

## Transition to Kindergarten

# Supporting Migrant and Seasonal Head Start Children and Their Families

Migrant and Seasonal Head Start (MSHS) programs provide comprehensive services to children and families. As a part of this work, they collaborate and coordinate with others to support effective transitions (National Migrant & Seasonal Head Start Association 2018). While all children and families in Head Start programs experience transitions such as enrolling in the program, daily arrivals and departures from group care settings, classroom to classroom, and exiting the program, MSHS children and families experience some unique transitions. For example, families may move one or more times a year, either within a state or between states in search of agricultural work. This means families change residences and their children may attend more than one early childhood program during the year. Head Start Program Performance Standard 45 CFR **§1307.72(c)** requires MSHS programs to “support effective transitions to other migrant or seasonal Head Start or, if appropriate, Early Head Start or Head Start programs for families and children moving out of the community in which they are currently served.”

The transition to kindergarten is another big change that children and families experience. For MSHS, many challenges and opportunities that kindergarten transitions bring are similar to other Head Start programs. However, some are different because of the already transitional nature of MSHS programs and the children and families they serve. This resource focuses specifically on the unique needs of children of migrant and seasonal farm workers and their families during the transition to kindergarten.



Migrant Head Start programs serve *“families who are engaged in agricultural labor and who have changed their residence from one geographic location to another in the preceding 2-year period.”*

Seasonal Head Start Programs serve *“families who are engaged primarily in seasonal agricultural labor and who have not changed their residence to another geographic location in the preceding 2-year period.”*

### **HSPPS 1305.2 Terms**

Migrant and seasonal families face challenges and experience stress whether they move or stay in place. For example, according to Gatewood (2019, 2), many parents *“report experiencing stressors that include...worrying about their children’s education...”* Given that the majority of children and families involved in MSHS programs identify as Hispanic or Latino and speak Spanish as their home language (Walker 2019), the transition to kindergarten can create additional complications and stress. Families may face challenges communicating with staff or completing forms that are not available in their home language, or navigating unfamiliar kindergarten enrollment processes. For families who move, it may mean their child starts kindergarten in one school in the fall and moves to a different school in the winter or spring.

Because MSHS programs accommodate the needs of parents working in agriculture and their employers, program operations do not follow a typical 9-month schedule (e.g., September-June or August-May) (National Migrant & Seasonal Head Start Association 2018). Some programs are open for as few as 6 weeks; others may be open for 7-8 months, or even longer. Some programs are only open during the summer months. In other words, MSHS program operations are timed to coincide with planting and harvesting seasons. Therefore, transition to kindergarten activities may or may not align with times when public schools are open or when kindergarten registration events take place. Since families often work from early morning to late afternoon, especially during peak seasons (National Migrant & Seasonal Head Start Association 2018), they are often not available for transition activities that occur during the day.

However, Gatewood (2019, 2) also notes that *“nearly all parents report sources of strength in their lives such as a dedication to their children’s futures...and the belief that working hard will lead to a better life.”* Within the context of kindergarten transitions, MSHS programs work to address concerns that families may have about their children’s education and future. They also build on families’ sources of strength and resilience as staff support children and families in navigating the kindergarten transition milestone successfully.

## **The Transition to Kindergarten Data Story**

MSHS programs actively engage in a variety of kindergarten transition practices. Program leaders who participated in the Migrant and Seasonal Head Start Study 2017 (Caswell, et. al. 2019, Table D.24, 245-246) report the following common practices related to children and families:

- Invite families to attend informational meetings or discussions with MSHS or school staff about kindergarten transition – 87.7%
- Provide families with information on the school their child will attend – 85.2%
- Send letters home with children or mail letters to families, in their home language(s), providing information on transition – 77.7%
- Schedule family and/or child visit(s) to the school the child will attend – 69.1%
- Teach families skills they can use to advocate effectively for their school-age children – 66.9%

- Accompany families and/or children to visit the school – 53.2%
- Accompany children to school and co-teach lessons with kindergarten teacher – 23.3%

In addition, program leaders report the following common practices related to ways their program partners with elementary schools:

- Share information about expectations of students and families – 64.5%
- Provide children’s MSHS program records to the school – 63.9%
- Share curriculum information – 51.5%
- Share information about rules and program policies – 47.4%
- Participate in state-funded kindergarten transition programs – 42.7%
- Conduct joint professional development for MSHS program and elementary school education staff – 24.2%

This study provides useful information from a nation-wide representative sample of program leaders about common kindergarten transition practices and the extent to which MSHS programs use them. However, it is also useful to know about promising kindergarten transition practices that exemplify and build on the practices in the report.

