Blending Theory with Practice: Implementing Kindergarten Transition using the

Interactive Systems Framework

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Abstract

The Interactive Systems Framework (ISF; Wandersman et al., 2008) was used to implement a kindergarten transition demonstration project collaboratively developed by elementary and early education providers, community-based family and housing services, parents, and a University intermediary and technical assistance group. First-person accounts from stakeholders at all levels provide a complementary and broad perspective on the project's implementation. The practice model blended existing research on kindergarten transition and parent involvement with feedback from stakeholders to create a community-specific program designed to help all children make a smooth entry into kindergarten. During implementation, evidence-based approaches needed to be adjusted to fit the specific needs of each community. Using the ISF as a guide, next steps and lessons learned include increasing leadership through a district-wide plan that is still flexible within each school community, increasing information and supports to individual schools, and improving data collection for continuous program improvement.

Keywords: kindergarten transition, transition, parent involvement, parent engagement, school community partnership, university community collaboration, early education, parent teacher relationship

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Interactive Systems Framework

Wandersman et al. (2008) devised the Interactive Systems Framework (ISF) to help

funders, practitioners, and researchers better understand the larger picture of how evidence-based

programs move from research to practice. This framework builds on existing research to practice

and community-centered implementation models by breaking down the process through which

programs move from innovation to implementation into three distinct systems. These are the

Synthesis and Translation System, which distills information from research into usable language

for programs; the *Support System,* which builds capacity for implementers through training and

technical assistance; and the *Delivery System,* which represents the actual work in the field.

Sometimes, however, innovations need to be further developed and enhanced in order to meet

the needs of a particular community before moving onto implementation. This is the case for the

Ready Freddy kindergarten transition model described here. Existing models (e.g., Pianta & Cox,

1999) provided a theoretical basis and offered practice suggestions, but did not offer a tailored

set of strategies for working with a specific population of schools and families in low-income,

high-risk, hard-to-reach communities. Instead of implementing an existing model, elements of a

demonstration model were based on fundamental principles from the literature in multiple fields

and many of the remaining details were created on the ground through trial and error. This

process of developing, supporting, and implementing the program required moving

interchangeably through the multiple tiers of the ISF, providing a unique perspective of how this

framework is applicable to the development of a model based on promising practices.

Developing an Evidence-Guided Model

Kindergarten transition, as defined here, is a distinct period of time leading up to and through kindergarten. Many children and families receive supports for this important transition, such as early exposure to the kindergarten teacher and classroom, exploration of the child's feelings about starting school, and parent engagement the transition process, through early childhood education programs. Many other children and families, however, transition directly from home and often receive no supports to prepare them for the start of school. In Pittsburgh, which has a strong early childhood system, including Head Start, Early Head Start, public preschool classrooms in the schools, and multiple zero to five service providers, there are not enough classrooms for all children and many families face barriers that prevent them from receiving these supports. In 2006, the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development (OCD) sought to address the inequality and gaps in services for low-income urban children, especially those without preschool experience, by developing a new model of transition to school based on the existing literature in transition, parent engagement, and community partnerships. The model was called Ready Freddy, after a child friendly frog logo that was created to give the project an identity among families and teachers.

Foundations of the model from existing literature

For this project, the first phase of the ISF *Synthesis and Translation*, in which existing research is made more usable for community providers, began with a review of the literature. Several studies indicate the importance of the transition that children and families make between early learning environments and the kindergarten classroom (Love, Logue, Trudeau & Thayer, 1992; Pianta, Cox, Taylor & Early, 1999; Ramey & Ramey, 1999; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000; Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, & Cox, 2000; Schulting, Malone & Dodge, 2005). Correlational longitudinal evidence suggests that the experience of a smooth transition is related to future

school success, but this result could be due to school quality and other associated factors (Schulting, et al., 2005). The National Center for Early Learning and Development conducted a nation-wide survey of 3,600 kindergarten teachers who reported that up to 48% of children have some difficulty with the entry to kindergarten (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2000). The most prevalent challenges included difficulty following directions, lack of academic skills, disorganized home environments, difficulty working independently, and lack of any formal preschool experience.

Teachers also reported increased difficulties for children in at-risk populations. Reports of adjustment problems were more prevalent in schools with higher rates of poverty and increased minority composition (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2000). Educational risks associated with poverty have been well documented (Gutman, Sameroff, & Cole, 2003; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000) and apply no less to the entry into kindergarten. According to Schulting et al (2005), without proper transitions, "children from low SES backgrounds have more difficult transitions to school characterized by early and persistent school failure, behavior problems, low levels of parent involvement, and a widening gap between their academic achievement and that of their more affluent peers." In contrast, quality kindergarten transition activities may be a means to reducing later achievement lags for low-income children (Schulting, 2008).

Because today's kindergarten classrooms continue to increase emphasis on academic instruction (Love et al., 1992), the experiences a child has leading up to kindergarten play a crucial role in how well they will adjust to this more rigorous setting. Belsky and MacKinnon (1994) suggest that the quality of the preschool experience can determine in part how well a child adjusts to kindergarten. For example, low quality early childhood experiences can increase externalizing behaviors that make adjusting to school a more difficult experience for the child (Belsky et al., 2007). However, even quality preschool experiences differ in how they prepare

children to move into the more demanding kindergarten environment and, as is the case in Pittsburgh, many children do not attend any preschool setting at all. Because of the diversity of children's experiences before school, some researchers and policy makers have shifted their thinking from a sole focus on children's readiness to a broader approach that includes how ready schools are to teach children with diverse backgrounds (Pianta & Walsh, 1996). The "Ready Child Equation" was developed by the National School Readiness Indicators Initiative, a 17-state partnership on school readiness. Findings from this study led researchers to develop an approach to readiness that takes into account the need for ready families, ready communities, ready services, and ready schools (Rhode Island Kids Count, 2005).

