personnel to provide a comprehensive examination of current transition practices across the state of Ohio. Our first two research questions are guided by Cook et al.'s framework described above (Cook et al., 2019), although our examination is primarily from a school district perspective, while their work highlighted the Head Start perspective. Our first research question focuses on knowledge transfer, with a focus on knowledge shared with kindergarten teachers and school administrators about their students' experiences prior to the transition. Our next question documents the variety of transition practices currently being used across the preschool and elementary school sector, including potential alignment activities across the two settings and outreach to families through the transition. Although originally hypothesized by Cook et al. (2019) as a preschool practice, we are interested in outreach to families from both preschools and elementary schools. Lastly, we examine structural and policy-related barriers affect usage and implementation of transition practices. We address these questions in the context of an in-depth qualitative policy study designed to understand how policies and practices across Ohio impact the classroom experiences of children from pre-kindergarten to grade 3. This method allows us to provide a more nuanced understanding of which kindergarten transition practices are implemented, and importantly, the implementation barriers faced by both preschool and elementary school personnel.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Data

This study draws from data collected as part of a larger project designed to provide a comprehensive, multi-faceted investigation of classroom ecology and its relations to children's learning and achievement during the first five years of schooling, from pre-kindergarten (PK) through third grade (G3). As part of this project, we collected qualitative data to document state-, district-, school-, and classroom-level policies and practices linked to the classroom ecology. We conducted interviews with school district personnel and educational stakeholders across the state of Ohio. The current sample for this data source includes personnel from eleven school districts as well as ten additional key educational stakeholders. Districts were chosen using a purposive sampling strategy that maximized geographical diversity, the uniqueness of districts in terms of population/composition and early learning policies, and feasibility. This sampling method helped to ensure a range of demographic, geographic, and policy contexts were represented

**Table 1**  
Typology of school districts interviewed.

2013 code	Full typology descriptor	District enrollment (ADM)	Median income	Student poverty	Percent minority	Number of districts
1	Rural – high student poverty & small student population	1366	\$29,161	47%	4%	2
2	Rural – average student poverty & very small student population	1032	\$32,486	36%	3%	3
3	Small town – low student poverty & small student population	1676	\$34,507	30%	5%	
4	Small town – high student poverty & average student population size	2230	\$27,713	51%	14%	
5	Suburban – low student poverty & average student population size	4176	\$37,567	28%	16%	3
6	Suburban – very low student poverty & large student population	5254	\$53,233	12%	13%	1
7	Urban – high student poverty & average student population	4608	\$26,283	64%	45%	2
8	Urban – very high student poverty & very large student population	30,647	\$24,716	84%	70%	

**Table 2**  
Distribution of personnel interviewed by district typology.

Position	Typology of districts				
	1	2	5	6	7
Teachers	4	5	6	5	5
Principals (or other school level leadership)	3	2	3	3	3
Leadership (superintendents or proxies)	2	2	3	2	3
Board member	2	1	2	1	2

as well as different levels of influence (state, district, school, and classroom). Within each quadrant of the state, a variety of rural, suburban and urban districts were chosen using the 7-point urbanicity scale developed by the state department of education from the U.S. Census (Ohio Department of Education, 2015). The typological diversity of the districts in this study is represented in Table 1.

In participant recruitment, the goal was to have at least one representative from each level in every district: classroom (teachers), school (principals), and district (superintendents or proxies, and board members). Within each district, we interviewed 4–12 individuals. In each district, we interviewed one to four teachers from kindergarten through third grade. For districts with a preschool component, the preschool teachers and preschool leadership were interviewed as well. In seven districts, we interviewed participants at every level; in addition to teachers, we interviewed a principal, a board member, and superintendent or proxy (someone else in district level leadership who represented the superintendent’s office). In only a few districts (4) we did not get to interview participants at all levels due to time constraints. In these cases, it was typically the school board member who was not interviewed.