## Promising Practices

This section presents promising practices that three MSHS grantees use to help children and families navigate transitions to kindergarten.

- ***E Center*** (grantee in California that serves MSHS children in centers and family child care homes in nine counties)
- ***East Coast Migrant Head Start Project*** (ECMHSP; large, multi-state grantee with direct services in Alabama, Florida, South Carolina, North Carolina, and Virginia, one delegate agency in North Carolina, and two delegate agencies in Pennsylvania)
- ***Redlands Christian Migrant Association*** (RCMA; large state-wide grantee in Florida)

The practices are organized by the following categories:

- Child Level
- Family Level
- Program and Center Level
- School District Level
- Children and Families Leaving the Area

Consider how these practices may apply to the families you support.

### Child Level

- Take children on at least one field trip to the local library. Work with the librarian to have children get a library card and participate in a story-telling activity.
- Incorporate developmentally appropriate transition activities in the daily schedule. For example:
  - Create a kindergarten prop box - a container that holds a variety of objects children can use to explore, play, and learn about a specific topic. A kindergarten prop box might include objects such as small trays for carrying

play food, small, empty milk cartons, large pencils, small boxes of crayons, lined paper like what is used in a kindergarten classroom, small clipboards or mini chalkboards, books about kindergarten in English and Spanish, bus passes with numbers or letters so children know which bus to go on, toy school buses, laminated photos of schools children will be attending.

- Create a mural of a school or school bus.
  - Practice cafeteria - style dining (e.g., using trays to hold and carry food) and include milk cartons so children can practice opening them.
  - Practice raising hands and waiting to be called.
  - Practice sharpening a pencil.
  - Chart the various schools children may be attending as a math activity with children.
- Collect children's work samples and create a school readiness or transition portfolio for each child: A school readiness or transition portfolio might contain writing samples, artwork samples, photos of the child engaged in activities that show a range of skills and interests such as block building, using puzzles or other manipulatives, using scissors, pretend play, looking at books, climbing structures, etc. It may also include child assessment information if the MSHS program, parents, and receiving school all agree to share it this way.

## Family Level

- Use family/teacher conferences and home visits to discuss what families can do help their child get ready for kindergarten. Provide ongoing (e.g., monthly) transition-related training to families in their preferred language during family meetings and other program events.
- Share family activity calendars that offer suggestions for preparing themselves and their children for transitioning to kindergarten. The **Activity Calendar for Families** on ECLKC could serve as a model and source of ideas for what parents can do for themselves and their children.
- Encourage families who have been through the transition to kindergarten process to talk with families who are new to the process. They might share their experiences, their perspectives about how public schools are similar to and different from Head Start, and advice to help families prepare themselves and their child.
- Help families gather kindergarten enrollment materials and resources, including materials specifically for children with an IEP. Offer to accompany families when they go to register their children for kindergarten.
- Ensure families have information about what the school district needs from them (e.g., child's health information, immunizations, birth certificate) and provides for children (e.g., transportation, teachers who speak children's home language(s), homelessness services, after school services, free/reduced lunch, special education services for children with disabilities). Address concerns parents have about their safety and security related to immigration status.
- Think about how you will support families to become familiar with and navigate the K-12 school system. Help them learn more about it so they can support their children through elementary and middle school, graduate high school, and on to college. In one grantee, PIR data indicated 75% of families have less than a high school diploma. Having an understanding of the system can help families engage in their children's development and learning to an even greater extent while they are with the MSHS program and beyond.

## Program and Center Level

- Localize transitions to kindergarten. In one multi-state grantee, each center follows an individual transition plan for all kindergarten-eligible children. Both direct service and delegate agency programs use this plan. Staff adjust the plans according to their calendar and program operation period. The transition plan outlines the steps to take



to accomplish each goal, the positions responsible for carrying out each step, timelines for completion (staff must determine timelines not already specified in the plan), and date achieved.