This holistic view of school readiness applies an ecological systems-based model to the field of education. The Ecological and Dynamic Model of Transition (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000) proposes that school outcomes are influenced both by children's immediate experiences and by the interactions of individuals, groups, and institutions that surround the child. Thus, academic outcomes are influenced by the quality of relationships between children, parents, teachers, and the community. Similarly, research in parent engagement also points to the need for relationship development: "The evidence is consistent, positive, and convincing: families have a major influence on their children's achievement. When schools, families, and community groups work together to support learning, children tend to do better in school, stay in school longer, and like school more" (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta's relationship-based ecological framework combined with relevant literature on parent engagement supporting positive home-school partnerships was the theoretical basis for a transition to kindergarten model developed by OCD called Ready Freddy.

Thus, our model acknowledges and clarifies the importance parent engagement in their child's education and a positive relationship between home and school as two of the major predictors of school success (Epstein, 1991; Henderson & Berla, 1994; Hoover-Dempsey et al, 2005). The transition period is a perfect time to begin that relationship, because transition practices that involve parents improve parent-initiated involvement during the kindergarten school year (Schulting et al., 2005) and lead to higher student achievement scores (Schulting, 2008). Mapp (2003) notes that although parents want to be involved in their child's education, many are unsure of how to be involved or do not feel that they are welcome participants in their children's education process. Additionally, Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005) found that building a parent's confidence and skill in participating in their children's education helps parents become more active participants.

Existing models were insufficient

Despite existing and emerging literature that promotes using an ecological model, many national transition programs did not account for the importance of the relationships between schools, homes, and communities. Based on the literature on school readiness and the social-emotional development of children, traditional models for kindergarten transition were designed to reduce school anxiety, for example, by the school hosting a preschool class to tour the kindergarten classroom. Further, the most frequent transition activities reported by teachers occurred the first day or few weeks after school had begun, such as talking with or sending a letter to the parent, and hosting an open house (Pianta et al., 1999).

Even now, transition programs that do begin before the first day of school are often coordinated by preschool providers, not the elementary school. For example, Head Start programs and state-funded pre-kindergartens are required to provide continuity of services

between early care and education and kindergarten programs, and several national transition models were developed to help programs comply with this requirement. However, not all children entering kindergarten have been previously enrolled in a formal early childhood setting. For example, in 2007, outreach to two low-income (92.5-96.1% of children are eligible for free and reduced lunch program), primarily African-American, urban neighborhoods in Pittsburgh found that 58-62% of children were not enrolled in any educational setting before entering kindergarten. Most of these children had not been exposed to classroom social norms such as sitting attentively, listening to directions, or working with a partner or to early academic skills such as identifying colors, numbers, and/or the letters in their names. Furthermore, most of the parents of these children had not visited the school, did not know any of the school personnel, and did not know what would be expected of them. While the long-term effects of staying at home versus attending low-quality preschool are still debated (Belsky et al., 2007; Votruba-Drzal, Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 2004), the fact remains that many children and their families will arrive on their first day of school without ever receiving services to help them adjust and prepare for the start of school. Worse yet, many unprepared families will not attend the first day of school at all (pre-intervention, schools reported a mere 25% first day attendance).

A more comprehensive approach based on best practices was needed. A best practice guide based on the ecological model (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003) offered principles, practices, and implementation examples, but assumed the availability of a skilled facilitator experienced in building family-school-community partnerships. Additionally, the model focused on the transition between preschool and kindergarten and did not provide strategies for engaging parents of children not in pre-school settings.

Community-centered approach

While based on existing literature, the Ready Freddy program began as a community-centered model. After being approached by a funder to determine ways to increase school readiness in low-income Pittsburgh communities, OCD synthesized both a literature review and a community scan of existing need. To establish that the local need did not match existing models and to obtain consensus for building a new model, OCD consulted with a local advisory panel of community members, school district representatives, early intervention and community service providers, child development experts, and funders. Because program developers did not know what would work for the community, multiple ideas and methods were tested to determine the core practices that could be successfully implemented in the community.

The committee met bi-monthly for one year to help identify strategies for collaboration, and to provide feedback on program tools and evaluation. The committee advised the development of a parent-child curriculum for transition to be implemented through local family support centers (which provide home visiting and center-based services to families with children ages 0-5). The school district also convened a meeting between principals, communications staff, the early childhood director, and district administrators to discuss transition needs for the district. School personnel identified the need for any transition work to include a focus on on-time enrollment and day one attendance. OCD staff also met with principals and parent engagement specialists from four schools targeted for intervention. Feedback from the individual schools indicated that they were hesitant to work with community partners, especially if it involved a high level of effort from school staff. Initial conversations with the schools also revealed that while there were some basic transition practices occurring through ECE classrooms, few fully understood the importance of quality transition and in some cases the school was unintentionally

discouraging transition (e.g., not offering concrete enrollment dates, not welcoming parents, and not offering transition activities before the first day of school).

