

**Fostering Early Learning Collaboration**  
**Dr. Thomas Schultz, Washington State Transition Summit 2011**

Dr. Gail Joseph: It is my great pleasure to turn this over to Dr. Tom Schultz, who comes to us kind of from – he has a couple affiliations. One is from the Council of Chief State School Officers in Washington, DC, focused on early learning. His work is focused on early learning there. And also, he is a partner in the National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement that's based out of the Brazelton Institute at Harvard.

Dr. Tom Schultz: Thanks a lot, Gail; great to be here. Just like all the other presenters and people who've welcomed you, I want to commend you for coming out on a Saturday to work, and in particular, ask for a show of hands of those of you who have left your own children at home to come here to talk about how to do better by other kids. [Laughter] So when you get back, thank your significant other or your spouse for taking care of those kids as you come back tired from – from a day – an extra day of work – a sixth day of work.

Well, what I'd like to do is – is kind of continue to frame the day for you in terms of how to think about the significance of work in terms of transitions from the early childhood world to the world of public education, particularly kindergarten. And if you're like me, your schedule is full of meetings. And – and I tend to have two kinds of experiences when – when I get to the next meeting: one is that I really know exactly why I'm here, and what I'm trying to accomplish if I've been part of the planning or I've had kind of like a significant opportunity to think ahead about it; but more than half the time, I – I get to a meeting and I spend the first – first third of it thinking, "Why am I here? I know I agreed to this a few weeks back, but why am I here?"

So for those of you who aren't sure why you're here, I want to suggest some reasons why I think this work is important. And if you came in and you know exactly what you want to accomplish and why you think the transition effort should go in a particular way, maybe to shake you up and suggest a different way or several different ways of thinking about it. And the way I'm going to go about this is to talk about transitions first, with three pictures; then to share a couple of stories about transitions that happen to be true; and then after that the fun will be over, and I'm going to share some data with you from a national perspective that I think is important to motivate work that you will hopefully do starting today and then over the next months and years in terms of this effort.

So, let's start with picture number one. Transitions is letting go. So here's a dad saying to his son, "You're five now, Lance. You've got to let go of four." [Laughter] And – and, you know, when you think about it, for a young child, often their early childhood teacher or child care provider is a person that they develop a tremendous personal bond with. I mean, they – they are so affectionate and they are so cute that we reach out and bond to them. And – and letting go of that relationship to go to some new foreign place called kindergarten, it's a challenge, right? It's a challenge. And so, that's part of what this is like for kids. Transitions is letting go.

Okay, here's another one: transitions as shock and awe. So here's a – a little bit exaggerated, but... So this – the clown pops out of – of the box and says, "Boo! Pretty soon you're going to start going to something called school. You'll have to go every day, even when you're not in the mood or when it's cold and dark and rainy and all you want to do is lie in bed and watch robots fight on TV. You're going to have to sit at a little desk and be completely quiet and not fidget while your teacher drones on and on about latitude and longitude, nouns, and mastery tests. And if you don't like it, too bad, because it's the law. You have to go! So enjoy your freedom, because this is the most you're going to have for a long, long, long, long time." [Laughter]

You know, this is like the – this is like the "Ferris Bueller" idea about school, right? And – and I think in our – you know, particularly in – in – in the people who work in early childhood, you know, I have to confess, you know, a lot of the times that's kind of the – the posture or the perspective on school. So, transitions as shock and awe.

But let's end up with a positive note. This is like, to me, transitions as fulfillment. And this is not exactly a – maybe exactly aimed at kindergarten, But, you know, this is a little girl saying to her brother, "Finally, the alphabet is paying off." [Laughter] And, you know, let's recognize, getting to kindergarten is a huge achievement that kids are excited about, that they're proud about; and what it involves is moving to a level of learning where things become much more meaningful. Kids are developing more powerful tools to explore the world, to solve problems, to learn about things that are, you know, beyond the fundamentals that – that are enriched. And I think we need to recognize that, while often the way we – we present the issue of transition as kind of like a problem that we have to overcome, for an overwhelming number of kids and their parents, getting to the point where you're entering kindergarten is – is an achievement; and it's one that kids are really proud of.

So having ended on a – on a very positive note, let me share a couple of transition stories. This is from a wonderful unpublished dissertation by a friend named Jim Squires, who was the early childhood specialist in the state of Vermont for years. And he did a wonderful dissertation where he talked to three or four dozen kids in different early childhood programs about the issue of transitions, and also explored some different kinds of experiences.