- During meetings with local school personnel:
  - Share information about best practices in supporting dual language learners and migrant farmworker families.
  - Review the alignment of the Head Start ELOF, state early learning standards, and LEA expectations for school readiness to determine if other school expectations should be added.
  - Share the MSHS program's school readiness goals.
- Meet with public school representatives to reach a consensus on what records or information should be transferred and how to transfer it.
- Collaborate with schools to support the registration process. For example:
  - Participate in kindergarten registration activities, such as helping families complete registration forms, providing relevant documents the program has already collected to facilitate transitions, and providing translation for families.
- Schedule shared professional development opportunities for Head Start program and elementary school educators.
- Start kindergarten transition work at the beginning of program operations. One grantee opens programs in late spring (staggered openings from April-June) and closes mid-to-late fall (staggered closings from October-November), depending on the crop season. For children who will be transitioning to kindergarten, transition activities start the fall before. Head Start educators visit local kindergarten classrooms at the start of each school year. Head Start staff help families fill out required applications and forms before their children leave the program in October or November so they are ready to submit the forms when they return in the spring.
- Have year-round disabilities services staff attend IEP meetings that occur when the MSHS programs are closed and keep in touch with families about goals and plans made at the meetings. Whenever possible, support families to be in attendance at all IEP meetings.
- Meet with local farmworker coalitions to raise awareness about transitions to kindergarten and facilitating family participation in daytime registration events.
- Develop relationships with migrant advocates in school districts funded through Migrant Education. Migrant advocates interact with families and schools and provide ongoing support to families.
- Identify an education staff leader that monitors daily lesson plans and helps educators develop individualized activities based on ongoing observation and child assessment data. In one grantee, this is the Early Childhood Specialist (ECS), a position which requires a degree in early childhood education and experience training and supporting staff and analyzing child data. The ECS monitors child outcomes and examines kindergarten readiness expectations to identify school readiness needs, develop customized activities for families to do with their children, and ease the transition process. The ECS collaborates with educators when developing strategies and ideas that provide individualized support to children and families.
- Analyze child outcome data at the program level to identify trends and determine if children are meeting or exceeding expectations for children entering kindergarten.

## School District Level

- Collaborate with Migrant Education in school districts where Migrant Education is available. Grantee collaboration with Migrant Education in one state led to staff meetings with the Principal's Association at the state level to discuss MSHS collaboration with public schools.
- One grantee described staggered enrollments for kindergarten that start in the fall. Each family receives an

assigned date for their child to visit (1-2 weeks before school starts). Children attend in small groups and begin to “learn how to be a kindergartener.” This includes:

- Beginning to build a relationship with the teacher
- Learning classroom rules (e.g., using the bathroom, eating lunch in the cafeteria, going to recess, lining up, etc.)

The grantee provides an observation checklist created for families to use during the visit.

## Children and Families Leaving the Area

- Create continuity records or transition packets that include health, immunization, and child assessment information. Families take this information to the next location.
- Enlist migrant advocates to help families access information about school systems in their next location.

## More Support for Transitions to Kindergarten

Review resources on the Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center *Transition to Kindergarten* page. They are organized in six sections:

- Building Bridges: Educators Supporting Successful Transitions to Kindergarten
- Gather Information: What You Need to Know About the Transition to Kindergarten
- See It: Videos of Effective Practice in Action
- Apply It: Practical Guides and Planning Tools
- Host a Summit: Supporting Materials
- Related Webinars

While all the resources have information you may find useful, review *Collaborations, Connections, and Six Steps to Success* and *Transition to Kindergarten: Supporting Children Who Are Dual Language Learners* in particular for foundational information about kindergarten transition practices.

## Additional Resources

Dual Language Learners Program Assessment

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/culture-language/guide-dual-language-learners-program-assessment-dllpa/dual-language-learners-program-assessment-dllpa-users-guide>

U.S. Department of Education Office of English Language Acquisition

- Family Toolkit (online resource with answers to questions families may have about public schools and education services in the U.S.)

<https://ncela.ed.gov/family-toolkit>

- English Learner Toolkit (online resource updated to align with the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA); helps state and local education agencies fulfill ESSA obligations to children who are English learners)

<https://ncela.ed.gov/english-learner-toolkit>

## References

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