In total, our data analysis was drawn from 59 participants across the eleven districts as well as ten non-district stakeholders who represent early childhood nonprofits and Educational Service Centers (ESCs) across the state (69 participants total). Teachers ranged from preschool to 3<sup>rd</sup> grade; 25.8% were kindergarten teachers. Out of the eleven districts, seven districts had kindergarten teachers represented. While this study did not aim to examine differences in district size or resources, size will occasionally be used to describe districts for greater understanding. Using the 7-point typology scale in Table 1 (Ohio Department of Education, 2015), we define large districts as Typologies 6, 7 and 8, mid-size as Typologies 4 and 5, and small districts as Typologies 1, 2, and 3. In attempting to pool a diverse sample of districts (since there are greater number of districts among the small districts), we were not necessarily proportional to the numbers of district types in the state, though we came close to representativeness with Type 1 and Type 6 districts. Persons working within ESCs, which provide preschool programs across the state, and early childhood nonprofits were selected because of their knowledge and experience working with preschool programming and their experiences working with school districts. The distribution of personnel interviewed by position and typology is detailed in Table 2.

Interviews were conducted in person and individually by research staff over a 12-month period. Interviews were semi-structured with questions designed to elicit responses on multiple levels, with subjects ranging including classroom ecology, school transition practices, and larger policy issues that impact early learning. Question about transitions included kindergarten transition practices, how many incoming kindergartners attended preschool, and how this number might impact the classroom. Interviews were audio recorded and generally lasted 30–90 min. Interviews varied in length due to the availability of participants, as teachers often only had 30 min in between class periods to participate. Interviewers prioritized transition and policy questions when time was limited, though typically the interviewer was able to ask all the semi-structured interview questions. Once completed, interviews were uploaded and then transcribed by trained research assistants using Nvivo Pro 11’s transcription capabilities.

2.2. Study context

The preschool landscape varies greatly across states and this is likely to shape kindergarten transitions. Ohio’s preschool offerings are quite varied and involve many different entities. The state has a preschool initiative through which 65% of school districts offer pre-kindergarten programs (NIEER, 2019). A large percentage of these programs are early childhood special education programs featuring a peer model approach, with almost equal number of students with and without disabilities. Many districts rely on Educational Service Centers (ESCs) to run their preschool offerings. In fact, 41 ESCs public preschools across Ohio. ESCs also provide support services to districts who run their own preschool programming. Head Start also has a presence in Ohio, serving 11% of 4-year-old children in the state. However, across public preschool and Head Start, only 27% of children are served in their year prior to kindergarten (NIEER, 2019). The remaining 73% of children are served by private providers or do not attend preschool. The private providers may be center-based on family-based and may take childcare subsidies as payment. Overall, the systems providing preschool throughout the state are varied and governed by a variety of funding streams and regulatory environments. Furthermore, these differing options all have varied connections and communication with the school districts children will ultimately attend.

2.3. Analytic plan

Qualitative analytic strategies were used to examine the research questions. Using Nvivo Pro 11, 1st and 2nd authors read through interview data and developed a codebook based on emergent patterns, shown in Table 3. Investigators primarily looked for patterns that addressed research aims, including transition practices, communication among educational stakeholders and barriers to communication and transitions. Two research assistants were trained on the codebook and then tested for inter-coder reliability, using Miles and Huberman’s (1994) formula,

**Table 3**  
 Codebook used for kindergarten transitions.

Theme: Practices	
Parent orientation Parent volunteers	
Beginning attendance policies	Subcodes: Staggered start KRA assessment Classroom assignment
Visits	Subcodes: Classroom Family Home
Partnerships Summer programs Adjustment	
Theme: Challenges	
Curriculum Parents stress/separation Bussing Half time Absenteeism Technology Time	
Theme: Preschool/Elementary School Factors	
Attended preschool Preschool attached to elementary school Half day/every other	
Theme: Policy Factors	
Changes over time Adding preschool Outcomes	
Theme: Communication	
Teacher to parent Pre-K to K	
Theme: Child Behaviors	
Focus Crying Excessive energy Clinging	

in which reliability = number of agreements/number of agreements + disagreements. The coders met with Miles and Huberman's (1994) suggestion of 80% agreement between coders on 95% of the codes as sufficient agreement among more than one coder, and were regularly retested for reliability every two months. Through a recursive process, investigators further developed a second codebook based on patterns that emerged from the first round of coding, collapsing categories of themes from the initial coding to capture more data, with a greater emphasis on communication and cross-sector challenges. Research assistants tested reliable with the second codebook and coded the data on a second level (Miles et al., 2013).

