



Ready Freddy
**Kindergarten
Kick-Off Event**
Planning Guide

UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH

OFFICE OF
CHILD DEVELOPMENT



Ready Freddy, a program of the University of Pittsburgh's Office of Child Development, wants to help you host a successful Kindergarten Kick-off event.

One of the goals of Ready Freddy is to help schools, businesses, parents, and educational and community groups recognize and celebrate the first day of kindergarten as the beginning of a child's path to educational success.

Kindergarten Kick-Off is a great way to make the first day of kindergarten a positive celebration and present the school as a warm, inviting place for children and parents. This one-day festivity welcomes children, parents, and the community to the first day of kindergarten as a way to show support, offer encouragement, and make education a big deal. Included in this guide are just a few strategies and ideas we think you might find helpful as you plan your school event.

Why hold a Kindergarten Kick-off event?

Teachers across the country report that nearly half of all children struggle with the transition to kindergarten. Kindergarten Kick-off is a meaningful part of the transition process.

- ✿ It encourages on-time enrollment and lays a foundation for regular attendance throughout the school year.
- ✿ It provides an opportunity to build positive parent-teacher and parent-school relationships.
- ✿ It helps parents create relationships with other parents at their child's school, encouraging them to become actively engaged in their children's education.

First a few words about attendance

Research has shown that children who are chronically absent in kindergarten (missing 10% of school days) have the lowest academic performance in first grade. By third grade, only 17% of children who were chronically absent in kindergarten and 1st grade are proficient in reading. For low-income children who are unable to make up this missed learning time, absences in kindergarten impact their academic performance through the 5th grade. When the pattern of absences and poor performance continues past kindergarten into later grades, children are at greater risk for dropping out of school altogether.

Attending the first day of school can make a difference! According to data collected for Pittsburgh Public Schools during the 2009-2010 school year, children who were **present** on the first day of kindergarten missed an average of 9 days of kindergarten. Children who were **absent** on the first day of kindergarten missed an average of 18 days of kindergarten.

Starting the first day with a bang shows families that kindergarten is really a big deal!

A successful Kindergarten Kick-Off event has three components:

1. An outdoor celebration with volunteers who welcome families
2. An indoor welcome address by the school Principal
3. An introduction to the kindergarten classroom and teacher

PLANNING TIPS



Before the event – First Steps

Start planning well in advance (at least 2 months) so that you'll know what resources you need and who might provide them, who will be included in your planning team, and what you want your Kindergarten Kick-off event to look like. Send a letter to local preschools, Headstarts, parent groups, community organizations, local government representatives and others, inviting them to participate. (See Attachment 1 – Sample Letter). Develop a list of volunteers (groups such as United Way, community members, parents), and schedule your first meeting.



Things to think about when you meet

Brainstorm ways to create a festive atmosphere, including music, balloons, signs, and a street-side banner. Plan your arrival time, collect a list of existing volunteers, assign volunteers to specific locations, and determine when and how tables, decorations, food, music, will be set up. Assign a volunteer to connect with school staff. Decide on your promotion and publicity strategies and identify someone to photograph the event. Discuss possible 'talking points' in order to be prepared for the media.



At the Event – Next Steps

Make the space festive and easy to navigate by using chalk drawings outside the building and on the floor of the hallways in the school, directing children and parents to the cafeteria or auditorium, kindergarten classrooms, etc. Attach signs to the school's doors directing parents and children from the outside in, and add signage inside the school to direct parents and children to the gathering spaces (cafeteria, auditorium, classrooms) and the rest rooms. The signage should give parents an idea of what to expect during the event. Let parents know, for example, that you would like them to enter the school along with their child if they are able to (though some may need to leave early to go to work). Involve as many school staff — the custodian, kindergarten teachers, and the principal — in the event as possible.



Volunteer Roles

Start the day by welcoming volunteers and explaining the purpose of the day. Assign volunteers to specific roles. These can include:

- ☼ Cheering on and welcoming children and parents to the first day
- ☼ Directing parents and children from the sidewalk into the school cafeteria, from the cafeteria to the auditorium, and from the auditorium into the classroom
- ☼ Taking signs (such as “honk for kindergarten” and “welcome to kindergarten”) out into the community a few blocks from the school to greet families as they approach and to connect the festive spirit with the rest of the community
- ☼ Helping serve breakfast inside the school
- ☼ Engaging families who are gathered inside during the waiting period between arrival and the start of the day
- ☼ Wearing a frog suit or other friendly school mascot (this should be someone who is animated, but won’t frighten children)
- ☼ Asking all volunteers to **pay special attention to parents** – it’s very important to make them feel welcome too!

