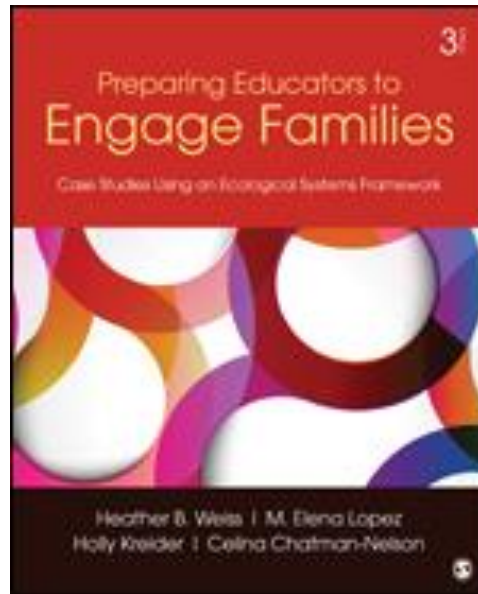


# FAMILY ENGAGEMENT TEACHING CASES 2013

HARVARD FAMILY RESEARCH PROJECT :: HARVARD GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION



## Bridging Worlds: Family Engagement in the Transition to Kindergarten *Margaret Caspe*

This teaching case includes a narrative, discussion questions, recommended reading, instructor notes and expert commentaries. Bridging Worlds and many other family engagement teaching cases are featured in the book [Preparing Educators to Engage Families: Case Studies Using an Ecological Systems Framework](#), 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, available for purchase from Sage Publications at: <http://www.sagepub.com/books/Book237463/>



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## Case Narrative

### Nicole, Maya's Mother

It is a balmy September afternoon during the third week of school in a large city, and Nicole is standing outside her daughter's kindergarten classroom. She waits nervously to talk with Maya's teacher about the difficult transition to kindergarten Maya has been experiencing. Before school, Maya cries and says that she doesn't want to go, and when she comes home, she refuses to talk about anything she did. Other than knowing that Maya's homework is sometimes beyond her ability and somewhat frustrating for her, Nicole doesn't understand why the transition to kindergarten has been so hard.

Maya had been in a Head Start program for 2 years before transitioning to kindergarten (first, a half-day, 3-year-old classroom, and then a full-day, 4-year-old program). She was a good preschool student, and Nicole had been actively involved in the program parent committee and policy council. She is proud that Maya knows many letters of the alphabet, can write her name, and has a lot of friends. She thinks that Maya is particularly good at drawing, and she is excited for Maya to begin to learn to read. Nicole and her husband are slightly concerned about Maya's language development and her ability to follow directions, but she did not qualify for special needs services after a formal evaluation was conducted at the beginning of her 4-year-old experience.

At the advice of Maya's former preschool teacher, whom Nicole consulted about the transition difficulties, Nicole requested a meeting with the kindergarten teacher. In preparation for the meeting, Nicole wrote down her own ideas about Maya's development and the ways that she wanted to be involved in her daughter's education. Nicole also had learned from the public librarian that some schools have children create "All about Me" books<sup>1</sup> and thought that this would be a helpful resource for Maya's kindergarten teacher to have. For this reason, she helped Maya author and illustrate a small book about herself to share with the kindergarten teacher. With bright-colored drawings by Maya, the booklet read:

My name is Maya Warren  
I live with my mommy, daddy, and sister  
My favorite color is green  
My favorite book is *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom*  
What I like best about me is that I am a good dancer  
Something that makes me sad is when I don't share with my sister

### **Ms. Teresa, Maya's Former Preschool Teacher**

"I was so surprised when Nicole called me up last week to talk about the trouble Maya was having in kindergarten because Maya was always so interested in class activities and eager to learn. I'm especially surprised that she's having trouble adjusting to kindergarten because we do so many transition activities for children and the families, and she seemed fine with those. As early as September, we start talking about getting ready for kindergarten. We begin by reminding families that there are many kindergarten options out there and that they need to apply early and start preparing for the transition early as well. In February, we have a parent workshop night when we talk about what kinds of changes both children and families alike should expect when children start kindergarten, including how kindergarten classrooms might look different from a preschool environment and how family engagement might be different in kindergarten than it is here in Head Start. We also talk about practical issues such as how to fill out the kindergarten enrollment forms. In May, we take a class trip to the nearby charter school, and children shadow kindergarteners for the day. Finally, over the summer, we send home materials that include suggested activities that families can enjoy with their children before kindergarten starts.

