

Mimi Howard
Washington State Transition Summit 2011

Dr. Gail Joseph: I'm going to bring Mimi Howard up, who is, this year, a Head Start Fellow. It's her second year of a Head Start fellowship. She was working last year a lot with Joan Lombardi, who some of you might know, and this year is doing work both in the Office of Head Start but also at the National Association of the Elementary School Principals – so kind of working on both sides of this issue.

Mary (Mimi) Howard: Thank you. And I – I just want to start by saying I really feel like I've died and gone to heaven being in a room with this many people who are working at the community level to try to make some changes and hopefully get more kids ready for school and successful once they get to school.

I'm from the state of Colorado, and that state also has a fairly robust and experienced early learning – system of early learning councils that's done a lot of work. And I have to say to you, I really think it's at the community level that these really important changes get made. So, congratulations to all of you for being a part of that movement; and – and again, thanks for being here on a Saturday. And I guess it's before the game starts, right? Is that why we're all so calm? [Laughter] Okay. I just wanted to make sure before I started that it wasn't, like, kickoff time or anything right now.

So as Gail said, I'm – I'm here – I'm just going to take a couple of minutes to talk to you about a new resource that's been developed by the Office of Head Start that is called "Partnerships for Building Collaborative Relationships Across Early Learning and the Early Grades." You have a copy of it.

So I'd like to start with this quote by James Heckman – and it's not a new one, and I'm sure a lot of you have seen it already – but I think that, actually, it's a good one to start with given the conversations that we've had this morning so far in that I think what he's pointing out here is what a lot of us already know and feel, and that is a lot of the problems that we're seeing with school right now, with education, really comes from the fact that we haven't created these smoother trajectories of learning from one level to the next.

And I think it's a cause of what we just saw this week. I don't know if you all saw the – the latest report card is out for fourth grade readers and eighth grade readers. And we're finding, as – as Tom said in his – his remarks, that fourth graders – the needle is not being moved. Four – more and more kids at the age of four are not reading at grade level; and even more disturbing is the fact that this persistent achievement gap that, again, Tom talked about, is – it's just – it's not being – it's not being changed at all. So, that's a concern.

And I think that what James Heckman is talking about here is one good solution to doing that. And I'm sure all of you in this room would agree with that, because it really has to do with creating, as I said, more continuity across levels of learning. Talking about continuity is not new; we've been talking about it for years. Those of you who are in here probably have been in the trenches working on this for some

time as well. And we see it going on at the national level, at the state level, at the community level, and through some foundation support. And I'm not going to run through all of these, but just to give you a sense of what's happening.

At the federal focus, we heard President Obama from the first day, practically, of his administration talking about the importance of creating what he called a system of education that goes from cradle to career. The new Head Start – or HHS Department of Education Race to the Top Early Challenge Fund, while focusing pretty specifically on zero to five, also has some really important provisions in there for how to create better connections with K-3 and K-12 programs. The Head Start Reauthorization of 2007 specifically called on local programs to begin to reach out and work more effectively with the elementary school staff in their community to create this better alignment.

We've got foundations that have also done a lot of work around this. And at a national level, as Gail said, I'm going to be working with NAESP, which just completed a task force that – that developed a report on what – on best practices in P-3 and what needs to happen across P/K-3 and how the principals need to be engaged in that process to really make it happen in schools.

And then, finally, there are a lot of state programs that are – that are happening. Those are happening here in Washington, of course; and New Jersey is another state where that has happened. That being said, however – you know, it's – there can be policies and there can be practices put in place at any level, and there can be plenty of money that's given in terms of resources from foundations to help create these P-3 continuum. But at the – at the bottom of the sort of pile of all these wonderful things, what's happened – what needs to happen first is that individuals need to come together to make these kinds of plans around continuity work. It's really at the individual level, at the local level, that – that things happen.

And having said that, you know, I think this little – this little saying here kind of lets you know that it's not so easy to do. It's not always the easiest thing in the world to bring two systems – early learning and early grades – together to sit at the same table and begin to talk about sort of how they can work together. So, I think it's important to realize that this is hard work, as Jennifer said, and it's not easy, and it takes time and it takes understanding. But the payoffs are, again – what we heard Tom allude to, is when you have a more continuous set of learning and teaching experiences, that children are the ones that benefit the most from it.

So Jennifer really set me up quite nicely for talking about what comes next, and – in that she talked a bit about the school-to-school partnerships and how important those are. And I had not heard some of the statistics around that. It's quite – it's quite incredible. So this new – this new tool that has been developed by the Office of Head Start is really designed to provide some resources and some guidance for people working at the local level in schools and early learning programs to put together some plans for being able to work more collaboratively together to create more continuity.

And so, this tool that you have in your handbook – or in your folders here – includes both a blueprint for building quality – or continuity – sorry – and a planning workbook. So the continuity blueprint really – I've got to get out here because I can't see what I'm – what I'm talking about to you. So, the continuity blueprint answers these sort of basic questions: Who needs to be involved to make sure that continuity across early learning in the early grades – it happens and – and – and – and is sustainable? What should continuity address? Is it just about making the move from preschool to school? Is it just about working with families? Is it just about making curriculum and instruction more compatible across levels? Or is it all of the above?

And this tool really provides you with a good look at what it takes across a number of basic elements to create more continuity for children. And then, how can – how can it be done? What – what are the things that exist in your everyday worlds, in your schools and – and early learning programs, that you can use to work together to build more continuity? So in addition to this sort of continuity blueprint, we also – we'll find in the – in the guide what I call a planning workbook, which essentially just answers the question "why is this important," and provides some very specific and practical tools for how you get started and what you could actually do together as – as planning teams across early learning and the early grades.

