Linking Schools and Early Years

working towards…

‘Children arriving at school ready to engage’

Supported by:
The R.E. Ross Trust
Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD)
Foundation for Young Australians (FYA)

Why Linking Schools and Early Years?

• In Australia, a significant proportion of children, especially those from disadvantaged communities, arrive at school developmentally vulnerable (AEDI)
• How well children transition to school is important as it can impact on their long term development (CCCH, 2008)
• School readiness does not reside solely in the child, but reflects the environments in which children find themselves – their families, early childhood settings, schools, neighborhoods, and communities (Kagan & Rigby, 2003)

• We know that to support children and families, communities need to be responsive to the changing needs of families and the environment in which they live, including:
  • Changes in society
  • Changes in families
  • Service delivery difficulties
  • Worsening developmental outcomes
  • New knowledge about child development
  • New knowledge about early intervention

• In response to this the CCCH conducted research which explored refocusing community-based services for young children and their families
• This research looked at national and international models and found that:
  • Barriers faced by vulnerable children when starting school may be overcome by stronger linkages and partnerships between schools and early years services, families and the community
  • There was potential to bridge a gap between early years services and primary schools to ensure better planning for the individual needs of children entering school

• Based on the research, the Linking Schools and Early Years project aims to:
  • Develop and trial new ways of working
    • across early years services, schools and the community
    • with families to engage them in their child’s education
  • Build on
    • the significant resources already invested in children and their families through their participation in early years services
    • the expertise of early years professionals and primary school teachers
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<tr>
<th>Linking Schools and Early Years</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Why this project is important?</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Turning research into practice and building Australian based research evidence around effective strategies that:</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Strengthen partnerships between early years services, schools, families and the community to overcome barriers to children’s learning and development</td>
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<td>• Enable children and families to transition smoothly between early years services and schools</td>
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<td>• Enable schools and early years services to better engage with families</td>
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<td>• Enable schools to be better prepared for children of all abilities and backgrounds</td>
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<td><strong>There is strong alignment between the Project and:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• The DEECD Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development</td>
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<td>• The Australian Government’s agenda for early childhood education and child care</td>
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<td>• The project is supporting early years services, schools and communities to implement:</td>
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<td>• The DEECD Transition Learning and Development Statements</td>
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<td>• The Commonwealth and State government’s Early Learning and Frameworks, which has a strong emphasis on local community and family partnerships</td>
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<td>• Universal Access – 15 hours</td>
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<td><strong>The Project</strong></td>
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<td>• The project is currently in its third year and will run for a period of six years, until 2012</td>
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<td>• A project advisory group has been established to oversee the project</td>
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<td>• An independent evaluation is being conducted throughout the project, following an action research model to assess both processes and outcomes</td>
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<td><strong>Project Sites</strong></td>
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<td>• The project is operating in three sites, in Victoria:</td>
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<td>• Corio/Norlane in the City of Greater Geelong</td>
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<td>• Footscray in the City of Maribyrnong</td>
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<td>• Hastings in Mornington Peninsula Shire</td>
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<td>• In each site, the project is being implemented in selected schools and the their feeder early years services (kindergartens and childcares)</td>
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<td>PROJECT GOALS</td>
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<td>PRECONDITIONS</td>
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The project goals

1. Children and families make a smooth transition between early years services and schools
2. Early years services and schools actively connect with families
3. Schools are responsive to the individual learning needs of all children

How are we working towards our goals?

• Forming and sustaining partnerships
• Continually gathering local contextual information
• Developing and implementing locally relevant strategies and activities
• Ongoing internal and external evaluation
• Sharing practice-based learnings across the project sites and other communities across Australia

Forming Partnership groups
• Groups are comprised of school staff, early years service providers, local government and representatives of child and family agencies

The role of the local partnership groups
• Driving the project locally
• Developing and implementing locally relevant strategies and activities
Gathering local contextual information

What data would you use to inform community action planning?

Local contextual information

- Community demographics:
  - ABS community characteristics, AEDI data, SEIFA Index of disadvantage, Best Start data
- Community assets and service mapping:
  - Existing community strengths; local networks, infrastructure, other local initiatives identified
- Consultation data:
  - Consultations undertaken with families and key stakeholders to identify needs and priorities

Forming the Partnership group

- Identification of key stakeholders
- Establish the partnership group
- Maintain and strengthen the partnership group

Gathering contextual information

- On an ongoing basis:
  - Document community demographics
  - Map community assets and services
  - Consult with key stakeholders

Developing an action plan

- A document that provides a clear understanding of what you want to achieve and how you are going to achieve it
  - Outcomes/goals and objectives (WHAT)
  - Strategies and activities (HOW)
- The Projects action plans are created using an Outcomes-Based Model – starting with the end in mind