Data from interviews were triangulated across two investigators to increase the validity of the findings (Creswell, 2013). Having reduced data to patterns found via two rounds of coding, investigators read through the data and coding to attempt to directly answer research aims. Investigators created multiple data displays to aid in drawing and verifying conclusions (Miles et al., 2013) that involved factoring themes and organizing and summarizing the data. Investigators developed the following findings based on the research aims and drawing meaning and conclusions from the reduced and displayed data. Findings are divided into themes around each question. When generating themes, the authors exam-

ined data across different reporters to check for representativeness (Miles et al., 2013). However, we present our results grouped by personnel type to highlight differences across reporters. The decision to group personnel by position reflected the goals of the larger project, with an aim towards inter-system level analysis. In particular, this analysis aimed to attend to the ways individuals who are implementing policies and practices communicate and cooperate with one another. Analysis utilized a lens of distributed leadership, which emphasizes the administrative practices above, around, and within a school (Spillane & Coldren, 2015). Thus we delineate what is said by teachers, principals, superintendents or proxies, board members, and nondistrict stakeholders in our results. Note that not all themes were applicable to all types of personnel. In supporting findings, quotes were chosen for representativeness.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Practices and experiences surrounding the kindergarten transition

Through our research questions we sought an understanding of the practices around the transition to kindergarten across the state, specifically what kindergarten teachers know about their children when they enter their classrooms in the fall (knowledge transfer), what transitions practices districts report using (alignment and connecting families), what structural barriers affect their use of transition practices, and what policies support or hinder transition practices.

##### 3.1.1. What do school and district personnel know about children's prior to school experiences? How do these experiences impact the classroom?

Three themes emerged related to children's prior school experiences and the kindergarten transition. The first theme concerned what kindergarten teachers knew and understood about children's prior preschool experience; indeed, there was wide variability in how much kindergarten teachers and other school personnel knew about children's preschool experience. Kindergarten teachers across districts noticed the variety of experiences that students entered kindergarten with, though many did not have extensive knowledge of the different kinds of programs children attended. They often discussed informal knowledge provided by parents but did not have systematic information about the nature of their children's preschool experiences, including type, length of attendance and dosage. This was consistent across type of respondent, with other district personnel discussing similar gaps in knowledge as teachers.

In several districts, school level leadership wished to collect more data about children's preschool experience or make more comprehensive plans of how they will access and utilize this data, with multiple districts beginning to flesh out these plans. One school principal in a mid-size district mentioned an upcoming plan to collect data on all incoming kindergarteners' preschool experiences and sit down with kindergarten teachers to share it with them. District leadership (the school board and superintendent's office) across the state echoed the lack of mechanisms available to track prior to school experiences. Experiences did vary by location, size, and background of districts; a principal from a mid-size rural district commented that there were not many program options for prior to kindergarten experiences in the area, noting that many children in the area had some kind of home-based experience. A principal from a small rural district echoed that children's prior to school experiences were very limited, and occurred in houses, because "there is nothing around." One board member in a large urban district noted that children's prior to school experiences var-

ied across the district and based on parents' needs such as work and distance.

A second theme was that teachers and school leaders also held varied views on what preschool is, and what 'counts' as preschool. Teachers across the districts noted how the varying programs impacted the experiences children had. Several principals pointed out major differences in what counts as preschool, with one principal in a small rural district noting how one could not always tell the type of program from kindergarten screening data, saying "we have one neighboring community who just started preschool but it's been a daycare, so parents marked it as a preschool, but it was really a daycare." Another principal in a large rural district highlighted how differences in preschool curriculum or goals tended to impact the kindergarten:

I don't wanna be negative when I say this, but there's drastic difference just like with any preschool, between like some kids coming from Head Start versus others. Some are all play and they'll come to us knowing no letters still. Some of them, it's as if they were in our preschools, so I don't wanna like be negative about that. I would say people would probably say the same thing about any preschool program.

District leadership across the state also noticed these differences, suggesting that notions of quality and teacher requirements varied from program to program. Even if districts had an idea of how many children in kindergarten attended preschool, they did not necessarily know the kind of program or experiences their incoming kindergartners might have had. This variability led to what one ESC program coordinator called a lack "of consistency on where kids are coming from in early childhood."