"What's difficult for me is that so many children attend so many different schools, that I never really have any contact with the kindergarten teachers. Although the majority of our children attend Davis Elementary, the nearby district school, I try to steer families into other choices because the school is not exactly high performing. Regardless of the school, in any case, more and more families are coming back and telling me that today's kindergarten classrooms remind them of what second- or third-grade rooms used to look like—and that it seems that there aren't any dramatic play areas where kids can just have fun, and there isn't any time for children to just 'be kids.'

"I've been teaching preschool now for 8 years and over the past 2 or 3 years, I've seen in both Head Start (see Table 1) and our State Universal Preschool program a real shift in their focus on child outcomes and school readiness. I've worked hard to adjust my teaching to meet these new challenges. All of my lessons are now aligned with state standards, and for the past 3 years, we've been using a great authentic observation assessment system that really helps me individualize lessons to meet children's needs. I'm able to share all of this information with parents during our parent-teacher conferences three times a year and can give parents a clear picture of what their children can do, how their children are doing in comparison with other children, and where their children need to be.

**TABLE 1.** The Grant Head Start Program

<b>Location</b>	Large Eastern city
<b>Grades served</b>	3- and 4-year-olds
<b>Enrollment</b>	<i>N</i> = 74
• Latino/Latina	75%
• African American	23%
• Caucasian (non-Latino/a)	2%
• Asian American	0%
<b>School staff (administrators, teachers, aides) ethnicity</b>	<i>N</i> = 18
• Latino/Latina	48%
• African American	20%
• Caucasian (non-Latino/a)	32%
• Asian American	0%
<b>Students at or below the federal poverty guidelines</b>	99%
<b>Graduating 4-year-olds rated “kindergarten ready” by the program assessment system</b>	83%
<b>Dual-language learners</b>	55%
<b>Classroom language instruction</b>	Instruction in both English and Spanish
<b>Additional supports</b>	Family engagement programs and leadership opportunities; extended-day care

“Nicole was always one of our more involved parents and always seemed to be so self-assured as a parent. She attended all of the events that we held and was always first to come to talk with me about how she could support Maya’s growth. I know that she and Maya read together every night, and on weekends, she and her family went to museums and other events across the city through a free program for low-income families. She was always eager to schedule family activities for Maya and seemed to be confident of Maya’s progress. I was therefore really caught off-guard to hear her sound so unsure of herself when she contacted me to ask how to handle the situation with Maya’s difficulties in kindergarten. It just doesn’t seem like we’re talking about the same family. I hate to think that the family’s very positive experiences with Head Start might be undermined in this short amount of time.”

### **Tanya Robinson, the Kindergarten Teacher**

“I’m happy that Maya’s mother is coming in to meet with me. I’m glad she requested that we have a conference. I always appreciate parents’ input, especially since, over the years, I’ve seen parents less and less involved in their children’s learning. The kindergarten transition is so important to children’s later learning development and overall adjustment to school, so family involvement needs to start right away. Children’s learning experiences at this crucial point help set the stage for their attitudes toward school as they get older and ultimately influence their future success. Families need to know that kindergarten has changed a lot over the years—that it isn’t what it used to be, and that a lot is required of their children.

“I’ve had some concerns about Maya. She’s been very quiet and doesn’t seem to follow directions. I can’t get a good handle on whether she knows the information we’ve been working on so far. I like to give these things some time. I see in her file that she was in a Head Start program, but I have no idea what kind of curriculum she was exposed to, what kind of standards, if any, they adhered to, and how she was assessed, if at all. I receive basic demographic information from the district about my incoming students, such as how old they are, where they live, and how many siblings they have, but I never get any information on how they are doing academically. For the past year, we’ve been using the Common Core Standards<sup>2</sup>; unfortunately, however, more and more, I’m seeing that children are not where they need to be to meet the foundational skills it requires.