The partnership groups implement activities that are:

- Relevant to the community’s needs
- Linked to the project goals
- Based on research evidence
- Easily replicable
- Low-cost

Implementing and evaluating activities

Review action plan & evaluate partnership
**Forming the Partnership group**
- Identification of key stakeholders
- Establish the partnership group
- Maintain and strengthen the partnership group

**Gathering contextual information**
- On an ongoing basis:
  - Document community demographics
  - Map community assets and services
  - Consult with key stakeholders

**Developing the local action**
- Develop a shared understanding of the project goals
- Selection of local strategies and activities
- Create a workplan

**Implementing and evaluating activities**
- Review action plan & evaluate partnership

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**Linking Schools and Early Years**

### GOAL ONE

Children and families make a smooth transition between early years services and schools

**What we have**

- Develop and trial locally relevant strategies and activities

**What we want**

- A smooth transition

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**What is this goal about?**

Schools and early years services:
- Having a shared dialogue
- Working together to create a seamless transition for children and their families from early years services and school

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**What we have…**

- Ad-hoc orientation activities
- Many professionals working in isolation
- Few strong relationships between early years services and schools
- Families that aren’t aware of the importance of the transition to school
- Families that aren’t aware of the importance of the early years and early learning experiences
- Early years services and schools working within curriculum frameworks that don’t provide a seamless learning environment
What does this photo say to you?

Working towards a smooth transition…

Linking Schools and Early Years

What we want…
• Early years educators and prep teachers that:
  • Have a shared understanding of each other practices
  • Value the role they each play in children’s early learning and development
  • Have strong networks and relationships with each other

What we want…
• Structured transition programs that:
  • Start well before school entry and provide time and resources for children and families to engage in the school environment and opportunities
  • Are jointly planned by early years services, schools and families
  • Are part of school and early years educators position descriptions
  • Have dedicated funds and leaders

Activities so far…

Peer Swaps
• Kinder teachers, prep teachers and childcare staff spend a day in each others services
  • To gain a shared understanding of each others practices
  • To develop local relationships across the early years services and schools
Peer Swaps as a community transition program

- Prep teachers visit early years services in Term Four to get to know the children and see where they are coming from
- Early years services visit schools in Term One to see how the children have settled in

Peer Swaps as a professional orientation opportunity

- Any kinder teachers and prep teachers new to the community undertake a Peer Swap to start familiarizing themselves with other key community stakeholders

A coordinated approach to transition

- Schools and early years services jointly plan transition programs that provide opportunities:
  - For children and families to become familiar in the school environment before starting school
  - For children and families to develop a relationship with school teachers and staff before starting school
  - For schools to 'get to know' the children before starting school
  - For schools and early years services to develop relationships with each other

Community Transition Calendar

- Trialled transition activities for families whose children haven't attended a preschool program
  - Transition activities that were:
    - Culturally specific – translated materials, interpreters
    - Easily accessible – transport and childcare offered
    - Supportive – families engaged through their connections with community services

Over to you...

What can you do?

Thinking about 'children and families making a smooth transition between early years services and schools' what do you or could you do within your service/setting and community?
What can you do?
- Use the DEECD Transition Statements as an opportunity to develop a relationship with local schools
- Encourage parents to share information about their child and family with their child’s school
- Utilize the expertise of the early years/school counterparts and families to bring together different perspectives around the transition to school

GOAL TWO
Early years services and schools actively engage with families

What is this goal about?
Schools and early years services:
- Offering opportunities for families to feel comfortable in the schools and early years services
- Engage parents to demystify the learning environment that they provide and support parents to contribute to their child’s education
- Increasing parent presence in schools

What we have → Develop and trial locally relevant strategies and activities → What we want

Actively engaging families
What we have…
- Some families that aren’t comfortable in a school/early years environments
- In some cases, a limited variety of opportunities for families to be involved in their child’s education and in the school/early years service
- Some families that aren’t aware of the value of their involvement in their child’s education

What we want…
- Families that are comfortable and confident to be actively and positively involved in their children’s learning activities
  - At home
  - In EY setting
  - In school
- Positive personal connections with all families and children well before and after arrival at school
- ECC environments are supportive and inclusive of families
**What we want...**

- Early years services and schools that:
  - Develop partnerships with families
  - Communicate with families is a sensitive and appropriate manner (e.g. low literacy, CALD families)
  - Involve families in planning and supporting their children’s learning and development

**Activities so far...**

- Schools and early years services engage families in ‘obligation free’ activities for families on site
  - Parent spaces in schools and early years services
  - A story teller, mask making workshops
  - Regular informal family lunches
  - Family days

- Family Friendly Review
  - Schools and early years services developed and conducted a review of the family friendliness of their environments, communication with parents and involvement of parents
  - What are their current practices?
  - What areas could they improve?
  - Planning and implementing strategies to enhance their current practices

- School open as community hubs
  - Playgroups
  - Information classes (asked for by Indian families)
  - English language classes
  - Community services operating on school grounds
  - Extended school operation hours for community access

- Informally engaging families
  - All staff are out in the yard after school to be available to parents and to build informal relationships
  - Regular morning/afternoon teas for families
  - Playgroups on schools grounds offered to new and existing families
**What can you do?**

Thinking about ‘early years services and schools actively engaging families’ what do you or could you do within your service/setting and community?

