

Transitions Episode

Guests: Kristie Kauerz, Matt Weyer, Lee Anne Larsen, and Marcy Whitcomb

Narrator:

Welcome to Early Childhood Policy Matters, a podcast for early childhood professionals and strategic partners, hoping to use research, to inform policy and better serve children, families, and their communities. Today, we look at transitions across state and local early childhood care and education mixed delivery systems. Host Howard Morrison sits down with a panel of national and state leaders to discuss successful approaches, policies, and best practices for supporting transitions in communities across the country. That's right now on Early Childhood Policy Matters.

Howard Morrison:

Hello and welcome to Early Childhood Policy Matters. I'm Howard Morrison, early childhood technical assistant specialist at the PDG B-5 Technical Assistance Center with SRI Education.

Today, I'm excited to be joined by two national experts. First, we welcome Kristie Kauerz, Director at the National P-3 Center, an associate clinical professor for the School of Education and Human Development at the University of Colorado, Denver. Thanks so much for joining us today, Kristie.

Kristie Kauerz:

Good morning. Thank you for having me.

Howard Morrison:

We also have Matt Weyer joining us. He is a principal at the Education Commission of the States. Thanks for being here, Matt.

Matt Weyer:

Thanks Howard. Happy to be here.

Howard Morrison:

Kristie transitions play a big role in early childhood mixed delivery system. Based on your extensive research and practice, can you share why kindergarten transitions are important for the early childhood care and education program?

Kristie Kauerz:

You bet, although I do want to expand that question just a little bit. I'll talk about why transitions are important for ECE programs, but I want to make it bigger than that because that's the point of transitions is that they have multiple touch points and multiple influences.

So, we like to think about transitions as having a sending side, that would be the mixed delivery ECE system, where children are coming from Head Start or state funded pre-K or community based childcare or family childcare, or maybe home. And then they're going to the receiving side, which would be the kindergarten classrooms, elementary schools and school districts.

Children obviously also sit within families and so transitions can have positive influence on all of those different pieces and parts, the ECE programs, the kindergarten side, and clearly children and families.

Why we know that transitions are important is because they help to produce longer term outcomes for children who can adapt to school more easily, because there has been a shared effort for children to navigate the differences between an ECE program and a kindergarten classroom.

There have been intentional efforts for families to understand how they can support children, both at home in talking about kindergarten, in talking about the changes that children are going to expect, and so that families can also better understand how to engage with elementary schools and kindergarten teachers. And so that influence and impact of positive transitions is really broad and ECE programs, to get back to your original question, are essential because they are the first place that children are experiencing in this transition. That's where kids are when they're in the year prior to kindergarten.

And so ECE programs should have the responsibilities and obviously the support to ensure that they are providing children a rich high-quality learning opportunity in that year prior to kindergarten. And then ECE programs should be actively engaging and partnering with receiving side, kindergarten teachers and elementary schools, so that there's really a team effort to support young children throughout the transition.

Howard Morrison:

Great, thanks Kristie. I really appreciate you taking it to a bigger picture level and broader than kindergarten transitions. Because when we think about that in PDG B-5, we really are thinking about transition points across the birth to five mixed delivery. So, I really appreciate you kind of reframing that and thinking about the bigger picture and really focusing on why those transitions are so important.

So, I like to kind of follow up with that and ask what are some successful strategies or best practices for effective and supportive transitions that you might be able to share with us?

Kristie Kauerz:

So, my work, my research, much of the technical assistance I provide really focuses on organizational and system strategies. So that's what I want to talk about a minute here, is that what we know is most effective at that level is when we have both sides of the transition intentionally and meaningfully engaged together. So, for example, if we only have the ECE or sending side engaged, they are actively supporting young children, they're doing whole child formative assessments to really understand where young children's strengths are, where they might need to develop more. And they put together a nice portfolio about that child. And then it has nowhere to go. There isn't a kindergarten teacher or an elementary school eagerly wanting to accept that portfolio of information about the child. That's not a very effective transition because that was one sided.

The ECE side alone was thinking about how best to support that child.

