

STATE OF CONNECTICUT
OFFICE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD
STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

TO: Superintendents of Schools

FROM: Beth Bye, Commissioner, Office of Early Childhood
Dr. Miguel A. Cardona, Commissioner, State Department of Education

DATE: June 9, 2020

SUBJECT: Transitioning to Kindergarten during a Public Health Emergency

The Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) and the Office of Early Childhood (OEC) provided guidance regarding kindergarten transition in the publication [Transitioning to Kindergarten: the Why, What and How of this Important Milestone for Connecticut Students](#). In addition, CSDE recently updated the document [What Parents Should Know About Kindergarten Entry, Enrollment, and Attendance](#). In order to address the unique and challenging conditions under which the fall 2020 kindergarten transitions will occur, the CSDE and OEC are providing this guidance to supplement these already existing documents.

As the kindergarten registration process continues for fall 2021 and as children enter kindergarten in the fall, it will be important to address the following factors that are likely to have varying impacts on children and the skills and behaviors they will exhibit when entering kindergarten.

- All children and families have experienced disruptions of life and daily routines during the COVID-19 public health emergency.
- Many children may have experienced higher levels of stress or anxiety during this time.
- Children who were attending preschool or childcare are likely to have missed going to school, being with their teachers and peers, and/or seeing friends.
- Children and families may have experienced trauma related to family illness or death, job loss, food/housing insecurity, and/or generalized anxiety.
- Children of essential workers may have been separated from regular caregivers.
- Children learning multiple languages may have experienced changes in the amount of exposure they had to these languages.
- Some children may have had teachers who were able to continue relationships and support learning at home during this time, while other children may not. Teachers may have had different approaches to support learning at home.
- Families' ability to support learning at home may have been impacted by competing demands, other stressors, and/or lack of internet access.

The law regarding kindergarten eligibility remains the same. It is important to keep in mind that all young children entering kindergarten will have experienced disruptions to the experiences anticipated prior to their entry to kindergarten. The practice of retaining children who are age eligible for kindergarten in preschool should only be considered for very unique and extenuating circumstances.

Key Components of Successful Transitions

In order to address these factors and meet the needs of children and families, school districts and communities should consider the key components of successful transitions: pre-transition activities, collaboration, making it happen, and establishing a timeline. Usual practices related to kindergarten transitions will need to be adjusted. Although many districts have begun adjusting by conducting registration remotely or providing virtual information sessions, additional careful thought and planning will be needed to support the transition process for children, families, and teachers.

Pre-transition activities

- Consider what type of surveys and/or self-assessment processes might be used to assess how districts are meeting the needs of children, families and teachers.
- Consider how virtual or in-person summer learning opportunities might be employed to support the transition process.
- Develop a kindergarten transition team that includes preschool teachers, Head Start, kindergarten teachers, community members, and families to plan innovative and responsive approaches to transition.

Collaboration

- Consider how local agencies and resources can support the transition to kindergarten during these unusual circumstances.
- Look to local philanthropy, grant opportunities, and/or emergency funding or programs to bolster supports for children and families
- Partner with community child care providers in order to coordinate the provision of care and education to meet the needs of families and children.
- Develop online professional learning opportunities to help prepare school and childcare staff to support children during the transition to kindergarten.

Making it Happen/Core activities

- It will be important for district to prioritize high impact strategies that have buy-in from those involved.
- Develop a process to gain information about children's learning and development, which may include the use of family-completed developmental screenings and/or sharing of information by childcare providers.
- Districts should consider how to leverage existing resources and expand existing channels for communicating with various stakeholders
- Districts should also look to innovative approaches and/or new funding and supports available during this public health emergency.
- Ensure the school and childcare staff have resources to address trauma, challenging behaviors, online-distance learning and other tools to foster positive transitions.

Establishing a Timeline

- Rethinking how the transition process is supported during this time requires planning and efficiency.
- Create a clear timeline and sequence for activities to support children and families over the summer and into the beginning of the school year
- Consider what adjustments might be necessary given changing circumstances.

Guiding Principles

The same guiding principles set forth in the document [Transitioning to Kindergarten: the Why, What and How of this Important Milestone for Connecticut Students](#) should be applied under the current circumstances.