Additionally, our model focused on including parents at all levels, because transition programs that focus solely on the child ignore the fact that parents are making a transition too. To understand parents' viewpoints, OCD staff wanted to make sure they were invited to be part of the planning process during program development. Parents participated in development meetings through family support centers, provided ideas on activities that would engage families, and were trained along with staff to conduct community outreach to their peers. Parents also provided insight into their experience by acknowledging that sending a child to school marks a significant change their life. They reported feeling anxious about their child's readiness for school, about changing the relationship dynamic with their child, and even about negative memories of their own school experience.

Establishing core program elements

One aim of the ISF's Synthesis and Translation system is to "identify key characteristics" of a program. Because a ready-to-implement "proven" practice model was not available, elements of the model were fleshed out in the field. During the model development stage, elements were redesigned multiple times to find the right fit for the parents, school, and the community. Various elements were tested through demonstrations in eight school-community partnerships. Guiding principles from existing transition models (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000; SERVE, 1999) were incorporated with literature on parent engagement and community-school partnerships (Dearing, Kreider, Simpkins & Weiss, 2006; Epstein, Sanders, Simon, Salinas, Jansorn & Voorhis, 2002; Henderson & Berla, 1994; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Mapp, 2003). These principles were linked with direct feedback from parents, school, and

community providers to create a community-specific model for building relationships to support

the transition to kindergarten. Through this process, four areas emerged: a) outreach and

marketing as a means of connecting schools to families whose children were not enrolled in early

learning; b) parent engagement strategies to promote positive parent-teacher relationships and

increased parental confidence (Hoover-Dempsey et al, 2005; Rimm-Kaufmann & Pianta, 2000);

c) community, school, and parent driven Transition Teams to develop community specific

transition activities (Kraft-Sayre & Pianta, 2000; SERVE, 1999); and d) continuous feedback

from the school district, early education providers, community providers, and parents to establish

not only what works but to incorporate practices into the existing system.

The Ready Freddy Model

The Ready Freddy model defines quality kindergarten transition as a series of activities

and interactions that welcome families and children into kindergarten, help children be ready to

learn in a formal setting, reduce anxiety, increase on-time enrollment and attendance, foster

parent involvement, and create continuity of learning between home and school. The Ready

Freddy model is built upon multiple elements that were created through a combination of

evidence-based approaches, knowledge gained through prior work in the community, and

feedback from stakeholders at all levels. The action elements that emerged through a

combination of the literature review, feedback from the community, and on the ground trial and

error include a) Transition Teams that plan and implement community-specific, quality transition

activities before school starts; b) summer Kindergarten Clubs, targeted to the most at-risk

families, that promote parent-child interactions and foster sustained parent involvement; c)

community outreach to find and engage parents; d) support to schools to create a welcoming

environment for both students and parents; and e) a frog mascot that helps to create awareness and recognition for the importance of transition.

Transition Teams

Like previous models (Kraft-Sayre & Pianta, 2000; SERVE, 1999), Ready Freddy Transition Teams included teachers, principals, parents, early childhood education providers, and other community providers. Parents and community providers, who have more intimate knowledge of how to effectively reach out to families, are expected to be the dominant voices on the Teams. Teams develop a transition plan including outreach to all age appropriate children and their parents before the first day of kindergarten, use local data to understand the community's kindergarten enrollment patterns and challenges, and organize and publicize transition events that match the community's interest and needs. Parents help with outreach and to determine whether transition events are "parent-friendly." Using a Team to plan and conduct outreach and events helps to support and encourage teachers to be available to build relationships with families and to build a welcoming school environment for incoming children and parents.

Kindergarten Clubs

The Kindergarten-Club curriculum (Smythe-Leistico & Laski, 2010) was developed by OCD based on the need for a transition-based parent-child group that would help both children and their families prepare for the start of school. Components of the curriculum are derived from literature on school readiness (e.g., Brown, 1987; Crain-Thoreson & Dale, 1992; Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997; Duncan, et al, 2007; Hall & Moats, 1999; Zimmerman, 1990; etc.) and on the importance of fostering relationships between school and home. Clubs are primarily designed for families of children who were not enrolled in any pre-kindergarten program to help provide them with a primer on some of the concepts typically introduced in early learning classrooms. During

each session there is a parent-child activity to build stronger communication around education

activities at home (such as homework), a parent-only discussion group to reinforce awareness of

the parent's role, and a child-only activity to build confidence in classroom style behaviors and

activities. Sessions focus on the attitudes, skills, and logistical planning (such as having a

morning routine to get to school on time every day) that contribute to long-term school success.

Community Outreach

Based on previous experience in the community and the need to find families with young

children unknown to the school system, direct door-to-door outreach is paired with district-wide

marketing materials and school-specific transition event details (e.g., letters sent home to

families, frog tee-shirts for all enrolling kindergarten students, and enrollment banners to hang

outside the schools). Materials are also strategically placed in high traffic locations (such as

pediatricians' offices, service providers, food banks, etc.) This multi-faceted approach helps to

reach parents who would otherwise not attend transition activities because they are not aware of

them, do not know transition is important, or have a negative attitude toward the school.