So, the most effective ones are when both sides together, think about how to support children and families. So going back to that same example of an ECE program, creating a nice portfolio about a child, about the child's family's culture and hopes and dreams for the young child. And that portfolio has been co-constructed with the kindergarten teacher. So, the kindergarten teacher's also getting the kind of information that will help her improve her instruction and continue to support the child and family. And there's time for the kindergarten teacher and the early childhood teacher to talk together, to share insights and strategies. That's a two-sided transition approach, and that's where we know they're most effective because everybody's engaged and everybody is seeing themselves as the important contributors to that transition process. It's not just one person or one side of the transition being engaged.

Howard Morrison:

Great, thanks Kristie. I really appreciate that focus on approaching it from a one-sided approach versus a two-sided approach, and really thinking about the multiple programs and services in a birth to five mixed delivery system, and really the most effective approach would be having that two-sided approach and implementation.

Matt, in your role, you focus on early learning issues for states, which includes a strong focus on transitions and early childhood policies. So, based on your experience from working with states, what are some of the key transition policies that states should consider implementing across systems?

Matt Weyer:

Thanks, Howard, that's a great question. I just wanted to start by reiterating what Kristie mentioned about the system and just really trying to be inclusive of all the players in that space as well. And a couple high level considerations before we jump into the specific strategies.

As I mentioned, being super inclusive, there's so many different agencies, programs, services that sit in this space. So, it's really fundamental to providing comprehensive services. And just as an example, in Illinois, they have a transition advisory committee that consists of several different role groups and might just be a nice model for other states to look to. And then moving over to another consideration, really trying to figure out, aligning around different areas, but also setting a north star.

So, thinking about level setting, really trying to understand the research around transitions' best practices, but also building strong knowledge of child development, all leads to that buy-in across levels. So, from district administrator to a state level policymaker, it's all very important. I think it's also really key to focus on building the system and not focusing on maybe a deficit-based mindset from trying to get kids and families ready for school, but really trying to create the conditions for success for kids and families.

And then really setting a handful of priorities and not just a laundry list. So, you can really specifically find two to three strategies and go with those and then really trying to understand how to make these things solidified within the state.

I think the other thing to mention here is how these changes or improvements can be solidified within the state, that can be done through a statewide strategic plan, such as preschool development grant birth through five, other interagency agreements or creating incentives for collaboration.

And so moving into the more specific strategies, Education Commission of the States last year led five states through a technical assistance effort to support kindergarten transition building. And a few of our states conducted landscape analysis where they really tried to find specific gaps or blind spots in their transition policies.

In a couple of states this really led to the identification of a lack of alignment and coordination with the childcare sector, in another state they realized they had strong transition policies overall, but lacked a strong family engagement component. So, they worked really hard to embed that in their work.

In an ECS 50 state comparison from 2020, we tracked that 23 states plus Washington DC have specific state statute that helps guide the pre-K to K transitions and some high-level themes that we found were family engagement, interagency agreements, bringing in programs like Head Start and childcare in more formalized ways, requiring detailed plans and also filling in more comprehensive supports for children with individualized education plans and those receiving early interventions so that continuity is there as they move into kindergarten.

As it relates to family engagement, I think a lot of focus could go around providing supports in culturally and linguistically diverse ways. So, this includes things like translating documents home to parents or providing interpreters or having staff that are able to be bilingual to really make sure that communication is meaningful.

It also includes things such as child and parent visits to the school, but also vice versa in places where the teacher is able to go to the home and meet with the kids and families there.

And I think just moving away from this kind of traditional notion where transition might be a 30 minute conference in August, and then the very next day that kid goes to school, more towards a comprehensive continuous kind of often checking in with families and kids as that leads up.

And I'd also like to emphasize too, utilizing a hybrid approach. I think the pandemic really showed school districts and teacher's ability to connect with families and kids virtually to kind of fill in where they may not be able to do so in person as often.

Kristie mentioned sharing information, I think it's critical that teachers know the types, the quality, the length of programming students are in. I think it all helps. And I want to reemphasize her point around using that data and not just having it put in a folder on their desk and them not necessarily knowing what to do with that.

And then obviously professional development. I think Kristie touched on a lot of the joint PD that can happen, whether it's horizontal or vertical across these spaces, but folding in principles as well, I think is key at the elementary level. And then just to end my comment here with just some high-level considerations that there's a lot of nuance to this, not all kids and their families are the same or may need the same supports. There's so much diversity. This can be based on rural locations, urban locations, whether the pre-Ks located within an elementary school, whether it's in a different community-based setting, there's all types of cultural, linguistic differences. So really trying to focus on providing continuity of care and addressing the whole child as Kristie mentioned too.

