Washington State Transition Summit 2011:
Fostering Early Learning Collaboration
Jennifer LoCasale-Crouch

Jennifer LoCasale-Crouch: Good morning. Or good afternoon, according to my body clock from east coast time. I'm, I'm really looking forward to, to -- you guys are such an enthusiastic group, and I'm thrilled to start to be able to make the transition now from some of the really, you know, heavy stuff...

[Laughter]

...that, that Tom put out before us in some of the early information about, about what we're dealing with, and, and the difficult -- the difficult battle that we face in figuring out what to do. And, to really begin to start thinking about what can we do, and what do we know about what works in this battle. So that, in fact, I don't think it is a losing battle. It's a difficult one, maybe we're a little mismatched at times, but, but one that we're getting some momentum around figuring out 17 some things that work and things that we can do. We all experience transitions. It's part of our life across the lifespan. That, that, you know, This is just a couple examples of, of typical transitions in life, but you could probably generate a whole list longer than this. And that, sometimes, those are good transitions. I mean, thinking about a new job or a new baby can be really exciting. But, sometimes they're really difficult transitions, too, depending on what your perspective is.

And, I think the important piece to think about with transition is really it's a code word for change. When we say transi -- transition and we're talking about these things in our lives it's a change. And, whether it's a good change or a bad change really depends on what your view of that is. And, this is good news because we know a lot about how to manage change. And so, when we think about what contributes to change and how do we know -- how do we help people adjust to change is that we think about these different ways of supporting people in preparing for a change. And one of those involves providing information. How do we get information -- books, resources -- to figure out what to do? And additionally, when you talk about developing relationships as support. Who else is going through this with us? How can we use that and leverage that for support? And also, we know that continuity provides a lot of support and adjustment. Things that can remain the same across those settings can really offer support when things are difficult. But we also know it takes time, that all these things don't happen overnight, and that the best adjustment occurs over a period of time. So, I was thinking about this in terms of going someplace new. I mean, that's what going to kindergarten is all about.

But, I thought about this just in reference to my trip here -- someplace new, got to my forty-eighth continuous state, I'm very excited. And, and the things that I did just to help prepare for that, right? So, I got information about where I'm going to go, realized this picture is really a lie. The blue sky doesn't look like that very often here.

[Laughter]

And then also, in terms of continuity, right? So, my body is not continuous right now, right? It's a little disconnected from, from the time difference. But, if I can find a place to have a nice, hot latte, then I'm

going to be okay, at least for now. And, I still need more time to adjust, but this is our everyday process that we go through when we deal with difficult situations. So, the difference is, is that kids and a lot of families need us to help them do this for them. So, things that are, that are part of our everyday adjustment, that they need our help with to do that successfully. So, it brings us back to this question that, that -- Tom has already been talking about some of this information is -- you know, how successfully do we know how children are entering kindergarten? And, what we know is about half the kids are adjusting pretty well, but that the other half are having difficulties. And, the things they're having difficulty with are some of the academic stuff, but also social and emotionally. So, the things that we think about that are problematic for them are often things that show in their behavior.

So, sometimes anxiety presents itself in behavior problems. Those are the kinds of things we hear from kindergarten teachers that kids are having a hard time with. So, why do we care so much then about how kids begin kindergarten? Well, we talked earlier about -- this is a really critical developmental phase. There's a lot happening, and it's really important if we can maximize taking advantage of that to give them the best chance of a bright future. But, what we also know is that the relationships that kids form with their teachers in kindergarten are highly predictive of their long-term success. We've, we've stretched this out all the way into eighth grade -- when we have more data, we'll look at it further down the road -- that the close relationships with a kindergarten teacher helps them academically and socially, and that maintains throughout their school career. What we also know is conflict is really stable. So, if they have a hard time in that kindergarten classroom, that goes with them.

And also, what we know is that family involvement early on matters, too. That kindergarten -- that in that kindergarten classroom, if that family's involved, that that's going to show long-term benefits for the kids. Okay, so then it also brings us back to how -- so we know families matter, we know those early relationships matter, we know that stimulation matters, and how quickly they adjust across those settings matter. Now, if you ever spend any time on YouTube or on the Internet, do a Google search, and you know the start of kindergarten is a big day, very important day. And as Tom described in his story, some kids start out great: really happy, waiting for the bus. But, not everybody starts that way. And, that not only do you see some of the kids crying, you see some of the families crying. It's a, it's a really important day.

