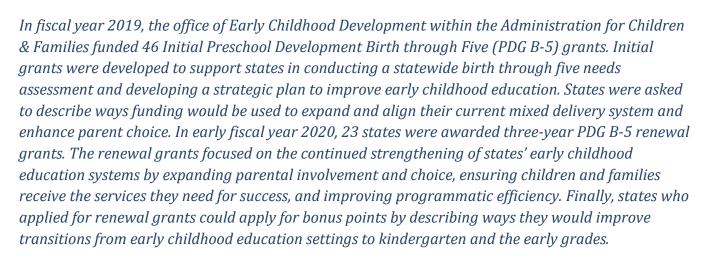# Adaptations to COVID-19
How PDG B-5 Grant Recipients Adapted
Their Transition Activities

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In fiscal year 2019, the office of Early Childhood Development within the Administration for Children & Families funded 46 Initial Preschool Development Birth through Five (PDG B-5) grants. Initial grants were developed to support states in conducting a statewide birth through five needs assessment and developing a strategic plan to improve early childhood education. States were asked to describe ways funding would be used to expand and align their current mixed delivery system and enhance parent choice. In early fiscal year 2020, 23 states were awarded three-year PDG B-5 renewal grants. The renewal grants focused on the continued strengthening of states' early childhood education systems by expanding parental involvement and choice, ensuring children and families receive the services they need for success, and improving programmatic efficiency. Finally, states who applied for renewal grants could apply for bonus points by describing ways they would improve transitions from early childhood education settings to kindergarten and the early grades.

PDG B-5 Grants Transition Activities

In 2020, the Office of Early Childhood Development produced a report on renewal grant applications and described states' efforts to improve kindergarten transitions (McCarthy, 2020). This report identified major themes related to states' activities described in their renewal grant applications including efforts to improve kindergarten readiness, new and expanded professional development activities, building collaborative communities through transition summits, and the development of transition toolkits or guidelines.

Impact of COVID-19

In March 2020, after 23 renewal grants had been awarded, the country began responding to the global COVID-19 pandemic. Public health guidelines to slow the spread of COVID-19 required states to adapt their intended renewal grant activities, including those related to kindergarten transitions. Each interviewed state was at a different stage of initiating their grant activities at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in variations in the adaptations that states made to their planned grant activities. This report describes how states have risen to this challenge. The following section describes the states' strategies to adjust transition activities as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 public health and safety restrictions and the ensuing school closures and remote learning requirements dramatically impacted PDG B-5. The impact was not limited to in-person activities; states identified multiple ways this shock across systems impacted, curtailed, and prevented their grant activities. A Rhode Island representative shared, "We had some work around credentialing

pathways, which stopped because we were doing that work with Institutes of Higher Education (IHE) and those classrooms stopped [convening]." Several themes emerged from the interviews with Grantees about the impact of COVID-19, including delayed starts to activities, statewide shifts in priorities, impacts on staffing, and adapting to virtual environments.

Delayed Beginnings

Multiple states identified planned activities that were delayed due to COVID-19, including activities not directly impacted by public health guidelines. Rhode Island described a delay in their plans to integrate data systems, "We have several different systems that agencies use, and we're trying to align those systems and make one bigger system. I think that the expectation is that we would have had that done by the end of last year. We're still working on some of that now because of COVID and the pushbacks."

When discussing the impact of COVID-19, Minnesota identified the delayed rollout of an online resource. The interviewee stated that all activities were impacted in some way. "We have this online tool called Help Me Connect. We were going to put our transitions materials on there. Well, that's also been fully delayed. And so, I can't think of anything that hasn't been delayed or needs to pivot." Although these activities were not directly restricted by public health and safety guidelines, the system-wide nature of COVID-19 still created delays.