And then really trying to find strong ways to support implementation, whether that's communities of practice providing sub grants or community pilots, some strategies we've seen in the states.

Howard Morrison:

Great, thanks, Matt. You really hit on a lot of great points and focusing on creating conditions for success and really the importance of family voice and family engagement in the transitions work. So, I think that's really critical in regards to policies and best practices.

So, we've seen many states that have developed toolkits or websites designed to support transitions. What advice or guidance would you give to states that are looking to embed the use of those toolkits and websites as a local practice across programs?

Matt Weyer:

So, thanks Howard. I think identifying and addressing the differences in language terms and definitions, as well as expectations is important as these may have different definitions or meanings, if you go program to program or agency to agency. So, I think just to reiterate the importance of being inclusive of all the stakeholders, really level setting, and then making toolkits and other resources clear, practical, actionable. I know several of these states use templates that provide nice sequencing and examples for teachers to implement. I also think embedding them in this notion about how it serves the larger goal to create not only value added to the space, but to really get that motivation for teachers to see how it

helps improve practice, how it helps connect with families and kids, and then always tying back to kind of that overarching north star for the work.

What are your fundamental values around this work? What are your goals? But yeah, I'd also love to hear Kristie's thoughts on this one too.

Kristie Kauerz:

Thanks Matt. I think one of the most important things, and I'm sure we're going to hear it from our colleagues in Maine, is that there are so many structural things we talk about, joint professional development, shared data, MOUs, lots of structures that we talk about. I want to also just really lean into the importance of relationships in this work.

Relationships, teacher to teacher. Does the ECE teacher and the kindergarten teacher know each other and have time to engage together.

Does the state education agency and the state agency that oversees early childhood, do they have time to talk together about the different kinds of supports and strategies they put in place that influence the transitions to kindergarten?

I think we focus on the mechanics and really need to remember that the mechanics are only as good as the relationships that underlie them. That would be then based on trust, as Matt said, shared language, shared understanding of how best to support children. So, it's really a both and.

Both those structures and mechanisms and building the space and time to develop the relationships that will really ensure that the mechanical aspects are implemented well.

Howard Morrison:

Great. Thanks Kristie. And thank you, Matt. I think those are all great points. I think relationships are key and really kind of are they underlying conduit across all those areas and to best support implementation, but really focusing in on things that are actionable and embedding how it serves the larger goal. And so I appreciate that.

And now we turn to the state level and for that, I'm very happy to welcome Lee Anne Larsen, Early Learning Team Coordinator at the Maine Department of Education.

Thanks so much for joining us today. Lee Anne.

Lee Anne Larsen:

Thanks so much for having me. It's a pleasure to be here.

Howard Morrison:

We also have Marcy Whitcomb joining us. She is an early childhood monitor at the Maine Department of Education. Thanks for joining us, Marcy.

Marcy Whitcomb:

You're welcome. Thanks so much for having us

Howard Morrison:

Lee Anne and Marcy, your team has such a strong focus on pre kindergarten and kindergarten transitions. What is your overall state approach to transitions?

Marcy Whitcomb:

So, I'm going to go ahead and take that one, thank you Howard.

Our overall state approach and goal was to look at building a system where our school districts and providers could work together to build high-quality transitions for those children who are going into public schools. We really wanted, as Kristie said, and Matt said, the relationship building is so important. So, we wanted to really stress between educators and providers across our state to build those relationships and really just work on successful transitions for families and students.

It's also important to note that local control is foundational in Maine. So, we offer guidance at the state level and then the local level needs to be able to take this and kind of make it their own with our support. So that's another piece of our approach.

Howard Morrison:

Great. Thanks Marcy. Are there any specific strategies that you're using that you think might be helpful for us to know?

Marcy Whitcomb:

Definitely. So, we started this project. We had a number of goals and outcomes that we had in mind. And so the strategies around that, we started by doing two surveys. We put out one to public school educators and providers across the state. And then we put out another one, to families and caregivers across our state. And we asked a lot of questions focusing on what was helpful, what had been successful, what were common barriers. And we got a lot of response, a lot of really positive response and a lot of great information from that. And so we use that input to build professional development modules for educators and providers. It's a four-module series that really take a deeper dive into the importance of transition for all stakeholders at this age, and really focuses on building year-long transition plans, as well as strong cross community transition teams that benefit all children and families in our state.

