MAKING TRANSITION TO SCHOOL A COMMUNITY EVENT: THE WOLLONGONG EXPERIENCE

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Introduction

This paper describes the activities of a dedicated group of early childhood and primary school professionals who have worked in their community to establish an integrated series of starting school practices aimed at ensuring that all children in their community experience effective transitions to school.

The context – Government

Families First is a NSW state government initiative that aims to support parents and carers of children up to the age of 8 years. It has an early intervention focus based on research that has clearly shown the importance of the early years for the future development of children. One of the key strategies in Families First is what has become known as Universal Transition to School. This strategy is based on Australian research on starting school (Dockett & Perry, 2001; 2007) and has funded many projects across the state.

One of these projects has been the Illawarra Transition to School Project. This project was formed as a coalition of the local Families First group and child, youth and family networks in the Wollongong and Shellharbour/Kiama areas. It is a group of people interested in supporting a positive transition to school and includes educators, parents, community members, council representatives and researchers. The Network has been active since 2003 and has been responsible for raising the profile of transition to school within the Illawarra region. In this paper, we consider the activities of one of the two groups that make up the Illawarra Transition to School Project – the Wollongong Transition to School Network.

The context – Local

Wollongong is the fourth-largest city in New South Wales. The city itself has a population of approximately 182,000. When combined with surrounding urban areas, the population comprises approximately 280,000. It is located 80 kilometres south of Sydney within the Illawarra region and covers 714 square kilometres of which 144 square kilometres are urban areas. There are fifty suburbs in a 30 kilometre linear strip of coastal plain. Due to the topography of the city, the spread of the population and inadequate public transport, Wollongong has been divided into a number of distinct communities rather than being one cohesive population.

The context – Starting school

In New South Wales, the school year runs from the end of January to December and there is only one intake into the first year of primary school – Kindergarten – at the beginning of the school year. Children can commence primary school at the beginning of the year in which
they turn 5, providing they have their 5\(^{th}\) birthday by July 31 in this year. They must be attending primary school by the time they are 6 years old.

**Getting started – A reference group**

In mid-2003, a sub-committee was formed by the regional Families First coordinator with the aim of developing a proposal to Families First for funding of transition to school programs in the Wollongong and Shellharbour/Kiama areas. The sub-committee consisted of representatives from Wollongong, Shellharbour and Kiama Councils, NSW Department of Community Services, NSW Department of Education and Training, Families First, Illawarra Area Child Care, Illawarra Children’s Services, and Illawarra Cultural Resource Unit. The sub-committee developed a proposal for the Illawarra Transition to School Project that was funded by Families First. The sub-committee became the Reference Group for the overall project. Each council area formed their own Transition to School Network because of size of the areas. This paper considers the Wollongong Transition to School Network and its activities over the ensuing years.

**Wollongong Transition to School Network (Wollongong TTS Network)**

The Wollongong TTS Network was formed following an information session in late 2003 facilitated by the second author of this paper and organised by the first author. This session was held at Wollongong City Council where the Starting School Research Project findings (Dockett & Perry, 2001) were introduced to 120 participants. At this meeting, an open invitation was made to the following groups to join the network:

- local early childhood services – not for profit and for profit prior-to-school services;
- teachers from public and Catholic school sectors;
- Wollongong City Council;
- Illawarra Children’s Services;
- Families First;
- NSW TAFE; and
- any other interested parties.

An initial activity of the network was to develop a plan to engage all stakeholders. There was a very positive reaction to the invitation to join the network from many prior-to-school professionals but the response from school personnel was less positive. As a consequence, the plan included strategies for involving school personnel.

In order to benchmark the current state of affairs in transition practices in Wollongong, a brief survey was prepared and posted to all schools and early childhood services in the area. The survey was posted in Term 1, 2004. While response rate was poor, the survey did assist in involving schools and providing some idea of what was happening in the area. From the surveys, the need for further ideas on transition to school practices was identified. This result, along with other ideas identified in the planning process led to an extensive range of activities for the Wollongong TTS Network during 2004. These have continued into 2005 / 2006 and are identified below.
**Wollongong TTS Network activities for 2004**

**Information sessions**

Topics for these sessions included:

- Ashcroft Public School Beginning Well program;
- Using children’s portfolios for transition to school;
- Understanding children’s friendships;
- The NSW Curriculum Framework;
- Transition to school project and parent mentoring;
- Brain research and the NSW Curriculum Framework;

Up to 100 people attended these sessions.

