



# background

Report # 121

Pathways To School Success

April 2010

## Making School Cool Lifts Attendance

*Public-private effort rallies neighborhoods around schools*

As recently as three years ago, only about 25% of the children who during the year would enroll in kindergarten actually showed up on the first day of class at two Pittsburgh public schools. It was a bad sign for the neighborhoods, where almost two-thirds of the children never experience preschool, Head Start or any other early learning opportunity. Then beginning in 2008, first-day kindergarten attendance soared to more than three times expected levels.

It was no coincidence. Driving the surge was a public-private partnership aimed at boosting school readiness in low-income neighborhoods and a frog named Ready Freddy.

This new embrace of kindergarten is the result of the work of local agencies, parents, public school officials, community leaders and others who have rallied around Pathways To School Success, a series of grant-supported projects developed by the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development (OCD) to intensify school readiness efforts in low-income neighborhoods.

“Our work is to help people be aware of the importance of the transition to kindergarten,” said Laurie Mulvey, director of the OCD Division of Service Demonstrations. “It’s a great time because parents are positive, children are positive and it’s a chance to get a positive start.”

There are clear signs the initiative has made an impact.

At the Pittsburgh Public Schools Northview Heights Accelerated Learning Academy, for example, first-day kindergarten attendance not only

hit 90%, but enrollment in the 2008-2009 school year exceeded district projections, requiring officials to add another classroom.

And at the Weil Accelerated Learning Academy in the city’s Hill District neighborhood, the first day of kindergarten has become a community celebration with balloons, food, fanfare, teachers, principals, community leaders and Ready Freddy – the initiative’s mascot – greeting new kindergarteners and their parents when they arrive at school.

Research underscores the importance of successfully transitioning children to kindergarten. In a recent national study of kindergarten children in 992 schools, students in schools with transition practices scored higher on student achievement tests on average than those attending schools where kindergarten transition was not practiced. The study also reported evidence that suggests

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*In a national study, students in schools which made the transition to kindergarten easier tended to score higher on achievement tests than those in schools where kindergarten transition was not practiced. Such transition practices may also help close achievement gaps.*

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kindergarten transition practices may play a vital role in reducing achievement gaps.<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately, not all children get to enjoy such benefits. The research reports that low-income children who are at the greatest risk of school failure and would benefit the most from kindergarten transition are also the least likely to attend schools with transition processes.

### A School Readiness Focus

The first project under Pathways To School Success was the Centers of Excellence funded with a grant from The Heinz Endowments. Launched in 2007, the project sought to intensify the school readiness practices of family support centers in the city’s Northview Heights and Hill District neighborhoods. Children in these neighborhoods attend one of the eight Accelerated Learning Academies in the Pittsburgh Public Schools that

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offer longer school days, a special curriculum and other features to help raise academic achievement among low-income students.

Kindergarten transition emerged as an important issue while researching ways to ramp-up school readiness. Traditionally, the school readiness literature focuses on academic readiness but does not focus on family and child readiness. For many children, however, kindergarten is their first experience with formal education outside of the home. For others, it means getting to know new teachers, new friends, a new building and a new set of rules. The transition sets the tone for how well children will do in school, but almost half of children who start kindergarten have difficulty with the transition.<sup>2</sup>

Another issue was the lack of information available to improve parent readiness. Parent involvement is a key factor in children's school success. In past years, many parents in the two neighborhoods were unaware of their school's kindergarten enrollment dates, who their children's teachers would be or how they could help smooth the transition to kindergarten. In other words, there was a need for a way to prepare the whole family.

The project's "K-Club" curriculum was developed to help parents and children get ready for kindergarten together. Each of the six sessions includes a child activity, a parent activity, a parent-child interaction activity and a take-home activity. Child activities give children a chance to interact with one another and expose them to the kinds of experiences they'll encounter in the classroom. Parent activities include training to help them better understand the importance of kindergarten and learn ways to support their child's education.

### Building Community Support

In the Northview Heights and Hill District neighborhoods, early education hasn't been a widely shared experience. Up to 60% of children in those neighborhoods had never been enrolled in preschool, Head Start, or any other early learning programs.

Such factors put a premium on raising awareness of the importance of kindergarten, finding kindergarten-bound children and encouraging their parents to enroll them early enough to attend on the first day.

To help with this, a community transition team of parents, teachers, principals, local agencies and community leaders was created. Another key strategy was adopting the Ready Freddy mascot, which became the widely recognized face of the project.

In Northview Heights, staff canvassed the neighborhood to identify all of the kindergarten-eligible children and to encourage parents to enroll them and to participate in K-Club and other transition activities. The community team generated ideas for neighborhood-relevant activities to enhance kindergarten enrollment. Strategies were designed to both reduce anxiety and increase awareness.

These ideas included school tours and free hair braiding and haircuts at the school. Another was to put the

Ready Freddy image on pizza boxes delivered in the neighborhood to remind parents of enrollment deadlines.

Agencies also pooled their resources to support the project. For example, Ready Freddy backpacks were given to children who enrolled early and book packets were purchased for children who enrolled in kindergarten.

Not only were both kindergarten classrooms full on the first day of class, nearly 20 more children showed up than were expected.

And parents participating in the K-Club said they found the curriculum helpful, and they showed greater involvement in their children's education and their school.

Buoyed by the Northview Heights success, Ready Freddy, the K-Clubs, community transition teams and other aspects of the Centers for Excellence project were replicated in the Hill District with similar outcomes.

"We found it was necessary to do more than just help the individual child get ready for school," Mulvey said. "It took a community approach to school readiness – raising awareness of the importance of school readiness, focusing on the period just prior to kindergarten and creating a community effort to get families feeling positive about enrolling their children in school."

### references

- <sup>1</sup> Schulting, A. (2008). Promoting parent-school relationships during the transition to kindergarten. *The Evaluation Exchange*, 14(1 & 2), 8.
- <sup>2</sup> Rimm-Kaufman, S.E., Pianta, R.C. & Cox, M.J. (2000). Teachers' judgments of problems in the transition to kindergarten. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 15, 147-166.

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