So, we know it's important from the data that we know it has long-term implications for kids' success. We also know emotionally it's really important and highly sensitive. And, this is good news, because this is usually when interventions matter most. When in a stress situation and we can go in and provide support that things that really be bene-- even more beneficial. So, what I'd like to do now is show this, this video. It's about six minutes long. The staff here have done an incredible job of getting kids' perspective on starting kindergarten. So, what I'd like you to do is watch this and think about what are the messages. What are the themes that you're hearing from kids that we can pay attention to, we should pay attention to? Okay, so we're going to watch this. We're going to let you talk at your table for five minutes about that, okay?

[Video clip and music begins]

Girl 1: What's kindergarten going to be like?

Boy 1: It's going to be really fun when you move into kindergarten.

Girl 1: I just sing "ABCs." You have to be quiet when the bell rings at circle.

[Children laughing and chattering]

Girl 2: When I see other kindergartners, I think about how I used to be in kindergarten. You had to line up from alphabetical order of your first or last name, and I lined up for, like, recess, and lunch, and going to the library, and P.E., and music.

Interviewer: Why do you line up?

Girl 3: So you don't get a glob.

Teacher: I'm waiting until everyone is in a nice straight line in the middle of the hallway!

Boy 2: Yeah. For leaving play court, or leaving school, or arriving, you have to walk in a straight line.

Boy 3: Get on the school bus and just drive to school.

Boy 1: When I rode the bus for the first time, I felt nervous.

Bus Driver: Welcome to the bus, to my bus.

Girl 4: Hola!

Boy 2: Actually, for three years of school, I rode with my dad because I forgot about the bus.

Girl 5: It has yellow everywhere, and it has black windows.

Boy 2: It gets from home to here, then from here to home.

Girl 6: This is my class. But this is the lights. If you have a big problem or a small problem, Kelso will help you.

Boy 2: You have to bring a backpack and a coat. If you get a sack, pack some of your things in it for Show and Share.

Boy 3: I was wearing first-day-of-school clothes.

Girl 2: On my first day, I thought, like, I wouldn't make, make any friends. And then, I did.

Boy 3: I was nervous that the other kids would be mean to me.

Girl 7: I was scared to have a new teacher.

Girl 6: But I was, I was scared.

Girl 5: I didn't know where everything was and stuff.

Boy 3: My mom helped me find my seat.

Girl 6: And I was sad, too, because my mom was gonna leave, but when I saw my mom in the hallway. She gave me a hug.

Boy 1: My teacher said, "All the parents have to leave." I, like, gave my mom a hug.

Girl 7: We sing our morning song. And then we go to our journals and then put them in our folders.

Girl 8: We listen to the teachers. We read with our friends. We learn math.

Girl 6: Sometimes we wrote stories together. We learn the schedule.

Girl 5: And, we go to gym.

Boy 2: And, do music.

Girl 6: But, you have to -- I don't know how to snap.

Girl 5: Shaking the maracas.

Boy 2: We do journal.

Girl 8: What did you write about in your journal today?

Girl 7: Ummmmmmm...

Boy 2: We write how we're feeling, like if we're scared, sad, mad, happy. And, I forgot what we were talking about. No, when we're feeling safe.

Boy 1: You check out books on the day where you have library.

Girl 5: I learned how to do better at art. I learned how to draw regular people instead of stick people.

Girl 6: We draw pictures, and in the hallway we, we hang it up, and the parents come and look at them.

Girl 2: I learned how to, like, write my name and last name, how to, like, write "apple" and "flower."

Boy 1: The popcorn words are "the," "was," "he," and "they."

Girl 1: The popcorn was, "pop, pop, pop."

Boy 2: We go on field trips, but not today. See those pumpkins over there? That one with the pointy stem is mine. We went to the pumpkin patch, and we learned all about pumpkins. That's a picture of it.

Boy 1: My favorite thing in kindergarten is lunch.

Boy 4: Lunchroom.

Boy 5: You need to eat, and that's all.

Boy 4: I'm eating.

Girl 6: In preschool, you didn't get to pick where you got to sit. And, in regular school, I got to buy my lunch and pick where I sit. So, it could be next to a friend.

Boy 1: What do you play with in school?

Girl 1: Um, I get to go outside. Out.

Boy 4: Free toys.

Girl 8: Mine is, too.