**Regular monthly meetings**

At these planning and development meetings, attendance fluctuated but there was a core of 15 regulars. However, the majority of these were still prior-to-school professionals with schools relatively poorly represented. Discussions centred on local issues for transition to school and how the work of the network might be spread widely within the Wollongong area. As well, there were sessions devoted to the *Guidelines for Effective Transition to School* (Dockett & Perry, 2001) and *Indicators of Progress* (Dockett & Perry, 2006)

**Kids Garden Groove**

This is a regular community event run annually by the Wollongong City Council to which families are invited. The Wollongong TTS Network took the opportunity to promote its activities through its presence at the ‘Groove’, resulting in many enquiries from parents and educators.

‘Starting School 2005’ Picnic in the Park

This picnic was organised for December, 2004.

**Promotion of DET Starting School information booklets and posters**

These had been recently released by the NSW Department of Education and Training.

**Development of a Wollongong Transition to School brochure**

Based on earlier work from the Starting School Research Project, a local brochure was produced.

**Appointment of Project Officer**

A Project Officer was appointed to assist both the Wollongong and Shellharbour TTS Networks by:

- liaising between the Wollongong and Shellharbour networks;
- acting as Executive Officer of the Reference Group;
- extending knowledge about effective transition practices and developing links between schools and early childhood services;
- identifying key contacts in schools and early childhood services;
- seek linking with families where children do not attend prior-to-school services;
• working with the Families First supported playgroups in the area; and
• assisting with the coordination of community events relating to transition to school.

**Wollongong TTS Network activities for 2005**

**Information sessions**
Topics for these sessions included:
• Key learning areas;
• Indicators of progress matrix; and
• Transition to school for Aboriginal children.

**Strategic planning day**
This day was coordinated by the Reference Group and had as its aims:
• to determine priorities for improved transition to school initiatives for 2005;
• to identify strategies to include and engage with all stakeholders;
• to focus on the inclusion in transition to school activities of those children who do not attend a prior-to-school setting – including children and families from CALD backgrounds; and
• to focus on transition to school for Aboriginal children.

The strategic plan was built around the following questions:

1. How can schools and prior-to-school services build on existing transition to school programs?
2. How can we ensure that Aboriginal children have successful transitions to school?
3. How can we ensure that children who do not experience a prior-to-school setting have successful transitions to school?
4. How do we improve parent and community knowledge about the importance of a successful transition to school?
5. How do we promote and extend our Transition to School Networks?

Both a strategic plan and a consequent action plan were developed and guided the activities of the Wollongong TTS Network for the year.

**Regular meetings**
These meetings continued with a gradual increase in the representation from schools.

‘Big School 2006’ Parents Expo
A trial parents expo was held in one district in the Wollongong area.

Design a mascot competition for school aged children
This was one activity of the Wollongong TTS Network that really did gain the interest and involvement of schools.
Formation of cluster groups within the network

The geography of Wollongong makes it difficult for people to attend meetings regularly without substantial travel. Hence, the Wollongong area was broken up into several clusters which began to meet regularly and concentrate on the micro-local activities for transition to school.

‘Starting School 2006’ Picnic in the Park
This was a bigger and better version of the previous year’s picnic.

Spreading the word beyond Wollongong
Invitations to speak about the Wollongong experience of transition to school were received and accepted from Families First Central Coast and Early Childhood Australia.

Wollongong TTS Network activities for 2006

Many of the previous year’s activities were repeated and extended, including:
- Big School Parents Expos; and
- ‘Starting School 2007’ Picnic in the Park.

As well, there were some new initiatives including:
- Launch of Wollongong TTS Network website;
- Voices of children project; and
- Triennial Report to FF.