“I know that a few days before school started, there was a ‘kindergarten day’ in our local community, hosted and staffed by a local nonprofit organization, where children and families could come together to learn about kindergarten (See Table 2). One of the important goals of the event was to generate excitement about the transition ahead of them. It seems that the main focus of the orientation was on how parents are partners in the educational process. Presenters showed them different activities that they could do with their children at home and in the community to support their children’s learning, with an emphasis on reading. I didn’t go because I was still on vacation, but I was able to get a hold of some of the flyers that were sent out to parents, and they seemed to be very helpful. For example, they urged parents to come visit kindergarten classrooms, make sure their children have regular bedtime routines, and talk with their children about what happens at school each and every day. I’ve saved some of these handouts and will be sure to give some to Maya’s mom. I wish, however, that parents had also been given information about the Common Core and the expectations we have for kindergarten preparedness.”

**TABLE 2.** Maya’s Elementary School (Davis Elementary)

<b>Location</b>	Large Eastern city
<b>Grades served</b>	K through 5
<b>Enrollment</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Latino/Latina</li><li>• African American</li><li>• Caucasian (non-Latino/a)</li><li>• Asian American</li></ul>	<i>N</i> = 778 88% 10% 1% 1%
<b>School staff (administrators, teachers, aides) ethnicity</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Latino/Latina</li><li>• African American</li><li>• Caucasian (non-Latino/a)</li></ul>	<i>N</i> = 56 38% 15% 57%
<b>Students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch</b>	95%
<b>Students performing at least one year below grade level in reading</b>	79%
<b>Students performing at least one year below grade level in mathematics</b>	53%
<b>Limited or non-English proficient students</b>	47%
<b>Classroom language instruction</b>	Mostly monolingual instruction
<b>School-based services</b>	Afterschool programs; GED and ESL classes in the evenings

**Esther Lasher, the Head Start Educational Director**

“Part of my role as an educational director is to facilitate all of the connections that are crucial for children’s successful transitions to kindergarten. I attempt to make linkages between local district schools and kindergartens, and develop agreements and avenues for our programs to collaborate for the benefit of children. I work with our families to make sure they feel connected to our early childhood programs as well as quality elementary schools, and I hope to ensure that children feel a sense of belonging to the educational institution they end up attending. This spring, I instituted our first Head Start ‘kindergarten fair,’ where representatives from different kindergartens nearby came and talked about the curriculum they use. A group of parents came and asked principals some good questions.

“After the fair, I sat with the principals, and we talked about different ways the kindergartens could continue to reach out to families and children over the spring and summer before kindergarten starts. I suggested we start to develop a community-wide transition plan based on information I pulled from the Internet (See Table 3). It would be great if we could get families,

the district, and community groups more involved in this process. The transition plan could contain simple activities that the elementary schools and the early childhood community could organize to help smooth the transition process. For example, teachers could send information about the kindergarten program home to parents before the year starts, and if possible, kindergarten teachers could send letters to families introducing themselves. The transition plan could also address some of the broader policies that need to be put in place for transitions to be more effective. For instance, it would be great to find a way for Head Start and kindergarten teachers to share outcomes reports and written records. I also talked to the principals a lot about the home visiting we do here in Head Start at the beginning and end of the year and how these home visits strengthen the bonds and trust between parents and teachers. This might also be an effective practice for kindergarten teachers to adopt.

**TABLE 3.** A Portion of the Draft Transition Planning Document: Transition Activity Ideas by Connection\*

Type of Connection	Transition Activity
Child—Early Childhood Program/Kindergarten	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish bonds between the preschool child and the kindergarten teacher.</li> <li>• Encourage preschool teachers to stay in contact with their former students and families.</li> <li>• Hold spring kindergarten visits for preschool children.</li> </ul>
Family—Early Childhood Program/Kindergarten	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expect kindergarten teachers to communicate with families before the school year begins.</li> <li>• Have teachers contact families during the first few days of preschool and kindergarten.</li> <li>• Hold orientations and workshops for families during preschool, over the summer, and through kindergarten to inform them about kindergarten expectations.</li> <li>• Encourage family participation in home learning activities.</li> <li>• Support home visits early in the kindergarten year.</li> </ul>
Early Childhood Program/Kindergarten	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Align curriculum across early childhood and kindergarten programs.</li> <li>• Coordinate standards across early childhood and elementary school programs.</li> <li>• Develop procedures to share assessment information about individual children.</li> <li>• Create joint professional development opportunities among early childhood, kindergarten, and elementary school teachers.</li> </ul>
Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Add other community members to the transition team (e.g., representatives from libraries, nonprofit organizations, other families).</li> </ul>

\*Note: This document is based on materials developed by the National Center on Quality Teaching and Learning. For a more complete transition plan and more information, visit: <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/teaching/center/transition/plan.html>

“Unfortunately, however, sometimes kindergarten classroom lists aren’t put together until the last minute, and teachers aren’t aware of their class composition until a few days before school starts. Principals also mentioned difficulties in scheduling events over the summer while teachers are on break. It would be helpful if the district took steps to bring us together at a time convenient for everyone, but they’ve been largely silent on the issue.