Welcoming Schools

Feedback from parents indicated the need to make the schools feel more welcoming.

Welcome signs are placed around the school and school staff receive training on how to be

friendlier to families. On the first day of school, a community event that fosters parent-teacher

relationships sets a welcoming tone for parents and children.

Ready Freddy Mascot and Logo

To increase public awareness of the importance of transition, social psychological

theories (Gladwell, 2000) highlight the need to create a likeable character to help solidify the

message behind the model. Using a child-friendly frog mascot to brand all outreach efforts,

materials, and events creates an easily recognizable theme that links multiple efforts, builds

popularity for the program amongst families, and increases demand by drawing attention and

support from schools, funders, service providers, and the media.

Implementing Ready Freddy Using the ISF

The following sections use the ISF lens to explain how Ready Freddy was implemented

using all three systems of the framework (synthesis and translation, support, and delivery). In

addition, we describe how the contextual environment (i.e., macro policy, funding, climate, and

existing research and theory) surrounding the program played a major role in implementation.

Because our model was developed in coordination with the community, it is also important to

share how their feedback helped shape the model and contribute to its subsequent

implementation. First-hand accounts captured through individual interviews with a funder,

school district executive, parent, kindergarten teacher, community provider, and program

developer are provided to demonstrate how differing perspectives of the community were

incorporated into the model and implementation.

Case example

The development of a parent-child transition curriculum is a good case example of the

interaction between processes involved in the ISF (figure 1). Because Kindergarten Club is a

Insert Figure 1 about here

transition activity that developed relatively independently from the remaining elements of the

model, it can be used to illustrate how one Ready Freddy element moved through the three tiers

of the ISF. Once the need for a parent-child group on transition was established by the

community advisory committee, the original version of a curriculum was developed based on

literature on transition and school readiness, a readiness assessment checklist from the school

district, and activity suggestions from parents and family support center staff who had experience

with other evidence-based parent-child groups. This joint development was used to create buy-in

from the program staff who would be implementing the curriculum. In addition, staff received

extensive training and technical assistance on both transition-related content and general

knowledge of group facilitation.

Reviews from content experts helped determine the need for revisions to the curriculum.

To help ensure quality, OCD staff consulted with a former educator and developmental

psychologist in the development of a six session parent-child interactive curriculum designed to

help children and parents be excited and prepared for the transition to kindergarten. The resulting

Ready Freddy Kindergarten Club curriculum was field tested and revised three times based on

feedback from families and facilitators. For example, curriculum developers learned that using

the child's kindergarten teacher as a facilitator is an ideal opportunity to establish an early

relationship between the family and the teacher before school starts. Reports from both teachers

and parents after the beginning of the school year indicated that when families participate in

clubs with their child's teacher, the child and parent experience a smoother transition to school.

Teacher training for facilitation of clubs has continued and now includes a fidelity

checklist which is implemented 1-2 times for each facilitator along with on-site observation and

feedback. During on-site observations of the clubs, we found that teachers need less support to

run the child activities, but more support to lead the parent activities. For example, some of the

teachers were uncomfortable leading a parent-only conversation about their feelings and

expectations for the child's kindergarten year. Additionally, during the parent-child activity,

teachers were more likely to work directly with the child, rather than helping the parent to be the

child's coach. OCD was able to provide feedback and coaching to teachers to help increase their

skills and confidence in speaking with parents. Teachers reported that feedback and modeling

from the observers helped them learn to be more comfortable with the parents' role. According

to one teacher facilitator, "*I was comfortable in front of the children, instructing them, and*

getting certain key points across, but when I sat down with the parents I was really nervous

about sticking to the lesson plan. The experience has helped in my own comfort level with

engaging parents. I've been able to have really honest conversations with the families and talk

about the things that need to be done at home in order to support what the kids are doing in the

classroom."

In addition to the fidelity checklist, a pre-test post-test measure and informal feedback

from parents are now available to help begin evaluating results, determining the need for any

additional supports, and eventually scaling up the use of the curriculum. Currently, several local

and State communities receive direct training and ongoing technical assistance to run clubs. The

curriculum has also been distributed to groups in other counties and States without direct

training. If these communities decide to use and share the quality assurance measures created, it

will help us to learn more about how clubs are implemented without direct support systems.

Implementation Context

According to the ISF, the context surrounding implementation plays an important role.

For Ready Freddy, the climate at the school, including the lack of existing transition practices for

all children and the reluctance of schools to work with an outside partner, shaped the direction of

the program being developed. The funder's perspective also gave direction: "*I was interested in*

a holistic approach and what we could do community by community. Getting district leadership

on transition was challenging because there was not sufficient local data to make the case."

From the beginning of the project, OCD had to work within these contextual parameters to convince individual schools not only that transition and parent-community involvement were important, but also that OCD was the right group to help them do the work. After establishing grant funding for a project on transition, one of the first steps was to get permission from the school district to test the model in two of their schools. Despite existing and emerging literature that emphasized the need for quality transitions into kindergarten, one of the biggest challenges was convincing the school district that a broader model was even needed. At that time, the district's transition plan primarily focused on sharing information between preschool and kindergarten teachers and having preschool children tour their new classrooms. Often, however, the preschool information was not received by the kindergarten teachers and children continued to struggle with the transition. Also, children outside of the district's preschool population typically were not invited to any transition activities before the first day of school. Furthermore, the system of transitioning each child one by one did not include involving the parents.