OTHER THINGS TO CONSIDER

1. Ensure that everyone knows how to answer the questions parents may be likely to ask and know what to do if children are dropped off and don’t know where to go. (See Attachment 2 Sample Parent Questions)
2. Have a supply of food for parents and children, and a separate supply of food for volunteers.
3. If possible, have families with students in the same classroom sit together in the cafeteria and assign a volunteer to help them get to know each other
4. Some families arrive the first day of school but have not registered their children for kindergarten. Having a space and volunteers from the school or community dedicated to helping families who need to complete enrollment forms will make the event run much more smoothly. It will be helpful to identify these volunteers early on and meet with them to review the school enrollment forms.
5. Be sure to invite the local media in order to assure good coverage of the event, and give volunteers and staff “talking points” so that they can answer questions from the media.
6. Assume that it will take a bit more time than anticipated to set up (including locating tables and other supplies inside the school).



A few words about supplies

Hosting a successful Kindergarten Kick-Off event requires lots of supplies that we have divided into ‘must haves’ and ‘nice to have’; (food might fall somewhere down the middle - nice to or must have depending on your audience and resources). Must haves would include: volunteers, and a welcoming process (especially for parents). Nice to haves would include: signs, mascots, chalk drawings, etc. Feel free to get creative about how to decorate. What’s most important is to focus on building relationships with parents. (See Attachment 3 Supply Check List)

DURING THE EVENT

Be sure there are plenty of volunteers, school staff and community representatives who are eager to welcome and greet children **and parents** on this special day. Keep the event festive and lively without scaring the little ones, and have a great time. Be sure the photographer captures all aspects of the event — inside and outside the school building.



Kindergarten Kick-Off
Pittsburgh Weil PreK-5 School
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

AFTER THE EVENT

Debrief and consider what worked and what didn't. Were there enough volunteers? Was there enough food? Did the children look happy? Did their parents seem relaxed? Was there good representation from the community? How did the volunteers and school staff rate the event?

The Sequence of Kick-Off



1. THE "STREET EVENT"

- 📄 Welcome banner
- 📄 Ready Freddy costume
- 📄 T-shirts
- 📄 Signs
- 📄 Coffee/bagels
- 📄 Balloons/streamers
- 📄 Music
- ⚙️ Kindergarten teachers
- ⚙️ Principal
- ⚙️ Support staff
- ⚙️ Volunteers
- ⚙️ Families are greeted on the street, and then go to cafeteria for breakfast



Your Notes



2. THE PRINCIPAL'S WELCOMING REMARKS

- ⊗ Welcome parents
- ⊗ Appreciation of parent role
- ⊗ Link to Pittsburgh Promise (college scholarship opportunity for Pittsburgh Public School students)
- ⊗ Talk about attendance
- ⊗ Introduction of teachers
- ⊗ Teacher leads students to classroom



Your Notes



3. ENTERING THE 'CLASSROOM' AND SAYING GOODBYE

- ⊗ Teacher invites children to circle time
- ⊗ Parents can sit/stand to observe
- ⊗ Teacher welcomes students
- ⊗ Teacher welcomes parents
- ⊗ Brief introduction to classroom
- ⊗ Read a book (Ready Freddy)
- ⊗ Teacher thanks parents/invites them back
- ⊗ Students thank parents
- ⊗ Parents exit
- ⊗ Teacher leads "learning names" activity



And finally...

Make sure enough volunteers are available to pack up supplies and decorations after the event ends, have a plan for leftover food, and be sure the space is neater when you leave than it was when you arrived!

A child's transition into kindergarten sets the tone for her educational experience for many years to come. On the first day of school, every kindergarten child should walk into the classroom feeling excited, ready to learn, and supported by the school, his parents, and his community.

The Importance of Branding Kindergarten

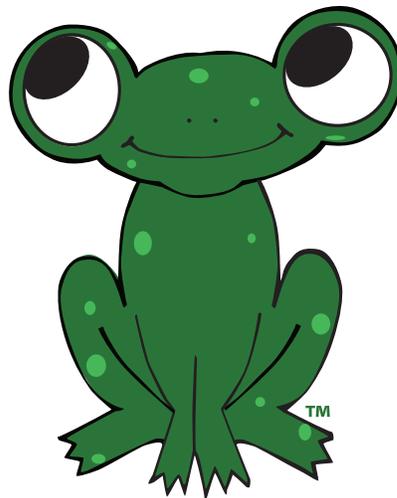
Having someone dressed as Freddy the frog mascot is a wonderful addition and can help to relax the children and put their parents at ease (though, on a cautionary note, some children may be afraid of the frog and confused by all the activity). Branding the green frog as the mascot for kindergarten creates a strong message because it builds awareness and easy recognition.

Mascot costumes like the one featured in the picture are relatively cheap (approximately \$100) and can be purchased from an online or local vendor.



Who is Freddy?

Freddy is the child-friendly frog image that became the face of the Ready Freddy project. He appeals to children and parents alike and has received extensive press coverage. Freddy has successfully helped families recognize kindergarten transition activities across the Pittsburgh school district. Over time, parents, children, and the community have come to associate kindergarten with Freddy the Frog.