“Something that came out of the meeting that I’m particularly excited about is the possibility of starting up some joint professional development workshops for the kindergarten and Head Start teachers. I think that would be a great way for us to make sure that our curriculum, standards, and assessments are aligned and for kindergarten teachers to see that we are implementing the Common Core in our early childhood programs. Even more important, it would give our preschool teachers a great way to talk to families about what to expect in kindergarten.”

### **Nicole Prepares to Meet With Tanya Robinson**

Nicole takes a deep breath as she knocks on Tanya Robinson’s door. “I really want Maya to do well in kindergarten,” she sighs. “It’s such an important year and will make such a difference in how she will think about school for a long time to come. It’s worrisome to see my daughter like this. I wish this had just been an easier transition. I thought I’d done everything right and had tried to make sure we all knew what to expect when Maya went into kindergarten, but I’m afraid I feel at a loss right now. It seems like she’s gone from one world to a completely new one, and I just don’t feel prepared to help her, after all.”



## Discussion Questions

### Major Issues

The purpose of this case is for educators to consider the transition to kindergarten and ways of engaging families in the transition process. The case is designed to help educators better understand the following:

- What the transition to kindergarten means
- What different connections shape the transition to kindergarten (such as families' connections to early childhood programs and kindergartens, and early childhood programs' connections to elementary schools), and what the larger educational context is within which transitions occur (for example, standards, curriculum, and assessment)  
How early childhood programs, elementary schools, and families can work together to ensure smooth transitions for children and families

### Describing the Situation

- What are Maya's strengths? What are some of her possible challenges? Why is Nicole concerned about Maya? What concerns does Tanya have? What additional information would you like to know about Maya's abilities and behaviors in the past and currently?
- In what ways is Nicole engaged in her daughter's education in preschool and during the transition to kindergarten? What does Nicole want for her daughter?
- Describe the relationship between Nicole and Teresa and the relationship between Nicole and Tanya. How are they similar? How are they different?
- What role does Esther Lasher take in bridging the various relationships in the transition process?

### Exploring Contributing Factors

- What do we know about Maya's family and the ways that they interact? What questions might Tanya ask Nicole about Maya's family and friends to help her understand the difficulties that Maya is experiencing? How might members of Maya's family be helpful in providing additional support as she makes the transition to kindergarten?
- What assumptions does Tanya make about Nicole and Maya? About the standards of the Head Start program she attended? What effect might this have on Maya?

- How are children assessed in the early childhood program? How is this information shared with families?
- What types of information and data about individual children, classroom practices, and standards are shared between the early childhood and kindergarten classrooms? How are gaps in information sharing impacting Maya's transition?
- What are some of the existing transition activities that take place for both children and families at the Head Start program? At the elementary school? In the community?
- What are some of the barriers to positive transition practices?

### **Articulating Possible Next Steps**

- How might Nicole use Maya's writing to initiate a conversation with Tanya? How do you recommend she start the discussion?
- If you were Tanya, how might you respond to Nicole's concerns? What specific suggestions would you make to Nicole? What routines or practices might Tanya put in place in her classroom to better support Maya?
- What might the Grant Head Start program do to follow up on and support the situation?
- What policies, activities, and events might the community and larger district begin to put in place to ensure better family engagement in the transition to kindergarten?

### **Replaying the Case**

- How might Tanya have better supported Nicole and Maya in the transition to kindergarten? How might the situation be different if Tanya had approached Nicole earlier in the year or over the summer, or even during a home visit?
- How might kindergarten teachers, preschool teachers, community members, and families (including those of former kindergarten students) have come together to better support the "kindergarten day" that was held over the summer?
- What might the Grant Head Start Program and Davis Elementary do differently in terms of developing transition practices?
- Imagine Tanya and Teresa are sitting next to one another at a professional development workshop. What opportunities might their interactions have for children's learning and development and for family engagement in both early childhood programs and in kindergarten?
- How might the Head Start program better advocate for Maya and Nicole at present and in the future?