Highlights

Wollongong Transition to School brochure
Based on earlier examples of information brochures devised by the Starting School Research Project (Dockett & Perry, 2006), the Wollongong TTS Network developed a Wollongong – relevant information brochure which was distributed at all the network’s activities. This brochure has turned out to be a very important source of information for families and educators as well as an important source of exposure for the network.

Big School Parents Expos
In both 2005 and 2006, the Wollongong TTS Network has run very successful Parents Expos. The objectives for these expos are to:
- reach as many parents as possible: particularly those whose children do not attend a prior-to-school service;
- bring schools into the community by having all schools in the district represented at the one venue;
- enable parents to fill out enrolment details, ask questions, look at uniforms, find out policies, practices etc for a number of schools in their area; and
- achieve a coordinated approach to transition to school so that every one receives the same message.
In 2005, one parents expo was run in the northern part of the Wollongong area and was attended by 12 schools – state, Catholic and independent – and 100 parents. In 2006, four expos were held throughout the Wollongong area with almost all schools in the local areas attending and an average of 110 parents per expo.

The Big School Parents Expos have been a resounding success with feedback from both the schools and parents very positive.

In another way, the Big School Parents Expos have epitomized the particular perspective of the Wollongong TTS Network that transition to school is a community event, not one that is restricted to early childhood settings and schools. While the Big School Parents Expos have been funded through Families First, it is important to note that as part of their community initiatives, the venues have been donated by various service clubs and the Wollongong City Council.

**Mascot Competition**

This competition was established to ask children in primary school to design a suitable mascot for the TTS Network. The objectives of this activity were:

- to involve the broader community in the TTS network activities by working with school age children;
- to have a character that is identified with transition to school and with whom children, families and the community will become familiar;
- to use children’s creative and imaginative talents to design the mascot; and
- for children in the area to have a ‘sense of ownership’ of the character.

Details of the competition were distributed to all primary schools in the area (Figure 1).
Sponsorship was from local business in the form of a prize for the winning child and school, Wollongong City Council and Families First. Judging was by a committee consisting of representatives of Wollongong City Council Cultural Services and Marketing Divisions, the Lord Mayor, the State Member for Illawarra, and the local business sponsor. The top ten finalists were invited to Council for the presentation by the Lord Mayor, State Member and the business sponsor. Their entries were framed and they enjoyed a pizza picnic and photos with the Lord Mayor. The winner was *Billy Backpack* designed by Mitchell Prior of Woonona East Public School (Figure 2).

![Figure 2. The creation of Billy Backpack](image)

Billy Backpack has since been brought to life and was launched at the Starting School 2006 Picnic in the Park. Billy appears on all material developed by the TTS Network and is a big hit at many TTS activities in the area and beyond.

Starting School Picnics in the Park

The first Starting School Picnic in the Park was held in December, 2004. All children in the Wollongong Local Government Area who were starting school in 2005 were invited to bring their families to a Sunday morning picnic in the park. The children were given a gift bag that included a school starters hat (Figure 3) sponsored by local businesses and information to assist the children and their families as they started school. The Lord Mayor attended the picnic, along with about 60 children. Brief speeches were made by the Lord Mayor and by the second author of this paper who spoke of the importance of a successful start to school.
In 2005, the picnic was held in October and was attended by more than 200 children and their families. The Lord Mayor launched Billy Backpack who made his inaugural public appearance (Figure 4). The children were presented with a gift bag including a school starters hat, Billy Backpack promotional materials and other materials to be used as they started school.

Figure 3 School Starter 2005 cap

Figure 4. Billy Backpack at the Starting School 2006 Picnic in the Park

Project website

This website was launched in 2006 and is sponsored by Families First. The website is used to promote local activities and events, meeting dates and to celebrate the achievements of the Wollongong and Shellharbour TTS networks. Local schools and prior-to-school services have submitted their transition to school programs for inclusion on the website. Links to research and other relevant websites are also included. The website address is www.transitiontoschool.com.au

Voices of Children Project

This project was a small investigation into the ways in which primary and prior-to-school children can be actively involved in the planning, implementation and evaluation of transition to school programs. The project was run in four primary schools and some of their feeder prior-to-school settings following an expression interest process. It was funded by Families First and the Wollongong City Council.

