

Amanda Fenlon

# COLLABORATIVE STEPS

## Paving the Way to Kindergarten for Young Children with Disabilities



**T**he night before my son was to start kindergarten, we snuggled in bed to read *Tom Goes to Kindergarten*, by Margaret Wild and David Legge, a lighthearted and humorous look at the separation anxiety felt by both children and parents. We giggled when Tom's mom and dad clung to him, not wanting to leave the



classroom after being able to stay with their son on the first day. Next, we read *The Kissing Hand*, by Audrey Penn, a tender story of a mother raccoon sending her love through a kiss on her son's palm as he starts school. This time tears welled up in my eyes.

My son and I were fairly well prepared for his transition to school. As an administrator for our school district, I had taken some steps to make sure of this. The previous spring, I spoke with both the kindergarten teacher and the principal about my son's strengths and needs as a learner. As a family, we were invited to a special kindergarten orientation, and being a district employee, I had been in the school and kindergarten classroom several times before the big day. Still, I was apprehensive, excited, and honestly quite nervous about how well he would do those first few days.

Kindergarten entrance can be a joyful, although anxious time for families.

Pianta and Kraft-Sayre (1999) note that a majority of parents (53 percent) included in a recent study felt positively about their child's transition to school, yet up to 35 percent of families noted some degree of anxiety about their child's entrance into school. Children's behavioral and emotional difficulties, reluctance to go to school, family adjustment problems, and unrealistic

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expectations from school staff were noted as parental concerns. A child's ability to separate from parents, get along with and be liked by peers and teachers, and even safety on the school bus can also cause families to worry.

Parents of children with significant disabilities share common concerns with other families. In addition, they typically have questions relating to how, when, where, and by whom their child's special services will be provided. The possibility of losing strong support systems established through preschool programs may also cause parents to worry (Wolery 1999). Thus, the entrance into school for the children with disabilities can be exceedingly complex and anxiety-laden for families. Demonstration models for transitioning children

with disabilities to elementary school suggest the following best practices:

- using a collaborative team approach to involve families, both sending (preschool) and receiving (kindergarten) teachers and related services staff, and school administrators;
- setting transition goals and outlining anticipated outcomes;
- encouraging active empowerment and involvement of families in the process and enhancing communication between all involved staff; and
- focusing on the needs and strengths of individual children and the services and supports needed to be successful in kindergarten (Ross-Allen, Conn-Powers, & Fox 1991; Wolery 1999; Sandall, McLean, & Smith 2000).

Transition to kindergarten can be addressed through provisions of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments (IDEA 1997) (determining educational placement in the least restrictive environment and special education and related services required by the child). However, the collaborative, coordinated process called for in research and best-practice publications is not clearly articulated in the federal law nor in most state agency regulations.

**Yet for the important step of entry into elementary school, the majority of states and local education agencies lack established guidelines or procedures governing the transition from early childhood special education programs to kindergarten.**

When young children with disabilities move from early intervention services (birth to two years) to preschool services (ages three to five years), and when youth with disabilities reach the age of 14, there are clearly articulated transition policies at federal, state, and local levels (IDEA 1997). Yet for the important step of entry into elementary school, the majority of states and local education agencies lack established guidelines or procedures governing the transition from early childhood special education programs to kindergarten (Rosenkoetter et al. 2001). Without specific protocols or regulations from state agencies, the level of communication and coordination between families and school program staff can vary greatly. Some states (Maine, Vermont, and Arkansas) have been leaders in setting up policies and procedures around this transition (Edwards 2002; Whaley, pers. comm. 2003), and this has had a significant positive impact on large numbers of families of young children with disabilities (Ross-Allen, Conn-Powers, & Fox 1991; Kohler 1994).





In addition to families' concerns, school districts may grapple with recommendations from early childhood programs that can be difficult to implement in some school settings. Schools must carefully bridge the gap between a play-based, child-centered curriculum to a kindergarten classroom with more rigorous academic standards.

In addition, the transition to kindergarten can be a time when parents of young children with disabilities pursue legal procedural safeguards such as mediation and impartial hearings to solve disagreements over services and needs (New York State Education Dept. 2003). Families of children with disabilities may disagree with a school district about the level of services to be provided or whether their child can attend a regular kindergarten class versus a self-contained classroom. They may believe the child needs more time to mature and want to delay the start of kindergarten until age six. Disputes such as these can create a strained beginning to the relationship between a family and school officials, which for children with disabilities can last until the student is age 21.