Girl 2: At preschool, like, you got to, like, really play and you didn't, like, have to do anything, and at kindergarten, you kind of have to, like, learn the alphabet and, like, learn how to write, and stuff.

Girl 5: I like to play with my friends. I like to play inside of classroom.

Boy 1: I wish we could play more in kindergarten.

Boy 5: Kindergarten's fun!

Both Boys: Kindergarten rocks!

Girl 5: [Singing] Goodbye, goodbye! Whoa, we gotta go. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. Goodbye, goodbye! Whoa, we gotta go. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

[Video clip ends]

Jennifer: Part of what's really great about this video is it does say that they're aware of these things. And, some kids can verbalize what's, what those differences are, and the experiences with it, and some kids can't. And so, we want to be able to be planful around both of those things. But, what, what I think is really important is they recognize this, this data that Tom talked about earlier, which are it's different. It's different.

So, going to school, going to, having a Head Start preschool child care experience first does help kids know the idea of routines and some of those things. But actually, what we see is that what those experiences were in pre-k have no relationship to what they are in kindergarten. So, they may have been in a school setting, but how much free time that they spend in one setting is not related at all to the other setting. So, it's still a major shift for them in having to acclimate to that new setting. In addition, you know, so that's from the child's perspective. And, what we hear from families similarly maps onto what we know about kids. So, about half the kids are having successful transitions. Other halves are having difficulty.

So, here what we're looking at is some of our interviews with families around transitions. So, we have some families saying, "You know, teachers reached out to me before school started, and I really appreciated that. And then, also, early on once school started, they let me know things were going well." So wanting to have some information, wanting to know something about what to expect and what's upcoming, but also, then, how things are going.

But, we also see just as many families having the opposite experience. So, in this case, you know, that the teacher called and said, you know, your -- for those of you who can't read from that side -- you know, that the child should be evaluated for Ritalin because she can't teach her. These are actual quotes. And then, the second one is a, is a family's struggle with the routine and trying to figure out, you know, your child's going and they're not getting their food, and they can't figure out what the routine is. And so, not only is the sense that the child is really maybe struggling at school, but also the parent, and really having a difficult time figuring out how to connect with the school. So consistently then, we see, although this is a really ripe time for positive things to happen, we see some real clear misalignment and shifts.

So, we see kids have different changes in curricula and the demands on them. In general, we tend to see less family contact when kids move into elementary school. But, we also see this new complexity arise. You heard the kids talking about, "And I have the librarian, and I have the P.E. teacher," and I have a whole new host of people that are in their lives that they're trying to listen to. And in general, you know, what we also see is that they actually have less time with individual teachers. And so, coming from a place where they might have had a really close and supportive relationship, that they're maybe not as likely going to have that opportunity in kindergarten. But, what we do also know is that that adjustment across that really sets the stage for future development and for future change. So, we want to really pay attention to how they adjust across that, that misalignment at times and that transition, because we know that starting point in kindergarten really matters for those long-term gains.

So, I mean, the good news is that we've been talking about kids and school readiness, and we talk about it like it's a child-specific thing, that, you know, they put their backpack on and they, you know, get on the bus, and then they just go to kindergarten, and that that's what school readiness is. But, we know it's way more complex than that. And, that's more good news. We know that there are a host of resources around kids that support their development. So, not only their, their first teachers, their parents, but their peers, the siblings, the teachers in their lives, the community people that they have connections with. And all those provide a really important web of resources that we can tap into to help them be more successful, and then help them move successfully across that bridge to continue to have those resources available to them to be successful.

And so, you know, when we think about this, you know, why, why, why focus on all those connections? You know, what can we get from it? So, part of what we want to do in focusing on school, to child and family connections is really to help share information and build those relationships that are going to support children's long-term development and family involvement. When we think about the school and community connections, to -- so early school and community connections to elementary school, what we're looking at here is really wanting to build this base to have all those other resources come from.

You know, this is an opportunity to maximize building and combining our resources to provide the foundation so we can make those connections more supportive.

But this is a lot, right? I mean, you're here on a Saturday. Give me a break, right? I mean, this is -- why should we even do all this? It takes time, it takes energy, it takes, you know, extra hours. And so, it's really important then to think about, are we getting some bang for our buck? Is it really worth the investment?