Another strategy that we have put into place was to build a resource bank for both parents and caregivers and educators and providers on our website. So, we used the information that we gained from the surveys and built those webpages out, which are actually available now on our website on our early learning pages.

And we also put together some focus groups with educators, providers, and then parents and families, also just to kind of do a face to face, be a little more intimate, that sort of thing, and gain a little more information about what we learned on the surveys. And finally, we built out a facilitator guide that will be used as a tool for local communities, school districts, and that sort of thing to use with the professional development modules. And when those are finished, those will be available on our website as well. And then they'll be able to take those kind of make them specific or individualize those to their own schools, communities, providers, that sort of thing, and work on building high-quality year-long transition teams and transition plans with a level of support that we will offer them as well.

Howard Morrison:

Great. Thanks Marcy. The strategies around the focus groups, the resource banks, the PD modules, that all sounds really exciting, great strategies that you guys are implementing in Maine. Thanks for sharing that.

Marcy Whitcomb:

Thank you. We're very excited.

Howard Morrison:

Lee Anne. I'd like to turn to you and see if you could share a little bit about what key partnerships have you leveraged that have made your transitions work successful?

Lee Anne Larsen:

Sure. I'd be happy to talk about that, Howard.

I think to begin, it's important for us to share just how critical building strong cross agency work was for our state initially in this work. We were fortunate that our initial PDG grant was really instrumental in helping to pull folks who serve across the early childhood sectors, whether they are in our Department of Education, our Department of Health and Human Services, the CDC, and even some of our other related supports for state agency work. That effort really helped us to start stronger conversations and be more coordinated in our approach. And we had had the opportunity to start thinking about transitions more deeply as a result of that PDG work. And then it was very timely when ECS offered the opportunity for some additional technical assistance to states.

Just the timing was perfect for Maine and it really helped us to continue to cultivate those relationships across our state agencies.

And even within that, I think what's important to point out is not only did we form the relationships across agencies, but even within side our own agencies, I think it really led to deeper conversations across teams. So as an example, in our Department of Education, I'm on our early learning team, but we need to be able to interact frequently with our Office of School and Student Supports where our social emotional learning specialists are based, where our family engagement specialists are based. We need to be able to interact with our Special Services Division, where our child development services that handle Part B and Part C programming are located.

And we found that really shoring up and making sure that we're communicating well was critical. Additionally, those relationships really led to our ability to do better outreach to stakeholders across our state. Marcy talked about the surveying and the focus groups that we were engaged in, and that would not have been possible, and we wouldn't have gotten nearly the kind of response to that outreach if we didn't have strong relationships built with community partners.

It was very important to us that we reach directly to families, in particular into our school systems and really hear the voices of our stakeholders. So, in doing that, it meant that we needed to find partnerships that would help us reach those voices. So, for us, just as a couple of examples, our Maine Parent Federation is a wonderful organization and has a strong connection to families who have children with disabilities, and they were instrumental in helping us connect directly with parents and caregivers.

Additionally, we have a very large new Mainer population of immigrants and also tribal communities, and we wanted to make sure that their voices were heard as well. So, some of those organizations that are directly connected and supporting various populations were just wonderful at opening doors and helping us be able to make those connections.

So, when I think about a lot of this, it comes back to what Kristie said at the very beginning, which is that relationships are absolutely central to what we do. And the stronger those relationships are on all levels, whether the state or the local, the better off you're going to be in problem solving and building systems that are going to be responsive to needs.

Howard Morrison:

Thanks, Lee Anne. I couldn't agree more. And it was just really great to hear how you focused on the relationship building across agencies but also inside your agency. And I think that's always just as important - and to really hear how that led to better communication, better outreach with community partnerships was just really insightful.

So I'd like to ask both of you to think about we have states across the U.S. that have either developed transitions resources or plans and some that might be emerging in that area. So, if you were talking to a new state level, early childhood administrator that were looking to develop a kindergarten transitions plan for its early childhood care and education program, what advice would you give them?