## Looking at the Bigger Picture

- What role does the family play in the transition to kindergarten? Why is family engagement so crucial during this sensitive and pivotal time?
- What types of communication and policies at the larger systems level are critical to a successful kindergarten transition?
- What relationships and policies impede or facilitate Nicole in supporting her daughter's transition?
- What are the roles and responsibilities of the district and the larger community in ensuring that children and families have healthy and positive transitions to elementary school?
- Reflect on an early childhood program or elementary school that you have worked in. What formal transition practices exist in these programs or in the wider community?
- Review the draft of the Transition Planning Document that Esther Lasher and the principals created (Table 3). What other transition activities might be included?
- How might parent leaders take a larger role in advocating positive transition practices?

## Recommended Reading

Kagan, S. L., & Tarrant, K. (2010). *Transitions for young children: Creating connections across early childhood systems*. Baltimore, MD: Brookes Publishing.

McIntyre, L. L. et al., (2007). Transition to kindergarten: Family experiences and involvement. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 35(1), 83–88.

Patton, C. L., & Wang, J. (2012). *Ready for success: Creating collaborative and thoughtful transitions into kindergarten*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Family Research Project.

Pianta, R. C., Cox, M. J., & Snow, K. L. (Eds.). (2007). *School readiness and the transition to kindergarten in the era of accountability*. Baltimore, MD: Brookes Publishing.

Rimm-Kaufman, S. E., & Pianta, R. C. (2000). An ecological perspective on the transition to kindergarten: A theoretical framework to guide empirical research. *The Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 21(5), 492–511.

Schulting, A., Malone, P., & Dodge, K. (2005). The effect of school-based kindergarten transition policies and practices on child academic outcomes. *Developmental Psychology*, 41(6), 860–871.

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## Instructor Notes

Instructor notes are in development. To request a draft of the instructor notes for this teaching case, send an email to FINE at [fine@gse.harvard.edu](mailto:fine@gse.harvard.edu)

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## Additional Family Engagement Teaching Cases

Bridging Worlds and many other family engagement teaching cases are featured in the book *Preparing Educators to Engage Families: Case Studies Using an Ecological Systems Framework*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, available for purchase from Sage Publications at: <http://www.sagepub.com/books/Book237463/>

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## Commentaries



### **Bridging Worlds Commentary by Jamilah Jor'dan**

*Jamilah R. Jor'dan, Assistant Professor, Chicago State University,  
Department of Early Childhood-Primary and Bilingual Education*

The transition to kindergarten is a major milestone in the lives of children and their families, and educators need to be mindful that this can be both an exciting and stressful time for them. Families are concerned about their child's well-being, the new expectations of the receiving school, and the need to develop relationships within their new school community. At the deepest level, families want to know if they and their child will be welcomed in their new setting.

This case study is about the Warren family and the challenges that they and their daughter, Maya, are facing as they transition from their Head Start program to kindergarten. Maya had been in a Head Start program for 2 years before transitioning to kindergarten. She was a good student, and her mother, Nicole, had been actively involved in the program's parent committee and policy council. However, the transition has been difficult for both, 5-year-old Maya and her mother. This case raises the question, what can educators and other stakeholders in similar situations do to ensure that children and their families experience a smooth transition to kindergarten?

Perhaps most importantly, transition support activities and the development of key relationships must start before the first day of school. As a former Executive Director of four Head Start programs serving diverse communities in Chicago, I ensured that the support for the transition to kindergarten start a year prior to the child's enrollment date and continue after the child was enrolled in school. The ongoing hard work to build and continue relationships with receiving schools in the communities was important. Efforts to strengthen these connections meant program staff and I attended events and meetings hosted by the schools and inviting school representatives to events, meetings, and other programs held at the Head Start program.

These activities provided all attendees an opportunity to discuss their concerns and perceptions about Head Start. In the current case, Tanya Robinson, the kindergarten teacher, affirms the value of establishing relationships with Head Start programs. However, at the same time she

acknowledges that she is not familiar with Maya's Head Start program's curriculum, standards, or assessments. In my experience, teachers who are not familiar with the program often raise the same kinds of questions and assumptions that she broaches related to Head Start. Strong coordination, collaboration, and ongoing communication among families, schools, and community partners give all stakeholders the opportunity to address questions and mitigate any biases that they might have, thereby bolstering support for the transition from Head Start to kindergarten for families.