Ready Freddy Kindergarten Kick-Off Event Planning Guide

Attachments

Attachment 1: Sample Letter



Ready Freddy

Pathways to Kindergarten Success

readyfreddy.org

Greetings Kindergarten partners!

You are cordially invited to be a part of the _____
School Ready Freddy Kindergarten Kick-Off!

Kindergarten Kick-Off is a special event to celebrate the first day of school for all 5 year-olds and their families. Join us as we greet these new students with smiling faces, warm handshakes, honking horns, balloons, food and much more, all designed to make their very first day of school a memorable one. Mark your calendars for _____
from ____ to ____ a.m. to come welcome families to an exciting morning and kindergartners to the first step on the road to educational success.

To formally sign up as a Ready Freddy volunteer for the morning, contact _____
_____ at the Office of Child Development Ready Freddy office by phone at:
_____ or by email at: _____.

And if you have any friends, neighbors, colleagues, or co-workers who might be interested in volunteering, please pass this information along to them.

We look forward to hearing back from you soon.

Kindergarten Here We Come!
Are you Ready Freddy?



Attachment 2: Sample Parent Questions

Typical things parents had questions about:

- ⊗ Bus schedule questions (where does my child catch the bus, what time does the bus arrive for pick up and drop off)
- ⊗ Teacher questions (who will be my child's teacher)
- ⊗ Event questions (what time will the Kindergarten Kick-Off event end)
- ⊗ Enrollment questions (can I enroll my child today and if so where do I go, what paperwork do I need, I completed the registration but the office person is saying they don't have my forms, can my child stay today even if all of the forms have not been turned in, etc.)
- ⊗ School lunch program (how do you sign up for free/reduced lunch)
- ⊗ Registration completion questions (how do I turn in missing paperwork needed such as immunizations; who do I give it to)
- ⊗ Uniforms (what is the uniform policy for the school, can my child still attend the first day without a uniform)

Additional things to consider

Across the country more and more schools are welcoming kindergarteners and their families for whom English is not their first language. It can be very difficult for these families to feel comfortable in a busy school setting when communicating with others is such a challenge. We encourage schools that are expecting children from refugee and immigrant families to coordinate with their school district's English as a Second Language (ESL) department in order to recruit volunteers that can help these families on the first day, and recommend the best ways to approach and work with children and parents who are finding their way in a new place.

Your Notes

Attachment 3: Recommended Personnel and Supply List



Must Haves/Must Do

- ✍ Kindergarten teachers
- ✍ Principal
- ✍ Support staff (anyone important for families to meet – like the Social Worker and front office staff)
- ✍ Volunteers
- ✍ Greet families (especially parents) on the street
- ✍ Handouts for parents such as school calendars, a list of school policies, information about the importance of attendance
- ✍ Breakfast for families (this could be the typical school breakfast for the children)



Nice to Have

- ⚙ Coffee/bagels-breakfast food (for volunteers)
- ⚙ Welcome banner
- ⚙ Ready Freddy costume/school mascot
- ⚙ Ready Freddy T-shirts
- ⚙ Signs
- ⚙ Balloons/streamers
- ⚙ Chalk Drawings
- ⚙ Music (Free Ready Freddy kindergarten songs are available for download at www.readyfreddy.org)

Attachment 4: Ready Freddy Kindergarten Kickoff Checklist

Task(s)	Assigned to:	Deadline	☑
Coordinating people			
Recruit event volunteers (see Attachment 1 - Sample Letter)			
Connect with school staff (get commitments from principal, K teachers, support staff)			
Identify school 'point' person (if outside organization is coordinating)			
Solidify volunteer list/confirm volunteers			
Assign tasks to volunteers (See Page 4)			
Identify a Volunteer Greeter (someone who can speak to the importance of the event 5 minutes prior to start time)			
Assign a Public Relations point person to create press releases and media talking points			
Coordinating logistics			
Communicate with school about time & materials needed (tables, chairs, space, etc.); get permits if necessary			
Establish timeline for day of event (volunteer arrival, family arrival, time needed for each component of the event)			
Create talking points for volunteers and school staff (especially important for principal welcome to talk about attendance)			
Contact media and other important officials			
Create friendly materials to give to families (school calendar, teacher contact information with picture, etc.)			
Order welcome banner			
Order Balloons/Decorations/Signs			
Order Ready Freddy mascot			
Order Ready Freddy T-shirts			
Assemble music (equipment and songs)			
Order food for families			
Order food for volunteers			
Create directional signs: to the school cafeteria or auditorium; to common areas (library, bathrooms, classrooms, front office, etc.)			
Arrange registration area for families to fill out enrollment forms			
Plan for and dispense leftover food			
Clean-up			
Debrief: what worked - what didn't work			
Send Thank-You notes/cards to volunteers and supporters			



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Prepared by the University of Pittsburgh
Office of Child Development
Service Demonstrations Division

Ready Freddy Pathways to Kindergarten Success

www.readyfreddy.org
412-383-7372
rfreddy@pitt.edu

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