Using the existing transition methods also meant that some children enrolled late and trickled into their first day of kindergarten over the first weeks and months of the school year. While the district did not identify the need for a new transition plan, they did recognize the struggle with on-time kindergarten enrollment. At that time in two targeted communities, 75% of eligible children did not show up on the first day of school, forcing teachers to continually modify teaching plans to orient new students, and making it harder for the district to know true numbers for staffing and classroom size. For the district, on-time enrollment was a key issue.

Synthesis and Translation System

From very early stages, OCD program developers met with home visiting providers, early education providers, and families to translate research-based principles into usable program

components that made sense to service providers and to families. Implementation of each

element required iterative testing, feedback from the community, and continual checks for new

literature over several years to develop a program that could be replicated.

Family support centers in conjunction with a local literacy agency and early care and

education providers were selected as the community planning partners because of their history of

parent engagement, access to families, and positive experience as collaborators. Even though this

collaboration fit the agencies' missions, buy-in was gained by including staff in all phases of

program design. First, a review of the national literature was presented to the Team so that

partners could combine best practice guidelines with local data to identify the greatest needs in

their community. Once needs were identified, the Team developed community-specific solutions

that utilized the talents of the group, stream-lined efforts, and pooled available resources. As the

program developer recalls, *"One result was a collaboratively designed outreach plan. The*

targeted communities were already saturated with outreach efforts; thus families were hesitant

to open doors to canvassers. Instead of implementing separate efforts by partners to recruit for

their individual programs, the Team was cross-trained in each other's initiatives and collectively

canvassed with a shared "these are all our kids" philosophy. Outreach workers were able to

connect with more families and gather a more accurate assessment of local demographics,

including the low number of children enrolled in preschool."

All elements of the model were developed through this blend of literature-based theories

and input from the community. The first Transition Team, which began with parents and

community partners, was able to use data collected during outreach to engage the school to

participate on the Team. The school, which had begun as a reluctant partner, quickly saw the

value of the new Team as community groups rallied and brought assets, skills, and efforts that did not fit within the school budget.

Support System

According to the ISF, implementation is often weak without a strong support system to inform and coach practitioners. One of OCD's primary roles was to provide ongoing support to schools, Transition Teams, and community providers throughout the implementation of the program. Technical assistance included support to build capacity for both program-specific needs and for the foundations of the work. The ISF model prepared OCD to look at the individual and organizational characteristics that would affect how the program would be delivered.

To develop an effective Team, best practice literature (Kraft-Sayre & Pianta, 2000) suggests that the Teams be facilitated by the schools. Initially, however, principals in the district-identified target schools were reluctant to commit to working with OCD or with a Transition Team. The program had to build a relationship with each school principal. Without their support, attempts at implementation would have failed. Building that relationship overtime included regular communications and one-on-one consultation regarding school-level transition practices and local attendance and enrollment data. Once the school leadership was engaged in the process, the Transition Team was able to identify common barriers and solutions to parent participation in transition activities. For example, the school established a specific enrollment week that would remain constant in future years. Having a set annual enrollment week allows community groups to plan and advertise and allows families to predict and prepare for enrollment. Additionally, schools learned that input from parents on how to plan engaging activities helped to increase attendance at events. Once the school bought into working with a

community Team and saw new strategies that worked, they were more open to allowing OCD to provide support to increase their capacity to work with and welcome families into the school.

After the first year, one school with an engaged Transition Team increased on-time enrollment from 25% to over 100% of their anticipated student enrollment numbers. The success of this Team opened the door to build another Team in a second community. To reduce direct OCD involvement and increase sustainability, more responsibility was shifted to the schools to facilitate the Teams. However, it became clear very quickly that more support was needed to build some of the general capacity skills required to run the Teams, such as how to collaborate with outside groups, how to run a meeting, and how to set and maintain focus on goals. A parent reflected that, *"More people wanted to be a part of the Team the second year and we had a harder time staying focused on transition with new members having their own agenda."*

Because of the need for training and ongoing support to facilitate Teams, OCD created a train-the-facilitator model that included some general skill building on how to choose the right people for a Team and how to follow a goal-based agenda. School staff, including principals and parent engagement specialists, were chosen for the training to build a sustainable model that could continue to operate within the school without direct OCD intervention. During and after training, facilitators were given opportunities to practice facilitation skills and content knowledge on transition (such as by creating an icebreaker to be used at the beginning of each Team meeting). In addition to training, OCD created supportive materials for Teams, including sample agendas, a PowerPoint to train new members about transition, sample transition activities, and evaluation materials. Team facilitators also received ongoing consultation on their facilitation skills and ability to keep the Team focused the quality of transition activities. Facilitators also

needed supports to balance their new role with other assigned duties and to prevent relapse into prior ineffective methods of communicating with families and community partners.