Second, educators need to be aware that families want to be involved in the planning process for the transition to kindergarten. Families want information about what their child needs in order to be ready for kindergarten, what the school's expectations are, and what contributions they can make to their child's kindergarten experience. Families' interest in these and related concerns helps them forge important relationships with the kindergarten teacher and the rest of the school community. In this case about Maya, the Head Start program had developed transition support activities that involved families, but few of these focused on helping families learn how to be their children's advocates or how to be effective parent leaders throughout their child's school years. The Warren family was involved in Maya's Head Start program in a leadership capacity and wants to remain involved in similar ways as Maya continues through school.

Finally, Esther Lasher, the Head Start Educational Director, talked to the principals about home visiting. Transition home visits present a wonderful opportunity for teachers to establish relationships with families because these meetings are personal and private. The home, or "front porch" conversations that take place during these visits can provide valuable insight into a child's interests and needs as well as a family's hopes and dreams for their child. Quality home visits also give family members the opportunity to talk about their school experiences and the ways they would like to be engaged in their child's education. Importantly, these visits also allow families to ask questions about the school's expectations and other issues. By having these types of conversations, educators show that they care about the children in their classroom and that they have respect for the fact that families know their children best.

As one example, during one kindergarten home visit, our early childhood team along with kindergarten teachers met not only immediate family members but also other significant adults in the child's support network that we might not have otherwise had the chance to meet during the school year. During the visit, family members came by to "meet the teachers," and children who were present shared their pets and favorite toys with us. The child whose family we were visiting received a book as a welcome gift from the school. We photographed family members and gave them copies and, with their permission, posted some of the pictures in the

classroom. While Maya’s “All About Me” book was a nice idea to assist with continuity throughout the transition process, it would also have been helpful for Tanya to be able to learn about her family, favorite color, favorite book, and other information before Maya arrived in the classroom. Families often feel that the only time teachers want to meet with them is when something is wrong. Home visits provide educators with an opportunity to change that perception and allow them to develop a positive relationship with each family.

In summary, this case study outlines challenges and opportunities related to the transition to kindergarten. Strong connections among families, schools, and community partners; parent leadership in the transition planning process; intentional efforts to invite families into the classroom; and a school’s commitment to home visiting are all key elements that can be leveraged to ensure a smooth transition for children and families just like the Warrens.



**Bridging Worlds Commentary by Amy Dombro**

*Amy Dombro, Early Childhood Writer and Consultant and Former head of the Bank Street Infant and Family Center*

Many of us in the early childhood field are working to promote family engagement. You may be conducting research, developing resources, facilitating professional and parent development conversations in a program or at a national conference, or studying in preparation to become part of this important work. Regardless of your role, this teaching case, “Bridging Worlds: Family Engagement in the Transition to Kindergarten,” calls attention to the powerful impact that adults’ feelings, assumptions, and expectations have on a young child’s learning and development. In other words, the case makes visible the too-often invisible aspects of family engagement.

*Making the invisible, visible*

Nicole, Maya’s mother, demonstrates deep insight into her child, and she knows how to be Maya’s advocate by reaching out to Teresa, Maya’s former teacher, as well as to her new teacher, Tanya. Nicole’s preparation for her meeting with Tanya—writing down her own ideas and creating an “All About Me” book with Maya—shows that she has a clear understanding of what she needs to convey to Tanya. It also demonstrates that she has developed a thoughtful plan to work with Maya’s teachers to ensure her success.

Unfortunately, as Nicole strives to build a partnership with Tanya to ease Maya's transition to kindergarten, Nicole is facing a web of obstacles that no one else is aware of. Included in these obstacles are some of the assumptions, feelings and beliefs of the professionals who want the best for Maya and her family and work hard to help them. These beliefs include:

- Teresa's view that Davis Elementary is not "exactly high performing" and her attempt to steer families to other schools. This attitude likely played a part in her decision not to reach out to the nearby school that most children from the Head Start attend. Imagine in what ways Maya's transition to kindergarten would have been different if her old and new teachers had known one another as professionals who were each working hard to cope with the increased focus on child outcomes, school readiness and the Common Core Standards.
- Tanya's appreciation of parent "input" (vs. engagement), her acceptance that parents are likely to be less involved than parents were in years past, and her assumption that Maya, like other children from Head Start, most likely isn't where she needs to be academically. Imagine how Maya's transition might have been different if Tanya had reached out to Maya's mother after the first day or two—or, better yet—over the summer. The two could have talked about how they might partner to build on Maya's many strengths so that she could experience success as she started kindergarten. Envision the power of this conversation had it taken place during a home visit, in Nicole's and Maya's own familiar setting.
- Head Start Educational Director Esther Lasher's lack of obvious support for Teresa and other Grant Head Start teachers in reaching out to colleagues at the Davis Elementary School, where most Grant Head Start families send their schoolchildren. In numerous other ways, Esther had demonstrated a dedication to working hard to build community and district relationships to support children and their families. Imagine the impact that her efforts would have had if her focus had been on building strong connections on a program-to-program level.