Shifting Priorities

The delay of grant activities can be linked to states' need to focus staff and resources on COVID-19 response and recovery efforts. As COVID-19 cases rose across the country, states mobilized impressive resources to address the crisis. Grant recipients described how this necessary shift in resources impacted the planning and coordinating of grant activities. As one interviewee shared, "I think certainly the focus of things turned very distinctly toward just ensuring that families had more immediate needs to be met. And that's certainly where most people's time was spent." Many states had intended to use workgroups to create materials, such as transition guidelines, roadmaps, or toolkits, to support families and educators. The shifting priorities to meet the immediate needs of parents and families reduced the states' bandwidth to participate in advisory councils or workgroups. Another grant recipient described a similar shift in resources at the statewide and more local level: "Well, no one from local public health has time to sit on an advisory group about something that's two years down the road. And so, we're having trouble getting capacity from our local partners too."

Interviewees identified that this impact affected all facets of grant activities, from building contracts with local partners to Information Technology (IT) support. Many states had commitments to improve transitions to kindergarten by using subgrants to support local partners. These commitments included expanding local-level transition programing, funding specific programing related to transition, and planning and supporting universal enrollment. All these plans and efforts were stalled because procurement offices had to shift their work to meet the needs of urgent COVID-19 response efforts. As reported by Minnesota: "Our Minnesota IT contracts team was so focused on getting out COVID-19

specific contracts, our procurement process to get our evaluator on board was delayed, as well as getting a lot of the grant activities going."

The scope, scale, and length of COVID-19 shifted the states' resources, preventing planned grant activities on transitions efforts from taking place when there were other pressing matters.

Addressing Staffing Concerns

The delayed start to grant activities was also attributed to difficulties with staffing essential positions. States had committed to provide professional development practices to elementary educators and direct coaching to kindergartener teachers to better align kindergarten with early childhood education. Rhode Island connected delays in some grant transition activities directly to hiring freezes: "That work has been pushed back because of a resource challenge and not being able to hire people during COVID." Challenges that contributed to delays included staffing leadership positions, as described by Minnesota: "Government hiring and procurement processes always take a long time. The pandemic just made them take longer. And so, a lot of our work was dependent on getting staff in positions to be able to lead the work."

States also identified how this reduction in staffing created challenges when making connections to community partners, causing further delays. State programs had plans to coordinate with child care providers, Head Start, Home Visiting, IDEA Part B 619/Part C, and elementary schools. With limited bandwidth and capacity, it was difficult to create relationships usually developed in-person and hosting in-person meetings. "The bench has gotten really shallow in a grant that's so dedicated to partnerships; that makes it so everything's slower and taking a bit longer to develop relationships." New Jersey's team identified that community partners also experienced staffing challenges: "A lot of our agencies are paid by the services that they provide and finding your usual population of people has been very difficult because you're not able to recruit people where you used to recruit them in the ways you used to recruit them, and you're not able to go out into communities and deliver services in the same way." This theme further illustrates how COVID-19 has impacted states' PDG B-5 grant activities at multiple levels.

Adaptations to Virtual Environments

Not all PDG B-5 grant activities focused on transitions were delayed. Many states were able to quickly adapt their activities to virtual settings. Holding planned activities as virtual events was the primary strategy states employed in response to COVID-19. Kindergarten transition activities states adapted to virtual formats included trainings, transition summits, learning communities, and registration. Rhode Island described making this switch quickly, preventing a disruption to grant and educational activities: "I will say we did a pretty good job of moving everything that was currently happening very quickly to a virtual platform so none of them stopped working." These efforts included the Rhode Island's

> "Instead of a statewide summit on kindergarten transitions, we have done four informational webinars and we offer those throughout the state at different times, so that different groups of people could attend."
>
> Rhode Island

Professional Development and Technical Assistance (PDTA) centers: "At our PDTA Center, we have a PDTA Hub, and they did a really great job of transitioning everything to a virtual platform." The interviewee also described how their plans for a statewide summit to discuss best practices to support kindergarten transitions were adapted to a virtual webinar: "So, obviously we couldn't do a statewide summit with 200 people in a room. Instead, we have done four informational webinars and we offer those throughout the state at different times, so that different groups of people could attend." Not only was Rhode Island able to move their summit online, but the change in format led to increased flexibility so that more partners could benefit. New Jersey described how they leveraged social media to conduct training and informational sessions: "Our First Lady did a couple series with home visitors and other frontline workers via Facebook and Twitter."