So, when we look at asking families and talking to them about their children's experience with transition activities, what we find is, and this is just, you know, one short list of different ways schools reach out to kids and families, things like child visits a kindergarten classroom, the family met with a kindergarten teacher, they take a tour of the school. Across the board, families and children like them. That's what this data is telling us. They find it helpful. Any information, any opportunity to share relation -- build relationships and share information, they like, they want it, they ask for more of it. So, you know, knowing that we're in a time, though, of really focusing on kid outcomes, so it's great that they like it, but does it matter? Does it really make a difference in terms of their school readiness? So, in one study we conducted as part of the National Center for Early Development and Learning, we were able to look across six states to say when kids experience transition practices on their way leaving pre-k into kindergarten, how do they look at the start of kindergarten? And, what we found was kindergarten teachers were saying those kids who had more transition experiences were doing better socially, were doing better academically, were more motivated for learning, excited about being in the classroom. So, we saw benefits across the board.

But, even more importantly, this mattered more for kids at risk. So, everybody benefited, but kids at risk, the group that's, that's behind, that we're most concerned about, was benefiting even more from those experiences. In a similar study using the ECLS data, Schulting and colleagues looked at the same thing in terms of when kids started kindergarten, how many transition experiences did they have, and how did that relate to how they progressed over the kindergarten year? Whoops. And, what they found is that the more kindergarten transition practices, kids were not only doing better academically at the end of kindergarten, but families were more involved. So, you had both benefits. And, similar to the other study, it mattered more for kids at risk.

So, we see benefits again across the board, but kids at risk benefiting the most. When we look to then to the school-to-school connections, we see similarly, when, when, when teachers reach out across that divide, so preschool teachers and kindergarten teachers doing things together, working together to support kids and families, what we see is across the board they, they like that experience, they're excited to be sitting around the table together, they like meeting the new kids, they like getting information about what's happening with those kids.

And so, you know, do those connections matter? Well, we found in the, in the NCTL study that I just talked about, the single most important practice that supported kids' school readiness was the pre-kindergarten teacher and the kindergarten teacher working together. Hey, you could have lots and lots of experiences, or if you had that just that one experience, that that related to your school readiness.

And similarly, in the Chicago Child-Parent Center program studies, when they've been able to follow kids long-term, what they see is that program has really tightly aligned the pre-k and the kindergarten together, and that those kids had better outcomes long-term.

I just wanted to share this one example of a community doing this, because it is hard work. And so, locally a group, we had get together around these issues, they decided they were only going to meet four times a year. This is a kindergarten teacher, the Head Start teacher, and the early care providers. They said, "If we can just carve out a little bit of time every couple of months to talk about what's happening, kids coming down the line, what can we do to help them, will that make a difference?" So, what they found in this case was carving out that little bit of time, more kids were participating in their kindergarten camp. So, the early care providers were helping families get into those resources, into those experiences. So as a result, the kindergarten teachers knew the kids better, families were more involved, people were more comfortable, and that they began to start to be able to align consistency between the settings.

For example, in the kindergarten classroom, they were working on fine motor skills and handwriting. Well, the early care providers didn't know that, and they didn't know anything about early writing and what they should be doing around it. So, just even having that conversation that that was important helped them to start to share information to improve things for kids. And then last, and I think this came up earlier today, too, which is they realize there's a whole group of kids they were missing. Nobody was seeing them. And so to them, beginning to think about how can we help pull in those kids that aren't part of these systems now. And, the last little bit of data I wanted to share is we see growing evidence and growing, actually, places doing more and more kindergarten camps. I'm not sure if that's something you all do here. But, what we're seeing from the data coming out of this is that kindergarten camps are actually a great way to do multiple connections all at once. So kids are involved, families are involved, schools are involved. And, what they're finding is that they're seeing positive results not only from kids being more comfortable and families being more involved, but they're seeing academic gains from kids, more school readiness at kindergarten entry as a result.

Okay, so in sum, what we see from these connections -- so we see kids are more socially ready, and that really sets them in a position to be more academically -- and participate more academically in the classroom. We also see families more involved when they're experiencing those transition activities, and that really supports long-term gains for kids. In addition, we see teachers really like these activities, and they feel more prepared to work with the kids and families when they come into their classrooms. And this really fosters better relationships, which we know, especially from the kindergarten relationships, have long-term benefits for kids. And last, especially in this day and time, you know, that these are financially smart investments. You know, we're often talking about time versus lots of money to do these activities and to do these experiences. And so for the investment of spending the time and carving out the time to get together, we're seeing real gains for kids.

And, that's all I got.

[Applause]

[End of video]