So this is the blueprint for continuity. Up there in the top in the green is what I call the guiding principles, and that answers the question "Who should be involved?" And the answer to that question is families need to be involved to keep the process going. Leadership absolutely matters. Nothing can happen in schools and in programs without school leadership being engaged and supportive. And teachers make things happen in the classroom. If teachers don't have the time and the – and the support and the flexibility they need to put things into place in classrooms, it's – there's not going to be continuity. So that's – that's sort of what goes at the very base of any kind of work that you're doing to build more continuity.

Then in terms of what should be aligned in terms of this – this tool, we look at how one could align teaching and learning across the two systems, how one could align support services – those important educational and non-educational support services that children typically have more access to in early learning and Head Start programs than they necessarily do when they get to elementary school. And then, finally, making the move from Head Start to school, which is – is transitions.

So those are the three sort of key areas that I think if you can – if we can focus on creating more continuity across all three of those, it'll be a more – it'll be a more effective approach to – to what we're trying to do here.

And then, finally, what are some of the common elements or structures that one – that you all have in place both in early learning programs and in K-3 programs that you could use as sort of levers to – to – to bring people together to work on some of this planning and – and – and – and doing? And the three that are identified here are organizational structures that you might have in place in preschools and in schools, like advisory teams, planning groups, these kinds of things that have been well established and

are institutionalized in both programs. Are there any of those that you could work on together to create more continuity across levels?

Professional development: everybody has access to professional development. So, using that to develop some joint professional development opportunities for teachers and early learning staff as well as directors and principals is a really important way, I think, to continue to build your continuity. And then, finally, being very intentional about the way that families are engaged in any of this work to build continuity is important.

So the second piece of this guide, which is the planning and communication tool. It's a very – it's like a workbook. It's just a very practical tool and resource for you to use. It's based on the continuity framework that I just told you about, and it's designed to be used at the local level with Head Start programs, early learning programs, and elementary schools. And I think that really makes it quite unique. This day and age, there are a lot of things that happen between programs and districts, but it's not as easy to find the resources and the examples of what school-to-school success really looks like, and this hopefully will provide you at least with some opportunities to look at some – some ways that you might begin to work together.

There are some very specific examples of what teachers and leaders can do across those three components. There's a rationale for why each is important and what it is that children and families would gain by having more continuity across the two systems. It provides a three-step process for how one moves from planning to finally developing some sort of a partnership agreement. And it provides, as I said, some – I hate to say the word "worksheets." So, I thought about that this morning when I was coming in. I thought, "Oh, my God, worksheets are like what we don't want to have people working on and looking at," and here they are in this adult planning tool. [Laughter]

I think the important thing to remember, and Jennifer talked about this a little bit, is that because these partnerships are going to be developed at the local level, no two partnerships are going to look the same. So although this guide is chock full of examples of what – what can work or what has worked in other places, it's really going to depend on sort of the capacity of the school and the community, on the culture and the priorities that the school and the community have, to decide what it is that's going to work and what isn't going to work in terms of creating partnerships for your early learning programs and schools.

So I would end with that – just making these closing thoughts that I think the first thing to do if you're going to undertake a project like this – which as I said, is not an easy thing – is to begin by taking an inventory of what you're already doing, because it's very likely that there are a ton of things that are already going on that if not already connected have the potential to be connected without a whole lot of heavy lifting involved.

I would take time to develop relationships. We kind of skipped over that – that piece; but honestly, nothing's going to succeed unless you've got that trust and that sort of mutual accountability and

commitment to working together firmly in place before you begin to sort of sit down and decide and put on paper what it is you think you're going to do together. Start small. Find one thing that you could maybe – that a school and a Head Start program, an early learning program, could do together and see how that works; and then move up rather than create some sort of an elaborate 14-step plan that would be probably impossible to ever put in place.

Make the work fit your context. Again, I think that's so important to take into account what – what's doable and what's reasonable for the children and the families that you have in your communities. And as always, keep children's success and well-being at the center of everything that you do. That's – that's why we're doing this.

I would just want to tell you in – briefly about next steps with this. As I said, this is a brand new resource. We're just getting it out into people's hands right now. And other than a few thousand people that saw this at the Head Start Institute that some of you may have been to in Washington, DC a month or two ago, you are the first ones to sort of have an opportunity to take a look at this. We want to disseminate it as broadly as we possibly can, get it into the hands of as many people as we can, so that we can begin over the next 12 months to start collecting some good feedback on what makes sense, what doesn't make sense – "We tried to use this. This worked; this didn't." So, this is kind of a pilot year to see how it works and who it works best with and why.

We also want to develop some additional sort of support documents to go along with this, some training materials. As – as Gail mentioned, I'm going to be working with NAESP, and one of the things that they would like to do is to develop some very specific materials that are focused on principals and the role that principals can play in this. So we'll pull out and do some – some very focused kinds of resource tools as well over the next year.

And then, as I said, develop some training protocols and hopefully find some places that would be willing to actually take this document and pilot it with some of their schools. So, if any of you have any interest in talking to me more about this and maybe investigating the possibility of trying this out with some principals and some early learning programs, I would be more than happy to talk to you. I – I know there are programs in the state of Washington that have already done this, and done this well. And so I think this would be a great proving ground to—to find some other people that might be willing to take this on and give it a shot.

Thank you. [Applause]