A third theme was that teachers and other stakeholders consistently pointed to the value of preschool and to the clear differences between children in their classrooms who attended preschool and those who did not. Kindergarten teachers across the state mentioned many times the difference between students who had some preschool experience and those who did not. Teachers pointed out that variability in preschool experience led kindergarten teachers to spend significant amounts of time helping to ease the transition when a student is not familiar with school processes. Several principals noted how they had to support these teachers and that the difference was clear at the beginning of the year. A common trend in feedback from principals was that incoming kindergartners who attended some preschool scored much higher on the Kindergarten Reading Assessment (KRA), an Ohio assessment given in the fall of kindergarten, and that the difference was still visible to principals during the year. One principal of a medium size district explained how this impacts the kindergarten teacher and classroom: "I mean they can catch up, not to say that they can't, but you can't just like hit the ground running. It takes till Christmas, it takes till Christmas." District leaders noted the potential of preschool to help children "do school", or to start off the year being able to participate in the school community and function in a classroom. Many participants across levels mentioned how the changing expectations of kindergarten, including less play and greater focus on academics, further placed a burden on kindergarten teachers who had children entering their classrooms with various levels of school experience.

### 3.1.2. What practices support children's kindergarten transitions?

A number of common practices emerged in our interviews regarding district and other stakeholders' use of kindergarten transition practices, including making early connections with families. During the preschool year, ESCs directors, teachers, and district preschool programs typically reached out to the families they served to hold informational meetings and provide resources for the kindergarten transition. Depending on the program, preschool teachers were sometimes able to do home visits with their

preschool families to provide even more support. If preschools were located inside of a district elementary school, preschool teachers would often take their classes to visit a kindergarten class or have a kindergarten teacher stop by the preschool class.

District kindergarten teachers also provided opportunities for families to learn about transitions through multiple consistent practices, including informational meetings prior to kindergarten. Teachers and principals in eight of the districts mentioned registration and resource nights the spring or summer before kindergarten in which they could meet families and register their children. While practices varied across the school year, and participants were interviewed at different times of the year, there were many thematic consistencies whether the time period of the interview was in the fall or spring. For example, one principal in a mid-size district describes what typical family communication might look like prior to school:

We have a parents information meeting in February as a district for kindergarten registration. . . in August we all have orientations and now it's going to be our parents and our students. So they'll come in and get to meet their teachers, see their room and all before it starts.

Kindergarten teachers and principals described similar practices during the school year across the study, regardless of the timing of the interview. These opportunities allowed families and teachers to meet and establish communication.

A few teachers also held "camps" or summer programs for incoming kindergarten students during the summer, for example a "Kickoff to K" or a summer reading program. These programs typically lasted a few weeks and provided children an opportunity to begin to adjust and experience kindergarten routines. Teachers and principals from half of the districts who participated in interviews have what they termed a "staggered start," or a brief period (several days to a week) in which only a small portion of children come in each day at the beginning of the school year. This practice allowed for teachers to do assessments like the KRA with children and to decide on their classroom placement. Staggered starts were meant to provide children an opportunity to begin to transition with fewer children and more individual attention from the teacher. No elementary classroom or school level personnel mentioned home visits as part of their current transition strategy, although some mentioned that they had been done in the past.

Often on a district level, the inclusion of district leaders of these types of programs depended on the size of the districts, as several of the smaller districts had one single elementary school. While transition efforts tended to be led by kindergarten teachers and principals, several medium-size districts had very involved leadership, particularly a strong student support or curriculum director. These mid-size districts with committed district level leadership tended to have consistent and intentional transition practices across multiple elementary schools.

Although the transition practices overall seemed relatively low intensity, one exception was when children had Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). While the interviews did not ask specific questions about IEPs, this subject emerged with ESC leaders as well as preschool teachers and supervisors and kindergarten teachers. For students with IEPs, comprehensive communication between preschools, elementary schools, and parents was apparent. As one early childhood stakeholder noted, transitions with an IEP received specific attention: "Nobody in this region is really studying child outcomes and knowing whether these kids are going to be ready for school or what are their challenges. Except if they've got a special need." ESC program leaders agreed with this sentiment, noting that there were more formal processes for children transitioning with IEPs, with one program manager stating: "With special education, a child on an IEP who's transitioning from preschool to kindergarten,

there are safeguards and procedures in place.” Typically every family of a child with an IEP has a transition planning meeting with the district, during which time most children are re-evaluated to either discontinue service, begin a new service, or continue the plan that they are on. However, even with meetings, this process can be confusing or challenging for families. One preschool supervisor in a large suburban district who works with a peer model program expressed that she felt that the transition was especially difficult for families with children with IEPs. This supervisor felt that all of the meetings and paperwork could be stressful for families trying to navigate the transition to kindergarten.