So, this is kind of a transition story that would be like transition as your worst nightmare. And he said this is a true story. It's the first day of school. A yellow bus pulls up to a stop, and by the side of the road eight children line up in descending order of height, parents clustering behind. One by one, the children step aboard, flash a smile to the driver, and take their seats – the first day of school. However, the smallest child at the end of the line and entering kindergarten is less willing. His parents first coax and then push him towards the door. Tears begin to run down his face, and he – what does he do? He screams that he doesn't want to go. His parents force him to the door. He grabs onto either side of the door and props his little leg against the stair and offers his last futile resistance as he is pushed aboard and the doors swing shut.

If we can't do a better job for a few kids, you know... I think, often, more kids than not now have – have been in early childhood programs so it's not, you know, tearing them from the bosom of their parents for the first time; but this could be traumatic if we – if we don't do preparation. But again, to swing back to positive, let's end with transitions as "this is going to be great."

So here's – here's another story about Sarah. Sarah lives at the end of a long dirt road. Lacking transportation, this only child had little opportunity to interact with other children or adults during her first five years. But several months before she was scheduled to attend kindergarten, a home visitor began to help Sarah and her parent prepare for the transition. During weekly visits, Sarah was introduced to learning materials and activities and told what she could expect to do and see in kindergarten. When the first day of school arrived, the home visitor picked up Sarah and her parent to take her to school. As Sarah looked into the classroom from the hallway, she whipped off her coat and told her mother before running inside, "This is going to be great!" Now, that's what we're after, right? That's what we're after.

So we've had our three pictures and our two stories, and as I said, now the fun is over. Now we're going to talk about data. So, I'm going to share a variety of information that I've gathered from lots of different national studies, starting with some information about where we are in terms of our practices with young children in early childhood programs and in the early years of public education, then sharing some data on kids.

So this is a study that was done by a woman named Sharon Ramey, who's a wonderful researcher at the University of North Carolina. She's running a program called First School, which tries to work with pre-K – pre-K programs and kindergarten and first/second grade programs and work on transition issues. And one of the simple things that she does is to look at what is the – how do teachers spend their time and how do kids spend their time in pre-K environments versus how they spend it in kindergarten. And you may not be able to read all of this from your seats, but I'll just highlight some of the differences in terms of the experience of youngsters in their pre-K years and what happens in kindergarten.

So if you look at the black – the black triangle, it shows you that in a typical pre-K day kids spend 136 minutes in what's called free choice time, or center time. So, they have options in terms of what they want to do and they can explore a variety of different kinds of activities. When they get to kindergarten in this – in this community, it goes down to 16 minutes. So instead of more than two hours, kids have about a quarter of an hour of free choice time.

In contrast, in terms of whole group time, which is the purple diagram, a little over an hour in this pre-K classroom in the community was spent in full group time; whereas in kindergarten, it's 128 minutes – or more than two hours. So, a big change in terms of the expectations for kids to be able to sit quietly, to engage with a whole group, and not be able to move around or have options. And then finally, outdoor time, which is the tan diagram. In this pre-K program, kids had a half-hour outdoors every day; in kindergarten, eight minutes; I don't know what that represents. It's not recess, but not very much time.

So, big changes in terms of what kids are used to in terms of a blend of activity between one year and the next when they've had a solid experience in pre-K and figured out how to function in that environment and then are moving into kindergarten and facing very different kinds of routines. So while this slide highlights how different things are between pre-K and K – and this would be something that you could do as part of your warm-up work around transitions – just kind of look at your schedules in terms of how your programs compare.

Another thing to focus on is, well, how are we doing based on research on what it looks like in terms of providing good opportunities for kids in terms of support for their social-emotional development as well as support for their – their – their kind of learning opportunities. And here, a wonderful researcher from University of Virginia, Bob Pianta, has been doing studies of early childhood programs – Head Start, child care, pre-K – across the country, as well as kindergarten and primary grade classrooms.

What was really surprising to many people from this research is that the levels of quality are actually very similar across all of these different environments. And what it looks like is that, in terms of the climate for emotional support for kids – are teachers kind of warm and responsive in terms of how they interact with kids? And if kids have a problem, are teachers trying to reach out and help them figure out how to – how to resolve it? Programs look pretty good in terms of a scale that was developed. It's called the CLASS tool, which is now being heavily used in Head Start and some child care quality rating systems. Similarly, in terms of classroom organization, the typical classroom is, you know, pretty well structured in that there are routines and expectations, teachers have a plan for the day, things are not chaotic.

On the other hand, if you look at the issue of instructional support, which is – do teachers have kind of a planned way of fostering progress on different kinds of goals? Are they providing extended kinds of opportunities through dialogue and questions for – for kids to kind of engage in the learning experience? Pretty low quality across all of these environments, so I think we have work to do as educators in terms of raising the bar as far as the quality of opportunities that we're providing to kids to learn in all areas of – of the early childhood curriculum.