Based on lessons learned from the first two years, OCD determined that having the kindergarten teacher on the Team was a key to building relationships between teachers and parents. Even though more parents attended Team events, the parents were still not getting opportunities to connect with teachers, which, based on the literature (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2005), is a critical component of transition. OCD hypothesized that if teachers helped to plan events, they might be more likely to attend the events and to know that their role is to welcome families. According to one teacher, using a Team approach allowed her to be more involved: "*Being able to jump right in with a group of people who already have something going on was really nice and an easy way for me to be a part of it too. Even though transition is important, sometimes teachers' schedules do not allow for extra work outside of the classroom.*"

The need for a support system was also demonstrated by less successful unsupported efforts. For example, after seeing data on increased on-time enrollment numbers, the district opted to adopt the frog logo for all marketing and communications about kindergarten and to assign two calendar weeks in the year to promote enrollment across all 30 elementary schools in the district. OCD staff, however, had concerns that an enrollment-only approach without a built-in support system would not have a large effect on transition. As suspected, marketing with the frog alone did not bring as large of an increase in enrollment as had been seen in schools with the comprehensive community Teams.

Similarly, the district created a tool-kit to give to all schools to help plan transition events and they encouraged schools to host an evening event for working parents. However, schools were not required to use a community Transition Team, to engage parents in the planning

process, or to get support on how to implement literature-based practices. While some schools

benefited from materials alone, many needed additional supports to implement a quality

transition program. Feedback from schools indicated that not all schools used the tool-kit.

Teachers and school transition leaders reported that the tool-kit came without directions on how

to use it and because the kits were sent to the principals only, sometimes the person in charge of

transition did not receive the toolkit at all. Subsequently, several schools did not reach their

enrollment goals.

During this time, a shift in the leadership over kindergarten at the district helped to create

more openness to working with parents and the community. Developing a relationship with

district leaders who have influence to make the required changes was necessary to build capacity

for a research-based district-wide policy on transition. From the new district executive's

perspective, "*Getting support from an outside group is just logical; no organization can do*

everything themselves. We have to work with people who have expertise in the community and

who have the talent and time to do the work. Schools cannot create plans without the input of

parents and the community or the plan is likely to fail." To maintain district-level support, OCD

now also meets regularly with district representatives and is working on collaboratively creating

a district-wide transition policy based on the literature and lessons learned in multiple

community schools. Some changes that have already been supported include reducing enrollment

paperwork that can be a burden for new families and additional training for schools on the

importance of transition and how to be more welcoming to families.

Delivery System

Per the ISF, individual, organizational, and community factors can influence how a

program is implemented. Effective delivery of a model requires the general and specific

capacities provided by the Support System. To accommodate the need for additional training and

technical assistance supports, OCD staff initially had to directly deliver many of the elements of

the program. Experienced leadership was necessary to support the collaboration with both

parents and multiple community groups, and none of the organizations or schools thought they

had the personnel who were skilled to lead this work. As an outside coordinator with experience

working with parents, service organizations, and schools, OCD was able to bring together

multiple contributors to the project around a unified agenda. Sometimes, until additional capacity

is built, an independent coordinator is useful to build trust among diverse groups not accustomed

to working together, respecting each contributor, and moving the process toward the common

goal. Without a clearly defined school person to lead the team, Teams without direct OCD

involvement were not as successful.

Through this process, we also learned that the partnering organizations need to be able to

link the purpose of the collaboration to their regular work. This was the case with the Housing

Authority, which turned out to be one of the Team's most valuable partners by providing lists of

low-income households with children ages 3-5. As this partner recalled, "*I was excited to be a*

part of the Transition Team because it fit with my work and allowed me to reach more families.

Now that I am a part of the Transition Team, my partnership with the schools is much different.

The children in public housing have always been the school district's target population, so

forming a partnership with the Housing Authority was a natural progression."

Similarly, having parents on the Team helped to directly connect the schools with the

community. One parent stated that, "*As a parent, I knew that other parents in the community*

would not come to events that did not relate to them. In order to get more families to come out,

we hosted a free hair-braiding event at the school because we knew that parents would want

their children to look good for school but didn't always have the money to spend. Parents also

knew that there was only one pizza delivery in the entire community, so that would be a great

way to advertise events." Without this critical parent input, it is doubtful that Teams would have

had success in reaching out to families to participate in transition events. A teacher who

participated in the events noted that parent participation was much higher than in previous years,

"While I knew the work would ultimately benefit the children, I was surprised by how valuable it

was to engage parents and the community in the process. It was a different experience to see this

level of involvement from parents and in much bigger numbers than I'd ever seen in the past."

Preliminary Descriptive Findings

While no formal evaluation has been completed, preliminary findings suggest positive

outcomes in the two targeted communities in terms of higher on-time enrollment numbers,

increased parent involvement, and improved perceptions of the relationship between the

community and school. Specifically, according to district reports, two schools were able to triple

their enrollment before the first day of school, contributing to the smallest district-wide

enrollment decline in six years. One school tripled parent attendance at parent-school

organization meetings, and teachers reported that the number of parents attending parent-teacher

conferences was the highest they had witnessed during their careers. Additionally, one teacher

who has received extensive support through training and one-on-one technical assistance

reported that her class brought in more parents than any other classroom or grade level for the

school's "Bring a Parent to School" activity. In her opinion, the before school transition activities

and the first day community event lay the groundwork for parents to feel welcome in the school.

She has also noticed an increased response rate on communications sent home. Without an

evaluation, it is unclear whether these findings are a direct result of the program.

Community support has also increased through higher attendance at transition Team events, and one principal reported the largest ever volunteer turnout. Similarly, results from a community survey indicated that the majority of community members who participated at any level (average of 63.9%) had developed more positive opinions of the connection between the community and the school. The remaining participants saw no change. In contrast, only 17.6% of those who had no involvement with Ready Freddy reported an improved relationship and 37.8% of the no-involvement group felt the relationship between the school and community was worse.