### 3.1.3. What barriers or challenges do districts face when implementing kindergarten transition practices?

Throughout the interviews, a number of barriers that made it difficult to implement more comprehensive kindergarten transition practices emerged. The primary barrier was the lack of communication and relationships between preschool personnel and elementary school teachers and leaders, although this challenge looked different depending on the preschool configurations in the districts. Multiple preschool teachers mentioned that being located inside of (or in close proximity with) a district elementary school building did allow for the possibility of more formal (scheduled visits) and informal (teachers stopping by, saying hello in the hallway) transition practices. Multiple elementary and preschool educators mentioned the ease of being in the same building, noting that being at the same meetings allowed for a greater flow of information between preschool and kindergarten. One preschool leader elaborated on the benefits of being in an elementary building, saying:

The kindergarten teachers stop down in our room all the time. So we have a lot of good conversation going back and forth. They’ll want information on some of the kids that we’ve had, what we’ve seen, what was our past experiences, and we like to check on our past preschoolers as well, see how they’re doing. So yeah and they’re right down the hallway, all three of them.

However, many districts housed their district-run preschool classrooms in a separate building due to space constraints. In these districts, several preschool personnel brought up the challenges of being separate from the elementary schools in the district, with one preschool teacher stating:

We have occasionally been contacted, since I’ve been here, by teachers saying ‘there’s a child that needs your services. Why don’t you contact this family and see what you can do for them.’ But as far as, I mean a lot of times, we’re not in the loop because we are in a totally different building.

However, proximity was not always linked to consistent transition practices, with several teachers in the same building sometimes expressing conflicting views on kindergarten transition practices. Teachers mentioned that school districts (particularly larger districts) had transition practices grouped under multiple leaders or departments, making it difficult for preschool and kindergarten teachers to effectively access information in a timely and effective way. In other districts, preschools were considered a separate entity from the elementary school, even when under the same roof. This mode of functioning inhibited communication between preschool and kindergarten teachers and was most common when ESCs or other entities operated the preschool, as opposed to the elementary school leadership.

The other overarching theme that emerged was the lack of, and variability in, transition practices on both a district and a state level. Districts varied on their commitment to implementing formal kindergarten transition practices. This was most clearly

illuminated when talking with ESC personnel who worked with multiple districts, who said: “What transition looks like, if this is what you’re asking for, preschool to kindergarten looks different in every district. How they handle that, there’s no state-level policy that guides that.” One ESC stakeholder bemoaned the lack of consistency provided by the state, noting how the state “does not mandate a transition plan or tool, it’s not consistent anywhere”. ESC program managers particularly felt the lack of clarity on a state level and district level, returning to the challenge that transition practices varied greatly between the districts that they worked with. Although district stakeholders (e.g. superintendent’s, principals) acknowledged the lack of formal transition practices on a district level, many mentioned plans to address this lack of consistency in the future.

### 3.1.4. What policies hinder or support kindergarten transitions?

Our last question examined what policies or practices supported or hindered preschool to kindergarten transitions. District enrollment and school choice both played a factor in consistent transition practices. Several districts only recently added kindergarten, or were operating kindergarten every other day or half day. This pattern occurred across districts, regardless of size or typology. Several district leaders noted the challenge of enrollment when the district could not provide care for a full day. This was a particular challenge to smooth transitions when districts lost students who attended their preschool programs. Since parents have the option to enroll children in schools or even districts that are not their geographically designated schools, predicting the incoming kindergarten class is a challenge for many districts. Often, elementary schools did not know who would be attending their kindergarten in the fall, so reaching out to new students and parents prior to the start of school was difficult to implement.

The complications of school choice operated differently across rural and urban areas of the state. In rural areas, parents would sometimes enroll their child in schools in nearby districts because of proximity issues (i.e., school is near their job) or because of the reputation of other districts. One superintendent in a large rural district noted:

We have about 900 students that live in our district that leave us and we have about 200 students that don’t live in our district that come in. So we’re upside down by about 700 students. Now part of the contention is, since we were not offering preschool and people were seeking out preschool in other places in other districts.

Another superintendent in a small rural district noted that while open enrollment presented challenges, he saw the large influx of students coming into his district as a good reflection of the district in the area, as his district offered preschool.