There was little extra guidance given to the schools and prior-to-school settings involved in the project although it was made clear that participants were required to document their journeys through the project and that there would be a presentation day held at the end of the project. Details about precisely what was to be done were left purposely vague in order not to thwart the creativity of the participants. To exemplify the level of instruction given, the following extract from the call for expressions of interest is reproduced.

The aim is to work in a small number of schools – and their feeder prior-to-school settings – to trial various ways in which children might be involved and to ascertain which of these approaches might be appropriate. For example, children may play an active role in the planning of transition programs through their input on matters such
as activities, venues, personnel to be involved and relationships among the participants. The investigators do not have fixed ideas about the manner of involvement of the children. However, we are convinced about the value of children being involved and about the importance of activities designed by children for children.

The schools participating in the project then set about, over a 3-month period including Term 3 of 2006, developing and implementing their plans. Both children and adults kept extensive documentation of their involvement. The project culminated in a presentation day held at the Wollongong City Council in which children and educators from all the sites were bussed in and presented what they had done through posters, videotapes, PowerPoint presentations and many other formats. Some 65 children, their teachers and some parents, along with representatives of the council, the NSW Department of Education and Training, researchers and other members of the Wollongong TTS Network were present to witness a spectacular celebration of what can happen when adults listen to and act on the voices of children. Much to the delight of all present, the celebration concluded with a pizza and ice block picnic.

As a follow on, it is planned to run a professional development day in which the four settings will share what they have done. Publication of the documentation is also planned.

Conclusion

The Wollongong Transition to School Network has raised the profile for starting school in Wollongong to a level where all schools and prior-to-school settings are aware of the importance of this life transition for children, families, educators and the community. Practices have changed and starting school is a celebratory time. Through our journey with the network, there are some important principles that we have learned about effective transition to school programs:

- every school and prior-to-school service needs a champion for transition to school and a supportive leader.
- programs with a strong child focus that value parents and carers as partners work the best.
- programs that foster strong relationships with parents and carers and encourage commitment to and participation in the school have the most beneficial impact.
- community involvement needs to be encouraged by accessing parents and relatives at local schools and childcare centres.
- what is currently being done works in the eyes of those involved. It is better to improve and refine processes already in place rather than make radical changes or start completely from scratch.
- it is better to do some things very well than try to do lots of things and do them badly (Adopt the KISS principle).
- the has to be a practical, easy-to-follow plan. The time spent developing and refining this plan is not wasted time.
- the most effective transition to school programs revolve around building strong relationships among all participants.

The Wollongong Transition to School Network has achieved a tremendous amount since 2003. To attend one of their regular meetings or a special event is professionally invigorating because of the enthusiasm and mutual respect shown by the professionals present. However,
as one would expect from such a dedicated group of people, success breeds further ideas and the enthusiasm to pursue them. To this end, the Wollongong TTS Network has suggested that, in the long run, they would like to see that:

- all schools and prior-to-school services enthusiastically implement TTS programs;
- parents are informed about TTS and actively seek information from their prior-to-school services and schools;
- TTS programs be seen as core educational business and funded accordingly;
- adequate time and resources are made available to implement effective TTS programs in all prior-to-school and school environments and for children and families who do not access these environments; and
- TTS programs are community events and celebrations.

The Wollongong Transition to School Network, with the assistance of Families First, Wollongong City Council and its many other benefactors, will continue to pursue these goals for the benefit of all children, their families, educators and community.

References


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**Acknowledgements:** We wish to thank all of our colleagues in the Wollongong Transition to School Network and the children and families who have reacted so positively to our endeavours to highlight the importance of transition to school for all, including the community. As well, we thank Families First, Wollongong City Council, NSW Department of Education and Training and all the other sponsors of the Wollongong Transition to School Network. Finally, we thank Billy Backpack for bringing such joy to young children and for showing these children, their families and their communities that transition to school is a time to be enjoyed and celebrated.