Evaluations of additional elements of the model are ongoing, but early evidence seems to point to additional improved outcomes for parent roles and efficacy in their children's education, improved parent-teacher relationships, and the role of community-school collaboration. One kindergarten teacher reports that children who took part in the transition activities have more familiarity with the school and that their parents come into the school more frequently. Also, she reported that families involved in the Kindergarten Club had few or no transition difficulties on the first day. It is possible that children in Kindergarten Club were more comfortable than the other children because they had established a relationship with their teacher and they were familiar with activities they learned during the Club. No evaluation has been done with the schools that used the frog logo and/or the tool-kit without additional supports from OCD or the use of a Team, but data collected by the district demonstrate that the enrollment numbers for these schools have increased at a slower rate or not at all.

Next Steps

The ISF provides a framework for thinking about how each element fits together into a larger system. Using this framework encouraged OCD and the school district to identify new strategies on how best to create a district-wide plan based on local data, lessons learned, and best

practices from the literature. Systems thinking suggests that if the district wants to implement a uniform transition policy, they will need to create initial buy-in, an accountability structure for all schools, and an enhanced data collection plan. Improved data collection will be critical to developing a formal evaluation to determine the effectiveness and dose of each element of the program. Ideas from stakeholders at all levels on next steps for the model are included.

Perspective of program developer.

Analyzing local data to demonstrate the essential elements of the program will be necessary to inform a district-wide transition plan. Creating buy-in at the district's policy level is the next step to institutionalize Transition Teams in every elementary school. For example, they will need to clearly define benchmarks for community and parent participation and transition-related outcomes.

Perspective of funder.

Getting district and individual school support and removing bureaucratic barriers are always a complicated set of issues; creating the right leadership and public will to champion the model is critical to its success as a system-wide initiative.

Perspective of school district executive.

In order to take this program to the next level, it will take a lot of manpower. Going door to door was such a big piece of finding children and getting parents involved. The district sees the results of that effort and we are on our way to embracing it. Principals already do some work with transition, but it is different in each school. The Transition Teams, with support from the district and OCD, can look at what these principals are already doing and help them to enhance their work. Sharing these ideas across schools can give them new ideas and take some of the burden off of them from having to develop a plan on their own.

Perspective of parent.

If the district is going to bring Ready Freddy to more schools, they need to have an informational meeting first. When the district sent out the took-kit but did not explain what it was, no one used it. It would be good if teachers could run the Team, but most importantly, whoever runs the Team needs to be someone who is passionate about the work and who is given the time to do it.

Perspective of kindergarten teacher.

For transition to be successful across the district there must be a structure in place to ensure staff are involved and supported. Registration events and other transition activities need to be planned well in advance with school staff input. We want to get the message out, as early as possible, that the school wants to partner with families and ensure that their children have a successful school career beginning in kindergarten.

Perspective of community partner.

In order to bring this program to more communities, we need to increase the knowledge of the importance of transition. Teams need to plan events that are fun for the community, but tie in the issue of transition and make relationships between parents and the schools.

Each of these stakeholders recognizes the need to use the literature and specific community feedback to increase awareness, to provide support systems for those who are doing the work, and to assess how the elements of the program will fit within the context of each school community. Indeed, the environmental context surrounding the implementation of Ready Freddy has been one of the greatest influences over the program's successes and failures.

Lessons Learned

Successful program implementation in complicated field settings requires continuous adjustment to fit local circumstances. This requires maintaining the main principles of the original model that are thought to be needed for success, while being willing to modify other aspects as one goes along. In these contexts, implementing a pre-packaged model with complete fidelity may not be possible.

Differing results between communities that implemented the full model and those that implemented only pieces suggest the importance of using a community-based effort. If the district wants to create a broad-based plan, it cannot be static. The plan needs to allow each school and community Team to assess what will work for their needs and demographic group. Likewise, the literature must be translated in a way that relates to the diversity of the group. The theoretical basis for the program and evidence of what elements work should be used to develop benchmarks and accountability. Because of the need for this community-driven approach, implementation will take a lot of work. As suggested by Wandersman et al (2008), community-centered models often require support to build the general capacity of the organizations doing the work. The need for increased general support was seen with both the schools and community partners (e.g., training and coaching facilitation skills to lead a community Team). It is not as simple as dropping a developed program into an existing school-community process.

For this project, engaging the audience meant directly teaching the literature as a rationale for why transition is important, how it fits their work, and what the evidence-based components are required for it to be effective. Supporting the work meant building capacity in the system, but also allowing for creativity in each community. OCD gave them the process and best practice guidelines, not the complete product. This created buy-in and built a community-based model that met the specific needs of each community. Each stakeholder felt like they

owned a piece of the program. At the same time, support also required ongoing training, consultation, coaching, and feedback to multiple levels, including direct delivery workers and both school and district leadership.

Review of the work thus far demonstrates a need for additional data collection. A uniform district-wide set of data should be collected for better comparison, but data should be relevant for use at the community level to support program sustainability and improvement. This process would support continued engagement of parents and community partners to develop new tools and strategies that meet the needs of the community.