A number of states committed to improving kindergarten transitions by supporting universal enrollment. Making the change to a virtual environment created challenges for grant recipients and their community partners. In-person activities had to be adjusted, as described by this interviewee: "Part of the transition work that we were doing is around kindergarten registration. So, a lot of that happened in the spring and had to be changed because a lot of our school systems were not set up to do that virtually or online. It was all a paper, in-person situation. So, we spent a lot of time working on that and what that was going to look like." Adjusting to COVID-19 went beyond moving in-person activities online; grant recipients and their partners had to re-think the entire transition process to ensure safety and privacy.

The move to virtual or hybrid learning created a new need for states to support families and community partners. Grant recipients had to find ways to ensure all families and education providers had access to the resources needed to conduct virtual learning. One state shared: "So, there's been some shifts and some work challenges for families who may or may not have access to resources that they need. So, they made sure that people had access to those [resources]." Minnesota reported the shifting learning environments required their work to move beyond supporting traditional transitions into kindergarten to addressing transitions in varying models of delivery.

Although there were challenges adapting to virtual environments, states were creative and developed new modes to share the information that had initially been planned for. The adaptations also created new opportunities that may not have happened otherwise.

> "I think the other piece of that is layering on now that transitions look so different. School districts are now transitioning between three different models of delivery. They can be in-person and then if the numbers change, they're looking at going to a hybrid, and then if the numbers change again, they might be going to a distanced learning model or going back to in-person."
>
> Minnesota

Unexpected Benefits of COVID-19 on Grantee Transitions Activities

Despite COVID-19 challenges, states also identified how moving toward a virtual environment resulted in benefits for families and community partners who were looking at supporting transition planning by implementing universal enrollment. The work around registration was a key component in universal enrollment. States worked to streamline the process, provide easier access to families, and have registration happen in the Head Starts and the program. COVID-19 pushed the effort toward universal enrollment forward.

> "We're looking at a common application and our legal agreements will be able to help with transitions to better coordinate eligibility and services for children as they're transitioning to different programs."
>
> Minnesota

Some state programs focused on inconsistent transition practices and the lack of parent knowledge about enrollment or existing programs. New Jersey described different adaptations districts had made to traditional transition activities: "I've heard and seen virtual tours and virtual parent meetings, prospective parent meetings, and those kinds of things." The interviewee went on to describe intentions to ensure innovations at the district level are shared across the state: "And we are really building some initiatives to try and get feedback from school districts as to what they've done that's working well, and what they've tried that hasn't worked so well, so that we can share that statewide."

Finally, the impact of the pandemic created a large burden on states, requiring them to redo initial plans and strategies. However, these necessities led to a more streamlined process for parents to enroll their children, which resulted in a smoother transition process, and new strategies to increase parent knowledge about the transition process by providing resources and actives in a virtual environment.

Visions for Future Statewide Transitions Initiatives

In addition to describing past and current innovations, states looked toward how to ensure families were supported in the future. States were clear about the need to look beyond the current crisis to plan for potential future disasters. To best prepare parents and children about kindergarten transitions, states will continue to offer virtual opportunities to provide parents and families those flexibilities. A grant recipient shared their state's commitment to learning from the pandemic experience: "I think we have found creative ways to make sure we're learning. For example, we can use some of our community engagement travel dollars to create a virtual learning community. Then we can capitalize on that virtual learning opportunity instead of traveling elsewhere."

Some states plan to continue ongoing virtual learning communities related to transition practices, and shared virtual trainings. States like Minnesota recognized that some of these activities would continue to be conducted virtually: "I think the learning communities are going to have to remain virtual for some programs."

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has touched every facet of daily life in the United States, creating new challenges for all. PDG B-5 grant recipients have displayed an ongoing commitment to developing a mixed delivery system that supports successful transitions for children. Despite delays driven by a necessary shift in priorities and resources, states were able to adapt important transition activities to virtual environments and leverage the challenges created by the pandemic into opportunities for growth.

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