

# The Road to Kindergarten



by Cathy Albro

**A**s more studies are conducted about the effects of high-quality early childhood education on later success, the need for a clear definition of “high-quality” is more critical than ever. But it’s hard to pin down what “high-quality” means when so many answers to the question contain yet more elusive terms. One of the terms that cause confusion is “continuity of practice.”

At HighScope, we believe fidelity to continuity of practice during the early childhood years is an important ingredient of a “high-quality” education — an education that allows for the development of the whole child and leads to greater success in the later grades and in life. To that end, we’re working toward developing an evidence-based continuum of practice for birth through third grade.

But what do we mean by “continuity of practice”? And why is it so important to “high-quality” early childhood education? A recent report from the Institute of Medicine described one of the essential features of child devel-



*The transition from preschool to kindergarten presents many challenges to early childhood educators and efforts to maintain continuity of practice.*

opment and early learning as “a continuous, dynamic interaction among experiences” (Institute of Medicine & National Research Council, 2015, p. 4). When this “interaction among experiences” nurtures and supports the optimal development of young children, we call this “high quality.” And whether it’s within one setting or between settings, when adults and children work together to establish and maintain a “dynamic system,” that’s when we see “continuity of practice” at work.

## From one transition to the next

Put yourself in a child’s shoes. Depending on the circumstances, you may move from home to a group or other setting and back home again, in

addition to scheduled activities or other forms of childcare. The differences between settings are often confusing to you and can interrupt the flow of your learning and your understanding of the world. Even more confusing might be differences between adults (two teachers or two parents) in the same setting.

As you transition from one age group or class to another within the same physical building, you and your family may likely feel lost unless some degree of continuity of practice is in place. Staff must start all over helping you understand new norms and procedures. You may even feel that you’re taking a step backward in the process. (That’s because you are.)

In addition, children eventually transition between programs and schools. This may be the point where the most discontinuity occurs, often between preschool and kindergarten. Preschool teachers want to provide programs using developmentally appropriate practices, and kindergarten teachers want children to be ready for a more academic and structured experience, as they or the

school leaders feel pressured to increase students' academic achievement. But as programs across the country are showing, academic demands and developmentally appropriate practice can coexist in kindergarten.

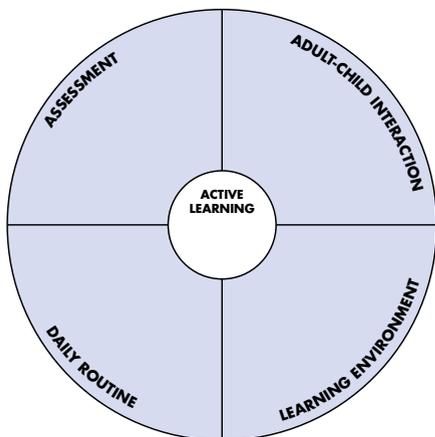
## Building a dynamic system

As many children and families can attest, discontinuity, both within and between programs, is frustrating — all the more so because, with routine maintenance and coordination between teach-

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ers and families, continuity of practice is a natural extension of a high-quality learning community. One of the hallmarks of the HighScope Curriculum is its systematic approach. A dynamic system that nurtures the development of the whole child encompasses many working components that operate in a multi-dimensional framework. Each component influences the quality and success of the other components in the system as they all work in concert. That, in essence, is continuity of practice.

*The principles that guide the HighScope Curriculum are illustrated in the Wheel of Learning.*



*In an active learning environment, children and adults share responsibility for learning.*

The continuity of these components in HighScope's dynamic system is illustrated by the Wheel of Learning. The hub around which the other components revolve is active learning. Its central position emphasizes HighScope's focus on the child's initiative and a comprehensive attention to the curriculum content. The other four quadrants of the wheel — learning environment, daily routine, adult-child interaction, and assessment — represent the responsibilities of supportive adults as they work with children in an active learning environment.

These elements exist in any HighScope program. But the components of the Wheel of Learning don't stand alone; instead, they describe the roles and responsibilities of the actors in the system. It's the teachers and children and families who work together (or don't) within the system that ensure its success (or failure). As in any system, coordination between the various components and regular maintenance is critical.

## Continuity between preschool and kindergarten

Perhaps the place where continuity of practice has been the greatest challenge is in the transition between preschool and kindergarten. Teachers, administrators, and parents often have different

philosophies related to pedagogy, and in the past, many local communities have claimed that there is insufficient time, interest, or leadership to achieve consensus. But those same communities are now realizing the importance of developing, at the very least, an alignment among early education programs.

In a recent study, The Early Childhood School Linkages Project found that, as opposed to the traditional "kindergarten readiness" demanded of children entering elementary school, effective programs had begun to view the transition as "an issue of child, family, and school readiness" in which "early childhood and elementary educators were active partners and participants in facilitating and supporting a smooth and effective transition" (Geisler, Horwitz, & Gernstein, 2013, p. 3). Children experience this smoother transition into elementary school when schools, early childhood education programs, and families work together to accomplish a shared purpose.

To promote this coordination among stakeholders, many organizations are advocating a continuum of practice in early learning that spans preschool through third grade, with a focus on the critical transition from preschool to elementary. The dynamic system that results is equally focused on preparing

the child for kindergarten *and* preparing kindergarten for the child.