Further, as explained in ISF, the support system is essential to helping front line staff deliver the model in the manner it was designed. To expand the model, OCD would need to expand training to more schools, provide individual support as needed to struggling schools, and create sustainable products to provide ongoing support and to receive continual feedback from schools and parents for continuous program improvement. Supporting materials should include a self-assessment guide to help schools understand and build upon their existing practices and data.

To properly implement the model, school principals and district decision makers need to be able to assess their own capacity to do the work. The ISF provides a framework for them to see the systematic picture of all the pieces that go into implementing a model effectively. The ISF can answer questions that are included in the assessment, such as "Do you and your staff have sufficient knowledge about existing research and theory on transition?" and "Do you have an existing staff person who has skills in Team facilitation and community collaboration?" Questions should primarily focus on the school's and community's capacity to do the work.

Once strengths and gaps in knowledge, skills, or capacity have been identified, they can be addressed through a series of products that will build ongoing capacity. Locally, these could

include group training and individual consultations to support general capacity needs required to implement the program, such as parent engagement skills and making relationships with community providers. Like the train-the-facilitator model, OCD may also need to create a coaching model to help principals support ongoing work in their schools. For long distance users of the model, support tools can be offered online. The program's website could also allow users to share feedback on what works with each other. As illustrated by the ISF, communication among stakeholders from all levels is essential to implementing effective practices.

From development through revisions and implementation, the Ready Freddy project has the unique perspective of having operated simultaneously and interchangeably within each tier of the ISF. The original framework focused on the process of moving from existing research to practice, but suggested that it could be expanded to include non-traditional implementation paths. The work done in this transition project to translate the literature, develop a community-centered model, support staff, and deliver the practice to the community illustrates that the ISF can be relevant in multiple contexts. Even after development of the model, it is important to continue to reflect on how the systems within the framework help to recognize both the program and partners' strengths and capacity needs. Because Ready Freddy was developed and revised in the field, having a framework to guide movement between literature and community needs was important.
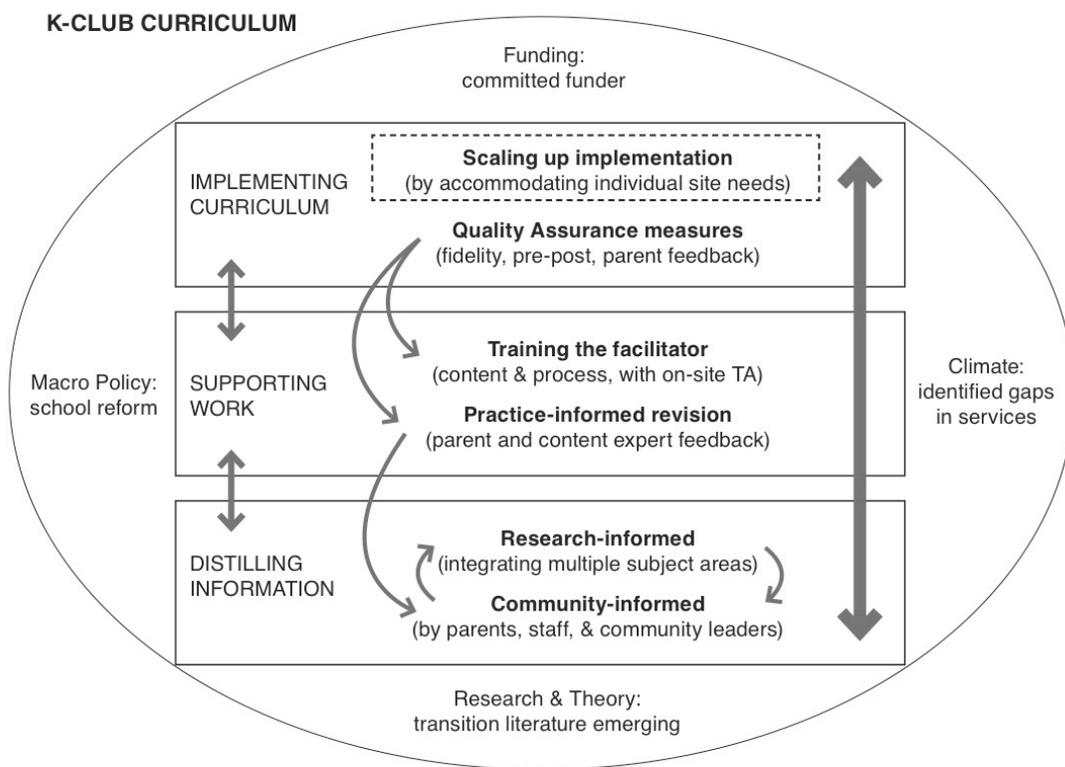
K-CLUB CURRICULUM

Funding:
committed funder

IMPLEMENTING
CURRICULUM

Scaling up implementation
(by accommodating individual site needs)

Quality Assurance measures
(fidelity, pre-post, parent feedback)

Macro Policy:
school reform

SUPPORTING
WORK

Training the facilitator
(content & process, with on-site TA)

Practice-informed revision
(parent and content expert feedback)

Climate:
identified gaps
in services

DISTILLING
INFORMATION

Research-informed
(integrating multiple subject areas)

Community-informed
(by parents, staff, & community leaders)

Research & Theory:
transition literature emerging

Figure 1: ISF case example: Kindergarten Club

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