Although many districts have begun to brainstorm this issue, it was particularly problematic for large rural districts that have a large transient population. In these districts, a substantial proportion of their kindergarten students were enrolled in the few weeks immediately before or after the school year started, which precluded the use of early transition practices. Due to this, one principal in a large rural district noted how it was very difficult to prepare for or predict children’s prior to school experiences. He highlighted how the district loses a lot of kids to open enrollment during the year, further noting:

And there have been months where there’ll be 20–40 kids come and go within a single month, which is 5% of the building population potentially. And seems like there’s a huge shift in August and September and December to January, seems to be the biggest months where kids either disappear or come back to

us. I think two summers ago she had like 80 withdrawals during the course of the summer, so 10% of the entire building.

In urban districts, which were mostly larger districts (Typologies 6 and 7), school personnel described the proliferation of charter schools as a challenge to both estimating incoming enrollments and estimating and maintaining funding, with one board member from a large urban district noting that they lose students to charters and that is in part decreases their state and local funding, stating: “when you’re a capped district; it costs not just state funding, but it’s also costing some of our local funds to send off to these students,” referencing students from the district who attend charter schools.

One policy that is currently still in its early stages but may in the future help support practices is the states’ Quality Rating Improvement System (QRIS): Step Up to Quality (SUTQ). Currently, SUTQ requires that preschools engage in transition practices but only a small proportion of preschool programs participate in the SUTQ system. One of the main complaints about SUTQ from participating ESC directors and preschool teachers was the excessive amount of paperwork, which they felt limited their time to spend with children in the classroom preparing them and their families for the transition to kindergarten. One preschool teacher at an ESC in a mid-size district specifically described the demands of SUTQ as a great deal of time spent on paperwork: “we have a lot in preschool to begin with, but there was an increase of paperwork for sure. And the thing is it’s all there, but they want it on their form and so it’s really just time consuming.” SUTQ requires that preschool programs provide information to kindergarten teachers about their students. Interestingly, multiple preschool teachers and coordinators expressed doubt that the information was used by kindergarten teachers, or even ended up in their hands. No kindergarten teachers mentioned receiving this information during their interviews.

On a school level, one principal in a mid-size district noted that having the preschool housed by the district and in the same building helped with the SUTQ paperwork and level of communication between preschool and kindergarten. In the coming years, participation in SUTQ will be mandated, which may increase district focus on kindergarten transitions (particularly for those that house or run preschool programs). This policy move may thus lead to enhanced kindergarten-transition practices across the state, though it would likely benefit from more input from preschool teachers and ESC directors.

Lastly, one of the main policy challenges in the kindergarten transition across the state was the multiple systems and funding streams between preschool and kindergarten. ESCs tended to have challenges in working with multiple school districts who have varying levels of established transition practices and communication. Typically Education Service Centers provide professional development, support, and sometimes teachers and classrooms to school districts. Several ESC directors mentioned working in partnership with multiple school districts on some kind of tool to ease transition, be it to better store transition data, or to facilitate communication between preschool and kindergarten teachers and leaders.

One of the challenges ESCs faced was the various levels of importance that different school districts gave the transition from preschool to kindergarten, with one ESC director noting, “They look different in every district.” Another nondistrict stakeholder mentioned the challenge of leveraging funding streams towards early childhood education that just are not there yet to serve more students. Only about half of districts interviewed had an in-district preschool option, most with limited spaces available. Participants from multiple levels and across districts expressed desire for more preschool offerings, but cited lack of funding or funding limited to certain student income levels as a prohibiting factor.

## 4. Discussion

The transition to kindergarten is widely acknowledged as a critical transition that children experience as they enter formal education (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000); yet, there are still many unanswered questions about the structures and policies needed to provide children with the support necessary to transition into formal schooling and experience success in the kindergarten year. Importantly, there is considerable evidence connecting children’s skills in the kindergarten year and their future academic achievement (Duncan et al., 2007). As a result, it is important that educational researchers offer a nuanced understanding of the kindergarten transition as observed by numerous stakeholders, including educators and administrators. In so doing, it is possible to identify what practices are and are not being deployed, and, of particular import, understanding how policies and practices may undermine or detract from children’s successful kindergarten transition. In this study, we began to provide detailed descriptive information on these critical issues. Below, we briefly review key findings and then examine the implications of our findings for policies and for future efforts to strengthen kindergarten transition practices.