Creating change is a complex process. Promoting family engagement around transitioning to kindergarten is a major change for many programs. This teaching case reminds us that positive change for young children has to take into account the feelings, attitudes, and assumptions of the adults who are important in their lives.





### **Bridging Worlds Commentary by Wanda Grant**

*Wanda Grant, Family, School and Community Outreach Coordinator,  
Mid-Atlantic Equity Consortium, Inc.*

The transition from prekindergarten to kindergarten is a critical time for youngsters. This transitional period can be the foundation for a child's perspective of whether or not school is a positive or negative experience, and can define his or her feelings of self-efficacy as a learner. This case study illustrates several situations that can occur during the transition from pre-K to kindergarten and the impact those issues can have on children, their families, teachers, and schools.

Four major problems are readily apparent in this case. First, the elementary school fails to effectively engage families in the transition process or build relationships and avenues of communication. Second, the pre-K Head Start program and the elementary school are disconnected. Third, there are differences in the level of academic press between the pre-K and kindergarten settings. The fourth issue is a result of the first three: student Maya's angst and reluctance to go to school. It is this final issue that I believe is most critical and most unfortunate.

In this case, several key practices come to mind that would firmly place Maya and her family back at the center of the transition process. Educators and families can adopt these transition practices to ensure children's lifelong love of learning and make school a fun and enjoyable place.

*Engage special-needs staff as liaisons during kindergarten transition.* Maya's kindergarten teacher, Tanya, had concerns about Maya's inability to follow directions and her reticence in class. At the same time, Maya's parents recognized that Maya had some delays in her language, although prior testing revealed that she did not qualify for special speech services. Were any special-needs staff, at either the Head Start program or the school, in contact with Nicole, Maya's mother, about the previous evaluation or the potential need for a new one? Special-needs service staff could advise Nicole about potential options that could identify or rule out any possibility of hearing loss or difficulties in comprehension and/or expressive and receptive vocabulary. Even if Maya were found not to be eligible for speech and language services, an evaluation would provide specific information that her family and teachers could use to help support Maya academically, both at home and at school.

*Find ways to augment children’s peer relationships.* Is it possible that Maya is feeling uncomfortable in her class because she has not yet made any friends? If she does not have any friends from her former school in her current class, she may be feeling lonely. Perhaps pairing her with a “buddy” might make her feel more comfortable. After school programs might also provide an interesting avenue to explore for Maya’s social-emotional growth. If there is no after school program at her new school, perhaps Maya can develop relationships with other kindergartners in a less structured and less academically rigorous setting. For example, she could join a ballet or hip-hop class, since we know from her “All About Me” book that she loves to dance. The children Maya meets there and the families that Nicole comes in contact with can become a strong support system for the entire Warren family.

*Encourage the teacher-parent-child relationship.* After Nicole and Tanya meet, it would be wonderful for the kindergarten teacher to carve out an opportunity for Maya to share her “All About Me” book with her. An effort like this would help Maya to know that her new teacher cares about her and is interested in knowing more about her. To further foster a three-sided relationship, the teacher might create a “home-school journal” for Maya. Each day the kindergarten teacher might write in the journal one thing that Maya did at school that Nicole can ask Maya about. That night, Maya and Nicole can write back to the teacher in the journal—creating a space for communication, and a way for Maya, Nicole, and Tanya to build a trusting relationship.

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<sup>1</sup> For more ideas like this, visit <http://readyfreddy.org/>

<sup>2</sup> The Common Core Standards were developed by The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center) to provide a consistent, clear understanding of what students are expected to learn, so that teachers and parents know what they need to do to help them. The standards are designed to be robust and relevant to the real world, reflecting the knowledge and skills that young people need for success in college and careers. Currently, 45 states have adopted the Common Core Standards.