- Collaborative, responsive, and trusting relationships with families.
- Ongoing communication with all stakeholders- including families, program staff, and others.
- Respect for diverse linguistic/cultural backgrounds and experiences, strengths, and needs of children and families.
- Positive relationships between adults and children as foundations for children’s learning and development.
- Competent, knowledgeable staff to implement transition practices.

For each of the guiding principles, several strategies and considerations are listed. While there is still uncertainty around exactly what school will look like in fall of 2020, the suggestions and resources included in this guidance are framed around three possible scenarios under consideration: a return to school, continued distance learning, and a hybrid or combined model.

Guiding Principle 1: Collaborative, responsive, and trusting relationships with families

Across all Potential Models	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Involve families and community members in planning• Plan should show sensitivity toward individual family context and needs (e.g., other children, working schedule-out of the home or in home)• Consider new and innovative ways of connecting with families such as Parent Teacher Home Visiting (PTHV).
Return to School	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Consider families' concerns about health and safety.• Consider the increased challenges families will face with the transition to a school routine under the current circumstances (e.g., getting school clothes, adjusting family routines after a long period of being at home).• Consider practices related to school supplies and materials in light of safety and increased family economic challenges.• Be aware of challenges families may continue to face due to health or loss of resources (e.g., income, access to technology) that may impact their ability to participate in school-based events; explore non-traditional forms of family engagement
Continued Distance Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ask for family input about how they are able to support learning at home• Consider families' needs and priorities when planning the role they will play in distance learning• Work with families to determine their educational priorities

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider developmentally appropriate distance learning for young children • Incorporate strategies that encourage active engagement and physical activity and limit screen time
Hybrid	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider families’ needs for child care during the planning process • Work with individual families to support them in a transition to a new model of schooling • Provide a forum for families to express their needs and challenges.

Guiding Principle 2: Ongoing communication with all stakeholders- including families, program staff, and others

Across all Potential Models	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gather input from all sectors when planning • Provide clear, consistent messages about kindergarten eligibility and entry and the school's responsibility for meeting all children's needs (retention should only be considered when unique, extenuating circumstances exist) • Employ a continuum of strategies for both disseminating information and for hearing from families. • Ensure mechanisms for communicating with families who speak languages other than English • Conduct a landscape analysis of community-based childcare and school-age programs • Collaborate around safely meeting educational and child care needs (e.g., keep children from the same classroom together for after school care, collaborate with community-based providers for onsite after school care) • Partner with families to understand their child’s unique experiences during COVID-19
Return to School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide a forum for families to share ideas, concerns, and fears about health and safety • Communicate with families about transportation needs and consider prioritizing transportation for families who are unable to transport their children to school • Provide clear, consistent, and frequent messages about health and safety measures and expectations
Continued Distance Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide reliable and confidential mechanisms for teachers and families to communicate.
Hybrid	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaborate regarding how the hybrid model will work • Provide clear communication about the various roles and responsibilities associated with the model

Guiding Principle 3: Respect for diverse linguistic/cultural backgrounds and experiences, strengths, and needs of children and families

<p>Across all Potential Models</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review home language surveys to identify additional information needed about home language practices and determine ways to gather this information • Gather information from families about home language and cultural practices across home and community settings • Review all plans and contingency plans to ensure practices are culturally and linguistically responsive (e.g., consider interpreters, translations, and families’ evolving work schedules and child care arrangements) • Implement practices to support multilingual learners more broadly and consistently if children were learning English in preschool and this language learning was disrupted • Ask families for key words or phrases in their home language(s) that can help children feel safe and welcomed in in-person or virtual classroom environments and that can support children as they learn routines • Build upon the cultural and linguistic assets of the family (e.g. multiple languages spoken in the home)
<p>Return to School</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider how to support social and emotional development for children by creating school and classroom environments that invite, welcome and support the linguistic and cultural diversity represented in the school community • Observe to identify multilingual learners’ language practices in the classroom to determine where support is needed for home and English language development
<p>Continued Distance Learning</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Challenge assumptions about families’ access to technology and resources to support learning at home; gather information from families to help determine how to best support them during distance learning • Consider how family language practices can be leveraged to support children’s learning; compile multilingual resources that can be shared with families • Consider children’s language profiles when planning distance learning opportunities (e.g., ensure students and families have materials they can access and that students can utilize existing language skills to demonstrate understanding and) • Consider language and culture when selecting materials and resources and when planning transition activities
<p>Hybrid</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider students’ language profiles when planning learning opportunities for home and school