How can school districts avoid such conflicts and establish collaborative relationships with families of young children with disabilities? How can they enhance children's adjustment to and performance in kindergarten? What specific steps can staff take to be well prepared for their future students? This article describes one school district's collaborative transition process, which has been successful for many families, teachers, therapists, administrators, and especially the young children themselves.

### **Laying the first stones—A collaboration begins**

In the Baldwinsville School District in upstate New York, a collaborative step-by-step transition process guides school entrance for children with disabilities (see "Steps in the Collaborative Transition Process"). The school administrator and service providers develop and foster a supportive relationship with the family early on, beginning when a preschooler is first eligible for special education services. In Step 1 of the transition process, the district arranges for delivery of services, such as special education, speech therapy, and occupational therapy, in the child's home and within high-quality inclusive early childhood programs.

An extensive body of research tells us that children with and without disabilities learn academic, social, and communication skills, as well as character traits of empathy and appreciation of individual differences when they are educated together (Wolery & Wilbers 1994; Staub & Peck 1995; Hestenes & Carroll 2000). Our district greatly values inclusive education experiences and has facilitated

the growth of several inclusive neighborhood preschools, with the belief that such programs are good preparation for entering inclusive settings in kindergarten and beyond.

To prepare families for their collaborative role in the transition process (Step 2), the administrator for preschool special education introduces the process at the child's annual review meeting, roughly one-and-a-half years prior to kindergarten entry. Special educators encourage families to begin thinking about their child's entry into school and to ask any questions they may have about kindergarten. In the year prior to

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kindergarten entry, much collaboration takes place. The school district attempts to actively engage families in the transition process by involving them in several ways.

The first formal contact generally comes after families receive a letter from the school district (Step 3), which serves as an invitation to join the team that will make decisions about the child as she transitions to kindergarten. Although many parents are already actively involved in their child's preschool

### Steps in the Collaborative Transition Process

- 1.** Children three to five years old, after being identified as needing special education, begin receiving special education, speech therapy, and occupational therapy services in inclusive early childhood settings. (year round)
- 2.** Annual IEP (Individualized Education Program) Review meetings occur. Teams discuss each child's progress and develop an IEP for the upcoming year. If a child is entering the last year of preschool, then the team discusses kindergarten and encourages the family's involvement. (June)
- 3.** A kindergarten transition letter (see "Dear Parents") goes out to all families of children receiving special education services who will be eligible for kindergarten the following year. (November)
- 4.** Families respond to the letter and become part of a collaborative decision-making team. Parents and preschool staff observe kindergarten and meet kindergarten teachers, related services staff, and the school principal. Informal collaborative meetings take place. (December–April)
- 5.** School district staff observe the children in their preschool classrooms. Both preschool and school district staffs gather and share information to prepare for each child's entrance into kindergarten. (February–April)
- 6.** Additional collaborative meetings, if needed, occur with families and the sending and receiving school teams to discuss the proposed kindergarten recommendations and services. (April)
- 7.** An annual IEP Review/Initial School-Age Special Education meeting occurs. All collaborating team members (parents, sending and receiving school teams, district administrator, and parent representatives) attend and participate. Each child's IEP is developed collaboratively. (April–June)
- 8.** School district staff (teachers and related services staff) order materials and equipment needed for children entering kindergarten. (April–August)
- 9.** Families participate in typical kindergarten orientation activities (screenings, opening picnics, and so forth). Additional observations of the children by school district staff occur, if needed, to further develop relationships and gather updated information prior to each child's first day of school. (July–August)
- 10.** School begins. Children are included in kindergarten with proper supports and services for success. (September)





program, this letter urges them to be even more closely involved in the planning for transition to kindergarten. The parent as key decision maker is emphasized in the reauthorization of the IDEA (1997).

Upon receipt of the letter, families frequently raise questions, such as “Will my child attend a regular kindergarten class?” “Can he receive his therapies in the classroom?” and “Can she ride the regular bus with her sister?” Such questions act as a springboard to involve parents in kindergarten observations and in collaborative teaming with preschool and school district teachers and staff. Open communication is an essential component at every step of the transition process.

### **Building a foundation for the team**

In the spring prior to kindergarten entry, the school invites parents to observe kindergarten classes and meet teachers, related service staff, and the school principal (Step 4). Frequently, parents ask their child’s preschool teacher or therapist to come with them when they observe and visit the school. These educators, together with parents, share child-specific, educationally relevant information with prospective teachers and therapists. This conversation sets the stage for collaborative teaming in support of the child’s entrance into school. The team may discuss specific strategies or adaptive equipment to which children respond well, such as social stories (Gray & White 2002) for a child with autism; an assistive technology device for a child with emerging communication abilities; or special seating for a child who has motor impairments. School district staff listen carefully, share information about the varied ways children with disabilities can receive services once they begin school, and describe other supports that can enhance children’s success in school.