Lee Anne Larsen:

So, I'll be happy to start on that. I think there's a few things that definitely come to mind pretty quickly for us. One is to underscore just how important stakeholder input is. Taking time to better understand who is the audience that is going to be impacted by the decisions that you're making at the state level is essential. If you don't take the time to do that, you run the risk of not necessarily being responsive in what you developed to the needs that you're trying to target. And I think highly related to that is listening carefully to what's being shared with you. Sometimes I think we're all very busy. We try to read the research and make sense of it, but may not take enough time to really listen and make sure that the decisions that we're trying to make are in alignment with what those needs really are.

So, it may be a good example at times to go slow to go fast. Slow the train down enough to really stop and listen to what the concerns are from across a wide variety of stakeholders.

I would definitely go back to relationship building as absolutely central, make sure that you're doing that and continuing to build those relationships over time. And the last piece that I'd contribute is that I think in any work like this, when state agencies are deeply involved in constructing an initiative, it's important to not let that initiative become siloed, but to look at how is that work connected to the other work that's ongoing so that it doesn't become just a standalone piece, but it becomes embedded in the culture of the ongoing work that we are engaged in all of the time to support children and families across our entire educational system.

And I think Marcy's got a couple of other ideas as well.

Marcy Whitcomb:

I do. Thanks Lee Anne. I just have a few other thoughts to add about that. One thing that really comes to mind for me, foremost, is just know that the process is really lengthy. The building of relationships, forming the relationships, building the systems, gathering the information from the stakeholders and making sure that the data and information you're gathering is actually informing your work. So you're gathering the correct information, it takes a really good amount of time. And so I would say when you're going into it, just be prepared for that, be mindful of that from the start and just make sure everybody's on the same page, that sort of thing.

And then the last thing I want to point out is as Lee Anne had talked about, we built a very strong cross agency, state transition team to lead this work when we started looking at our strategies and toward our goals and outcomes.

And this was really important because I feel like, or we feel like this is a model for our SAU's as they build out their community-wide transition teams, knowing that part of the guidance in our modules, in our learning is that when you bring other folks and other entities from the community such as providers or community centers or faith-based preschools or that sort of thing, it becomes

community-wide, everybody has sort of buy-in, the stakeholder group becomes large. The families get the support and resources they need, and it really leads to successful school careers for the children. And so in us building the cross agency state transition team, it was really a model for our districts and communities to build their transition teams as well.

Lee Anne Larsen:

I was just going to share that, and this might loop us back a little bit to the modules that Marcy had described in the beginning, but I think maybe another piece of advice that I would offer our state counterparts is that when they're thinking about the concept of transitions, I think one thing we've discovered in our own research is that at times there's this tendency to be really focused on making sure that the child is ready for the transition. And I think we've tried to approach it using a concept that we found really helpful from IES's practice guides that you really need to think about not only is the child ready, but is the family ready? Is the community ready? and are schools ready?

And for me, and I think for Marcy and our team that has been really helpful for us to keep front and center in the work that we're doing, because it enables us to better coordinate all of the stakeholders that have a piece of that transition process. So, keeping that concept front and center I think is really a helpful one as well.

Howard Morrison:

Today's guest, once again, were Kristie Kauerz, Matt Weyer, Lee Anne Larsen, and Marcy Whitcomb. Thank you all for joining us.

Lee Anne Larsen:

Thank you so much for having us. We really appreciate it and learned a lot from listening to our other colleagues.

Marcy Whitcomb:

Yes, I agree, Lee Anne. Thank you so much for having us. We really appreciate the opportunity.

Matt Weyer:

Thanks so much, Howard. I really enjoyed being part of the podcast.

Kristie Kauerz:

Thanks so much for having me. It's been a delight to be with all of you. I think my parting words would be really to focus on the relationships and I especially appreciate that this is not a special project. This is the work. This isn't something that happens in addition to all of the important work around building systems for young children. Transitions should be the work. Thanks so much for having me.

Narrator:

Thanks for listening to Early Childhood Policy Matters produced by National Technical Assistance Center for Preschool Development Grants, Birth through Five. Find more episodes by going to childcareta.acf.hhs.gov and searching for Early Childhood Policy Matters.

You can also find us on your favorite podcast app or on SoundCloud at EC Policy Matters.