### 4.1. Overview of main findings

Our work shed light on how preschools and elementary schools engage in practices to support children’s transition to kindergarten, with a focus on knowledge transfer, alignment, and outreach to families (Cook et al., 2019). One surprising finding was the lack of knowledge kindergarten teachers and elementary school administrators had about their students’ preschool experiences. Although prior research has shown positive effects of communication between preschool personnel and elementary school teachers about children’s skills and behaviors (Ahtola et al., 2011), our data suggest that elementary teachers often do not even know whether or where children in their classes attended preschool. This clearly precludes the potential for knowledge transfer from preschools to elementary schools. It is unclear how teachers or administrators would use this information if it was available; in fact, some teachers acknowledged preferring to treat their children as a ‘blank slate’ and to not know information about them in advance. However, this lack of communication around preschool attendance also reduces the likelihood that preschools and elementary schools can engage in meaningful alignment processes.

In fact, in terms of actual transition practices being implemented, alignment was completely overshadowed by practices that largely fell into the category of outreach to families. In general, our qualitative work largely mirrored national data on formal transition practices. For example, we found that parent orientations were quite common, whereas staggered starts were less prevalent, which is similar to patterns found in Little et al. (2016). One practice that multiple districts did describe is holding “camps” over the summer that allow students to begin forming routines. Although these are relatively new efforts, there is research to suggest that these programs are beneficial, especially when they contain evidence-based curricular practices (e.g. Duncan, Schmitt, Burke, & McClelland, 2018). However, these programs are usually designed to assist children with no preschool experience so it is unclear how useful they will be as preschool access continues to increase in the coming years.

Our research also sought to understand why there are so few transition practices that reach families early. One overarching theme was that there were few connections between preschools and elementary schools and that the lack of these connections inhibited the implementation of knowledge transfer and alignment practices. Even when preschools were part of the school district,

there were still divides between the preschool and the rest of the district. These were the result of physical barriers, as many districts have had to locate preschools separate from elementary schools due to growing enrollments but also other administrative barriers, such as having separate leadership over the preschools or relying on non-district personnel to operate preschool programming. Across all configurations of preschool programming, we found that when there was high coordination and communication with elementary school personnel, it was because of conscious decision-making at some level in the district. Future research should focus on understanding the factors that lead to these communication barriers and the factors that lead some districts to enact better coordination across preschools and kindergartens. In particular, future research should consider a systems approach (Yelverton & Mashburn, 2018) and in particular, focus on how and why some high level administrators (e.g., superintendents) take steps to increase this communication, as this level of leadership is needed to pull together the time and resources and to foster the cultural change that connecting these multiple systems warrants (Drummond et al., 2016).

Throughout our interviews, other issues emerged as key systemic structures that impact transition practices. First, the fact that children attend preschool across a wide range of programs, makes outreach from kindergarten teachers prior to school entry difficult. The fragmented preschool system clearly contributed to lack of transition practices implemented prior to school entry. Building relationships across these multiple programs could enhance transition practices and is a challenge that needs to be addressed in future research and policy. Although this study only took place in one state, multiple options for preschool exist everywhere and thus this challenge may be applicable broadly. Interestingly, research in Norway and Sweden has shown that coordination and communication across contexts are beneficial for children but both also showed that this communication was not frequent. For example, in the study in Norway, 64% of elementary teachers reported no contact with preschools (Cook et al., 2017). In Sweden, the practices that relied on coordination were the least common (Ahtola et al., 2011). Thus, these challenges are not unique to the U.S. educational system and likely, not easy to solve.

One policy factor that emerged as a potential way to enhance coordination is the state's QRIS system, Step Up to Quality (SUTQ). Preschool programs reported providing information on their students to elementary schools as part of their SUTQ requirements. Currently, SUTQ requires that preschools engage in transition practices, but only a small proportion of preschool programs participate in the SUTQ system. However, in the coming years participation will be mandated, which may increase focus on kindergarten transitions and could lead to more coordination across preschool sectors and elementary schools. This policy move may thus lead to enhanced kindergarten-transition practices across the state. However, the transition practices required by SUTQ are minimal, and a greater focus on coordinating with elementary schools may necessary in the future in order to increase transition-easing activities.