**Over to you...**

**What is this goal about?**

Schools and early years services:
- Having a shared dialogue and shared information around children’s individual learning needs
- Schools being responsive to the diverse needs of incoming children

**What we have...**
- Rich information about children being collected in the early years but not shared
- Schools know limited information outside the information that they gather on enrolment about incoming children
- Schools do not always have the capacity or networks to respond to the individual learning needs of all children
- Early Years Service systems operating in silos
- Limited relationships between schools and their feeder early years services

**What we want**
- Develop and trial locally relevant strategies and activities

**GOAL THREE**

Schools are responsive to the individual learning needs of all children

**What can you do?**

- Review your current practices around engaging families and the ‘family friendliness’ of your current practices
- Ask families how they would like to be involved in your school or early years services (activities are most successful when based on parents needs and interests)
- Provide a variety of formal and informal opportunities for families to be involved in your schools and early years services
- Invite parents to share their skills and knowledge with the children and other families, e.g. music, art, gardening, etc

**What we have...**
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Linking Schools and Early Years

Responsive to individual needs

What we want…
- Early years services that have the tools and forums to share the information they collect with schools
- Schools know the learning and social needs of all incoming children before they commence school and have the capacity to build on their earlier learning experiences
- Schools are responsive in a structured and consistent manner to the individual learning and social needs of all incoming children
- Strong networks, relationships and partnerships between schools, early years services and communities

What we want…

Activities so far…

Responsive to individual needs

Information Sharing Tools
- To strengthen information sharing across schools and early years services.
- To start developing a common language across early years services and schools
- To use as a tool for starting the conversation with families about the importance of sharing information with schools and about their child’s early learning and development

Responsive to individual needs

Locally developed information sharing tools
- A partnership approach to the DEECD Transition Learning and development Statements
- Starting to develop consistent local language through local conversations before completing the Statements
- A personal handover
- Prep teachers describe how the information shared will feed into their existing planning/preparing for children
- An evaluation to improve local processes where needed

Responsive to individual needs

Speech and language in the early years
- Investigated how parents conceptualise, foster and incorporate children’s early language development into everyday life
- Understands how families view supports for early speech and language development, and how they engage with these
- Examines early years health & education professionals’ concepts and practices in regard to children’s language development, and how these relate to parental views and practice

Responsive to individual needs

Community Forums
- To develop relationships between schools, early years services and child and family community services
- Opportunities for joint professional development e.g. a workshop on how to plan for individual children
- An opportunity for sharing learnings from the project and professional experiences and practices
- Brings together a wide range of early years and community professional working with children aged 0-8 years
What can you do?

- Use the DEECD Transition Learning and Development Statements to start conversations with the local schools/early years services about what information would be useful to share/receive.
- Encourage parents to complete the family section of the Transition Statement and to take Portfolios, Learning Stories, Observations, etc., to school.
- Schools and early years service plan some alignment between kindergarten and prep programs.

What can you do?

- Visit the children in term one in their new environment and chat with the teachers about how they have settled in and are engaging.
- Joint professional development with early years services and schools.

What have we learned so far…?

- Bringing people together around a shared vision and goals is powerful.
- Partnerships take time to develop — but are worth the time it takes!
- It is important to create partnership structures that:
  - Are relevant and value adding for those involved.
  - Build local capacity.
  - Are flexible and responsive.
  - Value participants.
  - Are based on a shared vision.
  - Build on existing networks (where appropriate).

Where to from here?

- Continual reflection of partnerships is an opportunity to:
  - Identify missing stakeholders.
  - Celebrate achievements.
  - Ensure partnerships are being responsive to local needs.

  "As we have learned together, time and time again, it is the quality of our relationships; with students, parents and other professionals, that makes a difference and shines a light on our way forward. The project has been invaluable in developing these positive, supportive relationships."

  Project Prep Teacher, 2010.
• Continue to work with project sites to create sustainable local partnerships that support:
  • A smooth transition
  • Active engagement of families
  • Responsiveness to children’s individual learning needs
• Communicate project learnings to wider communities and government with:
  • Practice-based evidence (anecdotally through local actions)
  • Evidence-based practice (available from project evaluation in late 2010)

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