So, last segment is going to be to share some information with you about young children that I think is, to me, an important thing to focus on in our thinking about what is transition all about. And I'm going to talk about three different things: one is what we know about issues of disadvantage, which is – it's on the increase; second, what we know about diversity; and third, what do we know about disparities?

Bob shared with you the data statewide in Washington State about the, you know, prevalence of poverty – half of the kids. What this slide highlights for us is that most low-income children have other risk factors in their environment so that not only are their families limited in terms of their ability financially to meet their needs, but most – the vast majority of low-income children have other things that represent kind of strikes against them as far as the – the ability in their home environment to support their healthy development and learning. In fact, only about 12 percent of low-income kids only – are in environments where there's one risk factor.

Other risk factors that include low maternal education, single parent status, or limited English proficiency in the home add up to multiple problems that kids have to contend with in terms of their ability to move through early childhood with healthy development and be ready for school. So, I think that's important for us to kind of be up on in terms of our understanding, and recognize that we have a lot of work to do in terms of preparing very large... A large proportion of our population that's coming into kindergarten are coming from these kinds of backgrounds.

And then the other background factor that I think is – is an increasing – kind of astonishing change in terms of what our classrooms look like is diversity. And a study – a group of people at the Urban Institute have been tracking the growth in young immigrant children, and found that over the last 18 years across the nation, we've doubled the number of young immigrant children from more than 4 million to more than 8.7 million – 8.7 million children. And we know that these children tend to be, more likely than not – to live in poverty and to have other risk factors. You can actually go on the website from this project and really get very detailed breakdowns state by state.

And so for Washington State, it shows the increase was from 74,000 in 1990 to 171,000 in 2007. And if – divide that up and break it down, you can think about really hundreds of more – hundreds of kindergarten classrooms full of kids who are recent immigrants to this country, and that we need to think about all of the things that they have to learn in addition to what we would normally expect as the goals of – of a good early childhood program.

Last but not least, let me talk some about what we know about the issue of disparities in learning and development. And there are lots of different ways to go about this. Let me start from the school perspective in terms of the achievement gap. We tend to begin to document in a systematic way across our school districts the achievement gap at the end of third grade.

And a project at the Annie E. Casey Foundation has been focusing on the issue of what percentage of kids are reading on grade level in fourth grade; and this chart shows you the picture of disparities there in which, overall, we're not doing very well. But there are huge disparities in terms of racial and ethnic disparities, as well as disparities for children in poverty. Eighty-six percent of African-American students of all income levels are not reading on grade level at fourth grade; near that percentage for students from Hispanic backgrounds. Eighty-three percent of low-income children are not reading on grade level at fourth grade. They broke it down further for African-American males: something like 91 percent – 92 percent of African-American males.

So what we need to recognize is that we don't have kind of a little bit of a problem, we have like a huge problem in terms of by the end of the early childhood period, birth to age eight, we are not getting kids on track in terms of reading. Why does that matter? It matters because, in spite of the work that's done in schools with – with compensatory education and summer classrooms and tutoring, et cetera, the majority of kids who are behind in reading at the end of fourth grade never catch up. They are much more likely to drop out of school. And from fourth grade on up, as – as we, you know, have learned in terms of – of – people have looked at this in terms of education research, you can't – you can't

comprehend the textbooks that allow you to read other kinds of material, so you're really handicapped in terms of your ability to learn other kinds of things. So, we also know, however, that the issues of language development and literacy and the problem of disparities starts way, way, way before fourth grade.

This is my only – this is my only action slide, so... [Laughter] This is a famous slide in – in early childhood research from a study done in – in Kansas in the late 1980s by a couple named Hart and Risley, looking at disparities in vocabulary development beginning at 18 months. And by the time kids get to 36 months, which is before they start pre-K, there's a huge difference in terms of their receptive and expressive vocabulary – the words that they know and are able to understand and use. And so, you know, we've – we tend to use this in terms of early childhood to say, well, this is why you have to invest in early childhood programs.

I think we also have to take more responsibility for the fact that this gap needs to be addressed in terms of the work that we do. We've got to come up with a plan so that when kids are in their early childhood programs – whether it's subsidized child care or Head Start, Early Head Start, early childhood for special education, or pre-K – we're doing something to overcome this gap. And there – there's national data that corroborates this study that was done, you know, back in the late '80s in Kansas. This slide shows differences in reading scores for children entering kindergarten for a nationally representative sample of kids; and indeed, there're substantial gaps between kids from different racial/ethnic backgrounds, as well as low-income children versus the more advantaged students.

I was reading a book chapter on the plane by a math educator, and I could've filled this with slides about math education. Math disparities are just as great. So, we – we have a lot of work to do.