The classroom observations help parents to relax because they can see firsthand the kindergarten classroom and the teacher interacting with students. Parents can ask the teacher questions about the kindergarten program and observe the level of support in the classroom. These brief and informal observations and meetings are nonthreatening and friendly. They appear to empower parents and build the relationships and trust needed for more formal decision-making meetings that come later in the transition process.

At about the same time as families and preschool staff are visiting kindergartens, the children’s future teachers and related service staff visit the preschools to observe and gather educationally relevant information (Step 5). School district staff see future kindergartners engaged in activities in the preschool classroom and note how each child interacts and plays with others, follows classroom routines, and demonstrates various readiness skills. School staff say these observations are extremely valuable in predicting support needs, designing services, and planning instructional programs for children in kindergarten. Because the district values this level of planning and collaboration, they fund substitutes for staff on days when they will be out of the classroom to attend meetings or observe incoming kindergartners. Federal special education grant funds are used to support these endeavors.

Throughout the spring parents can continue to call the district administrator or other team members with questions. Frequently, when a child will need many services and supports in kindergarten, the collaborative team continues to meet on a slightly more formal basis (Step 6), prior to the initial meeting during

**Often, just discussing how, when, and where services may occur can ease team members’ anxieties.**

**Dear Parent(s)—**

As you know, your preschool child will soon be eligible for kindergarten in the Baldwinsville School District. The transition to kindergarten from preschool is an exciting and sometimes anxious time for children and families. If your child requires special services in kindergarten, your close involvement in helping to plan the program is important to me.

I am writing this letter to you early in the year so that we might plan ahead for your child's entrance into kindergarten. Parents often have many questions about what their child's kindergarten experience will be like and how services such as special education, speech, and other therapies are delivered to the child.

This letter is my invitation to you to call me at the school district office. I can begin to answer some of the questions that might be coming to mind, and I can tell you about some of the ways we can provide services in the district. Usually in the spring, prior to your child's entering kindergarten, I take parents on visits to our elementary schools to observe classrooms and meet with school staff.

I look forward to meeting and talking with you about this important transition for your child. Working together we can plan a successful start to your child's school career.

Sincerely,  
Amanda Fenlon  
Administrator for Preschool Special Education

*Source:* Adapted by permission from A. Fenlon, "Activities to Empower Parents as Collaborators in Their Children's Education," *Literacy, Language, and Learning: Preparing Educators to Communicate and Connect with Families and Communities*, ed. P. Ruggiano Schmidt (Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing, In press). [www.infoagepub.com](http://www.infoagepub.com)

which Individualized Education Programs (IEP) are developed (Step 7). Just discussing how, when, and where services may occur can often ease team members' anxieties.

### **Doors are open: Teams put IEPs in place**

In the late spring the collaborative team has a formal meeting to develop the IEP (Step 7). The groundwork for this important decision-making meeting has already been laid through collaborative teaming. Parents, teachers, and related service staff have met and communicated about the child's strengths, needs, and probable services; materials and equipment can be ordered (Step 8). Because of the work that has been done to this point, this meeting is friendly and more like a coalescing and final agreement on goals and recommendations for services in kindergarten instead of a rushed and adversarial meeting between preschool providers and school district staff, with the family caught in the middle. Meetings often end with the families and kindergarten staff agreeing to get together over the summer or prior to the formalities of school start-up (Step 9).

## Conclusion

The end of this process signals an important beginning to the child's formal school career and, hopefully, continued successful collaborative teaming (Step 10). Families who have participated in the collaborative transition process have indeed felt included in the making of important educational decisions about their children. Responses from parents in informal interviews include many comments:

"Parents talking to teachers is so important, and they need to hear from us. As a parent, I know my child best, and what he needs. Getting to share that with his future teachers and therapists was necessary."

"Seeing the classroom was fantastic. It put me at ease. I couldn't have made an intelligent decision without going to observe and talking together with everyone."

"There's no question that I felt a big part of the process."

"I felt comforted by us all working together on my child's behalf."

Parents of children with disabilities want to feel well connected to their school communities, just as any parent does. A child's successful transition to school helps families feel this connection. Children too know when they are part of something good.

On a sunny, late-September day, my son hosted his sixth birthday party. Ten little boys jumped and laughed inside a large inflatable castle. Parents chatted briefly about their children's adjustment to school. Two of the boys my son had known from nursery school had become his close friends; they also happened to have disabilities, but this was irrelevant in their raucous, joyful play.

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