### Preparing the child for kindergarten

To aid in preparing children for the transition to elementary school, Michelle Pogliano, director of the W. Scott Westerman Preschool and Family Center in Ann Arbor, Michigan, has developed what she calls “The Road to Kindergarten” for her 50+ children who go on to kindergarten each year. Currently, the program works with families of special needs children (with IEPs) only, but Ms. Pogliano aims to create a continuum between preschool and kindergarten that includes all of

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the children and families in her program, and all of the 21 kindergartens they will potentially attend.

The “Road to Kindergarten” program begins in January of the child’s prekindergarten year, with parent meetings and individual conferences offering specific guidance and information that has been shown to lead to more fluid transitions. The main goal is connecting families with their home schools by encouraging participation in kindergarten round-ups and sending home summer packets that include books, math manipulatives, scissors, alphabet activities, and a *My New School* book — a social story that introduces the child to his or her specific school. (A generic *My New School* book is provided if the family has not yet made a decision on the school they will attend.)

Ms. Pogliano follows up this coordination between families and schools by surveying parents after their children have transitioned to find out what changes they would recommend in “The Road to Kindergarten” program. The most common recommendation is repetition — parents want to hear essential information that will guide their decision making multiple times, not just once at the beginning of the process.

On the other end, what can the receiving schools do to welcome and prepare future kindergartners for the change that awaits them and their families? We asked some parents of children in the HighScope Demonstration Preschool about their experiences with transitioning into kindergarten. The kindergarten practices they touted as leading to smooth transitions included multiple opportunities for children and families to familiarize themselves with the elementary school setting, like picnics and other fun events before school begins, kindergarten orientation in the spring, and invitations to attend school events the year prior to kindergarten. These opportunities increase

future kindergartners’ sense of belonging and engagement in the school, allowing them a level of comfort before the school year begins.

One parent was most impressed with the personal approach her daughter’s receiving school took. In addition to hosting a kindergarten orientation the spring prior to kindergarten, and inviting the family to the school’s spring Learning Fair, “her teacher sent her a letter before the start of the school year, introducing herself and welcoming [the child] to kindergarten.”

### Preparing kindergarten for the child

Just as important as the child’s readiness is the preparation of the elementary school setting for the child.

Like many preschool principals and teachers, Ms. Pogliano is concerned that the kindergarten programs the children are transitioning to are incongruent with the developmentally appropriate approach at the preschool level. She has begun to conduct a roundtable discussion forum for preschool and kindergarten teachers, with the goal of creating a smoother transition for their children.

*A dynamic system focuses both on preparing the child for her new school and preparing the classroom environment to meet the needs of the child.*



One point of inquiry is “How can we make our schools ready for the children and their families, rather than expecting them to be ready for our school?”

Ensuring that a dynamic system like the HighScope Curriculum is in place is a solid foundation from which to start. Of course, every situation is differ-

ent, and there are many variables that contribute to discontinuity of practice. Here are some strategies you can use to enhance the continuity of practice in your early childhood education setting.

- First, ensure that the mission and vision for your program (family child care, center, or school) is comprehensive and that all stakeholders, includ-

ing families, understand and agree with it. This initial step should include a detailed written plan that lays out the responsibilities of teachers, children, and families. Providing

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*Provide multiple opportunities for children and families to familiarize themselves with new teachers and new surroundings.*

professional learning to staff and education for families will contribute to their knowledge of how the practices are to be implemented, as well as their understanding of the importance of continuity and of all stakeholders fulfilling their responsibilities.

- Second, any dynamic system must be routinely monitored to maintain full functionality. A standardized program quality assessment tool (such as HighScope's Program Quality Assessment [PQA]) documents areas of strength and needed growth and will allow you to work with individuals and teams to set goals and develop professional learning plans (including accountability markers) to meet those goals.
- Just as the system itself must continually be assessed, a consistent means of assessing student progress must be in place to maintain continuity of practice. One of the problems





Connecting families to their home schools and offering specific guidance and information on the adjustment to the kindergarten environment leads to smoother transition from preschool.

in establishing this continuity is the misalignment of indicators for student growth across preschool and kindergarten. HighScope's key developmen-

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tal indicators (KDIs) were developed with the 0–5 age range in mind, and are one way to bridge the divide between the observation-based assessment of preschool and the more academic focus of kindergarten.

■ Additionally, the professional learning community (PLC) structure has been shown to be effective in building continuity of practice, as it opens communication and supports teamwork and collective problem solving to overcome the lack of consistency from classroom to classroom, school to school, and year to year. PLCs support staff as they work together over an extended period of time in the interest of more effective and consistent instruction. (For more information on PLCs, please refer to *An Authentic Learning Community* on page 5.)

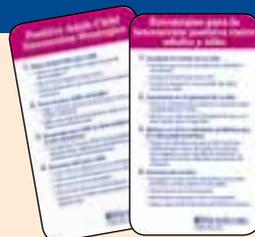
Studies have shown that when a system is securely in place that continues to improve and sustain program performance, successful continuation is more likely, even when key people leave (Duncan & Murnane, 2014). The HighScope Curriculum is comprised of all the components that make up a smooth-flowing system — but that alone won't guarantee continuity of practice in your program. The Curriculum serves as the foundation, but only through cooperation, communication, and coordination (and a lot of dedication) can you ensure that the children in your program receive the high-quality education that is so important for their lifelong development. ■

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