Guiding Principle 4: Positive relationships between adults and children as foundations for children’s learning and development

<p>Across all Potential Models</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prioritize children’s wellbeing (e.g., focus on health, safety, and emotional needs over curriculum scope and sequence). • Plan ways for children to get to know new teachers prior to start of school year (e.g., virtual school tours, home visits)
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on establishing a community, including teaching strategies for caring for and respecting each other and understanding and acknowledging feelings. This will be more critical than ever given the significant disruptions that children, families and school staff have experienced. • Take time to teach children about expectations and routines and provide visual cues and opportunities to practice these new skills • Remember that caring and trusting relationships are vital for children to feel safe and to learn. Take time to establish those relationships with each child. • Use brain-based practices to increase children’s learning. Child-choice, appropriate level of risk, curiosity and hands-on activities increase engagement.
Return to School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider looping when possible in order to allow children to remain with the same teacher/class they were with in March 2020 • Consider grouping children with familiar peers to support social and emotional development
Continued Distance Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider coaching models to partner with families in supporting learning and development • Use creative ways to build and maintain relationships with and among children (e.g., wave parades, virtual celebrations, collaborative projects)
Hybrid	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider coaching models to partner with families in supporting learning and development

Guiding Principle 5: Competent, knowledgeable staff to implement transition practices.

Across all Potential Models	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide professional learning opportunities related to social and emotional development, trauma-informed practices, and/or Multi-Tiered Systems of Support • Develop staff knowledge of community-based resources that are available to meet families’ needs and how to make referrals to the programs • Provide job specific support and learning opportunities for teachers, counselors/social workers • Ensure staff have opportunities to collaborate with EL specialists to ensure multilingual learners are provided equitable learning opportunities • Support teachers to create and implement individualized learning plans for all students • Provide shared professional learning opportunities with community-based providers (health/safely, SEL/Trauma) • Identify critical grade level content and build teacher capacity to implement a tiered approach with scaffolded instruction and targeted interventions to ensure that all students access this content
Return to School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider itinerant services for special services to be provided in community -based childcare settings (special education teachers and related services providers "push-in") and provide appropriate professional learning to support this practice

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide guidance and learning opportunities on trauma-informed practice and/or social-emotional learning for ALL staff including custodial, transportation and clerical trained • Provide clear guidance and training to ALL staff (including transportation, specials teachers, etc.) regarding health and safety practices across grades and developmental levels
Continued Distance Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide professional learning opportunities on effective coaching practices • Provide a platform for exploring and sharing innovative uses for technology (e.g. student collaboration, project-based learning). • Prioritize professional learning opportunities and resources for staff around the digital divide that may impact multilingual learners' ability to engage in distance learning • Provide professional learning opportunities related to developmentally appropriate distance learning techniques for kindergarten • Provide professional learning opportunities and resources related to distance learning for English Learners.
Hybrid	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide resources and opportunities for collaboration around prioritizing content across classroom time and distance learning

Conclusion

Collaboration and communication will be crucial throughout the process of planning for transition to kindergarten in fall 2020. A priority that should be addressed with urgency is to communicate quickly and clearly with teachers and families about the importance of this transition and the planning the district is doing related to meeting the needs of all entering kindergarteners. This communication should clearly advise against retaining children in preschool and kindergarten unless there are very unique circumstances that require careful consideration. Retention should only be considered in circumstances where a child has missed instruction over the course of the entire instructional year and not as a result of missed instruction during the Covid-19 health emergency.

Districts should consider how they can leverage existing resources as well as emergency funding (i.e., the CARES Act) to support children and families through the summer and into the fall. The CSDE and OEC will continue to share resources and support districts and communities in this important work. We encourage LEAs to partner with community-based programs and agencies to ensure that all children can experience a smooth transition to kindergarten.

If you have questions or require additional information please contact Andrea Brinnel from CSDE at andrea.brinnel@ct.gov or Michelle Levy from OEC at michelle.levy@ct.gov.