Two final ways of expressing this that might be a little more dramatic or easy to understand besides the charts that I've shown you are from a couple of different reports that I looked at. Low-income children are about a year or more behind national norms in language development when they enter kindergarten. So think about if you're a kindergarten teacher and you have – you know, half your classroom is low-income or all of them are low-income and you now have common core standards that you're expected to bring your children towards by the end of the year, how feasible it is – is it for you to help – to allow – to enable children to make two years worth of progress in language development in one year? So again, you might, you know quibble about some of these statistics. The picture that I think we have is that we don't have like modest or – or partial or kind of like some disparities, we have large disparities for groups of kids that are disadvantaged by different factors.

And then from a recent study that was done in conjunction with measuring the impact of Head Start for both kids who had gone to Head Start and kids who had gone to other early childhood programs, I – I read this, and like some of these other statistics, I read it, and I just – I could hardly believe it. But what this study said was that at the end of kindergarten, 40 percent of low-income children did not know all the letters of the alphabet. So you think, "They've been in early childhood for a year, they've been in

kindergarten for a whole year, and they don't know all the letters of the alphabet?" So, like, what is first grade going to be like for those kids? What's been going on in kindergarten for them?

So, I think we need to – we want to work on transitions and continuity so that, you know, the movement to kindergarten is smoother and less traumatic and we bring our practices to more consistency. But I think we've got a bigger challenge, which is, how do we raise our game? And, how do we do it together? And so, these are questions that I pose. I talk about this all the time to different early childhood groups. And, you know, the first question I have is whether we are really alarmed about this problem, and not only recognize that it's there but – but that somehow this is something that we step up and say, "With the – with the opportunities that are presented and the work that we do" – whether it's, 'I teach four-year-olds' or 'three-year-olds,' or 'I work with infants and toddlers' – "are we going to be contributing to solving this problem?"

And another question is whether we're – whether we are helping parents understand how their kids are progressing in relation to other children. And we don't want to turn early childhood into a competitive race, but I think – I think it's important that parents know where their kids stand. Arne Duncan, who's the Secretary of Education, talks about this all the time. He says the problem in a lot of public schools is that kids get promoted year after year and parents get the impression that they're doing fine, and they get the impression they're doing fine. And then when they graduate from high school and they try to go to – to college or they try to get a job, they realize they don't have the skills.

So while we, I think, want to focus in our feedback to parents about how kids are making progress and be strengths-based and understand that, you know, kids progress at different rates often during the early childhood years, I think we also have to find ways to help parents understand – if there's a substantial gap in terms of how their children are doing, that they get that information in a way that they can act on and work with us to – to accelerate.

I think some of the reasons, perhaps, why we maybe don't highlight the achievement gap or – or kind of realize the achievement gap as a high priority has to do with kind of some of the dominant philosophies in – in early childhood education. I won't get into this in – in detail. I think often there's kind of like the worry that the gaps – the gaps may seem so big that it's like, is there anything – can we really do enough to make a difference? Can we, you know, remain hopeful given this information? And – and I want to speak to that in one of the last slides.

The other thing that I hear a lot is, "Well, that's not true for our kids." I hear that from a lot of Head Start directors. We say – we cite the national data on Head Start; they say, "Well, that's not true in my program." And I hope that's not true in lots of communities in Washington State, but I want us to be sure, if we say it's not true, that we know – that we know that for sure. Because I think if we ignore the problem, it's – it's not going to get better.

And just to end on a positive note, I want to highlight one last study that was done as part of research on Early Head Start where these researchers were working with low-income children and they looked

very carefully at what happens if you provide a very high-quality, literacy-rich environment for children both by working with parents in the home and having a high-quality infant/toddler approach in terms of rich language activities. And again, these are low-income children. You can see a huge difference between the kids who had the very lowest quality literacy environment. I won't go into how this is all measured. But if you look at the kids at the high end, where they had a very carefully planned out, age-appropriate, language-rich experience, these kids are at national norms. So if we do the best that we know how to do in early childhood, we can make a huge difference for these kids. And I think we need to have high expectations for the youngsters but also high expectations for ourselves.

So, finally, wrap-up. I guess, to me... I – I stated – started out by saying, you know, "If – if transitions is the answer, what's the question?" And I hope that this has, you know, stimulated you to think about it in some different ways: kind of from the kid perspective but also from the perspective of what are the challenges that we have collectively – people who work in the early years of public education and people who work in birth to age five programs – and can we think about our work as transition partners, as joining forces to provide really equal opportunity so that we're overcoming the disparities that we currently see in terms of most of the information we have on young children.

So, thank you very much. [Applause]