The last factor that emerged is that of school choice. Because parents have the option to enroll children in schools or even districts that are not their geographically designated schools, predicting the incoming kindergarten class is a challenge for many districts. This challenge also prohibits early transition practices. The complications of school choice operated differently across rural and urban areas of the state. In rural areas, parents would sometimes enroll their child in schools in nearby districts because of proximity issues (i.e., school is near their job) or because of the reputation of other districts. In urban districts, the proliferation of charter schools made estimating incoming enrollments challenging. These complications require new and distinct strategies to reach families early, perhaps through partnerships with preschools and other

community partners to enroll kindergarteners early so that transition practices can begin prior to the school year. This challenge was particularly problematic for the districts that have a large transient population. In these districts, a substantial proportion of their kindergarten students were enrolled in the few weeks immediately before or after the school year started, which precluded the use of early transition practices. Understanding how to connect schools to families prior to kindergarten entry remains an important question for future policy research. However, enhancing collaborations between preschools and elementary schools will enhance preschools' abilities to serve as a key bridge between families and elementary schools (Cook et al., 2019).

Other newer policies may be shaping the kindergarten transition. Most notably, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), requires districts to create formal plans for coordination with both Head Start and providers in the federal childcare subsidy program. These plans may increase both the amount of knowledge transfer and alignment coordination. In fact, many specific coordination suggestions focus on increasing communication across preschools and elementary schools, sharing professional development activities, and actively supporting children and families during the transition to kindergarten (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2017). It is important that future research documents how much new coordination occurs as a result of ESSA and whether these changes translate into improved transitions for children. In particular, the variation in how states' implement these pieces of ESSA provides a unique research opportunity.

#### 4.2. Enhanced kindergarten transition practices

Our qualitative research highlighted the frequency of low intensity transition practices that have only been modestly associated with children's adjustment and learning (Cook & Coley, 2017; LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2008). Interventions focused on more intensive kindergarten practices have found stronger, long lasting impacts on children. In particular, the Head Start REDI-P program, which included 10 home visits across the preschool and kindergarten year, has demonstrated promising impacts. Specifically, results from a randomized controlled trial showed small-to-medium effect sizes on children's academic and socioemotional skills in kindergarten (Bierman et al., 2015). However, programs of this intensity are hard to implement on a large scale given district resources and other constraints.

Determining ways to increase the feasibility of more intense transition practices is a critical next step. One useful model is the collaborative approach undertaken by the National Center for Early Development and Learning in their Kindergarten Transition Intervention (Pianta et al., 2001). Their approach focused on bringing preschool teachers and staff, elementary teachers and staff, and parents together to determine the transition practices that were important to each stakeholder. Through this collaborative approach, communication was increased and the opportunities for meaningful transition practices increased (Pianta et al., 2001). Engaging districts in this type of collaborative process may be one way to implement feasible transition practices in the future.

More recent collaboration models have emerged, primarily from the Pre-K to 3<sup>rd</sup> grade movement. For example, Drummond et al.'s (2016) qualitative review of these approaches suggests a number of specific practices that helped increase communication between preschools and elementary schools. One such practice is inviting all public and private early childhood education providers to district-sponsored professional development. Not only can this increase alignment in practices used across the transition, but it may also provide opportunities to for providers and elementary schools to communicate and plan larger kindergarten transition practices. It is important to note that implementing activities that foster such

collaboration require extra resources (Cook & Coley, 2018; Kauerz & Coffman, 2013), which is a major challenge for many school systems. Although some districts have secured outside philanthropic money to engage in this process, more work is needed to find sustainable funding for transition efforts in the future (Drummond et al., 2016).

Although the present work provided a new in-depth look into kindergarten transition practices and the policies and experiences that affect them, there are limitations to note. First, although we purposively selected school districts for this work, they are not necessarily generalizable to other contexts, particularly if the contexts have a more unified preschool system. For this reason, examining policy connections to the kindergarten transition in other states is an important step for future research. Second, our work did not include the parent perspective. This should be considered in future research, as parents play a major role in the transition (Curby et al., 2018). Our work also focused primarily on school districts; greater perspectives from a variety of preschool providers, including district, private center-based, and family-based providers is needed to more comprehensively understand collaboration around these issues. In particular, future work on the perspective of family-based providers is critical to include, as they are often overlooked by research but their close relationships with children's families may provide a unique insight into how transitions unfold. Despite these limitations, the consistent challenges discussed across our interviews provide important new directions for research to consider when trying to determine how to best support children and families across the challenging transition to kindergarten.

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