

Rounding Up Pre-K Kids, Parents



Inviting parents and pre-kindergartners to meet teachers and see their schools six months before school opens can noticeably reduce first-day jitters -- for everyone. Called kindergarten round-ups, these events also let teachers meet their incoming charges. Included: Tips for staging a kindergarten round-up.

At first mention, a kindergarten round-up sounds like an all-hands effort to corral children at a recess gone awry.

In fact, round-ups are an increasingly popular orientation program for pre-kindergartners and their parents. The events bring families to school to see classrooms, meet teachers, and experience a kindergarten day. Most schools hold the events in late April or early May.

"We see it as a win-win situation," said Dr. Robert Kreifels, executive director of school administration for the [Blue Valley School District](#) in Overland Park, Kansas. "The sooner you can start the transition process, the better it is for everyone. This lets everyone know, wherever they will be, they will be okay. Children -- and parents -- are much less anxious."

REACHING OUT EARLY

Whether round-ups last a whole day or a few hours, they can go a long way toward helping children and parents prepare for the start of school. The [Portland \(Oregon\) Public Schools](#) have had some form of kindergarten round-ups for at least 30 years, and have found them worthwhile for teachers, children -- and especially parents, said Lew Frederick, the district's director of public affairs. "The greatest issue in terms of transitions is not the kids, it's the parents," he told Education World. "This provides the parents with a touchstone. It gives parents an idea of what to expect. This connects families to schools early."

The program is different at each of the district's 63 elementary schools; some teachers do an informal assessment of children's school readiness skills. Children's skills are assessed more formally after they enroll, Frederick added.

The round-ups can be good opportunities to perform vision and hearing tests, and informal kindergarten screenings. If problems are detected, children can be referred for further evaluation and assistance before school even starts.

"It's a time for us to be proactive, and see if we need to prepare in any way for kids, or start providing services," Kreifels told Education World. Blue Valley has held kindergarten round-ups for at least 11 years. "We have some specialists -- speech, special education teachers, and occupational therapists -- observe the children. But we don't place a lot of emphasis on that. At times, we can pick up on something and follow-up with parents about it."

Children and their parents spend about 90 minutes at school; children visit classrooms and interact with each other while parents learn about the kindergarten curriculum and skills they can practice at home with their children before school starts.

"They come into school, into class, and experience a typical kindergarten environment," Kreifels added.

SAMPLING KINDERGARTEN

Teachers at [BCLUW Elementary School](#) in Conrad, Kansas, invite soon-to-be kindergartners to spend two full days in the spring attending class with their teachers. This year, 21 out of the 27 incoming kindergartners attended the round-up, said teacher Vicki Anderson. Regular kindergarten classes are cancelled for two days so teachers can focus on their incoming students. Parents come in with children on the first day to complete some paperwork. Then students go to their "classrooms," where they even find their names hanging above coat hooks.

"This lets everyone know, wherever they will be, they will be okay," says Dr. Robert Kreifels, executive director of school administration for the Blue Valley School District.

"They sure like coming in and seeing where they hang their bags," Anderson told Education World. "It also shows us if they can recognize their names."

The children are exposed to all the aspects of school life including lunch, recess, and each of the specials, such as music, physical education, Spanish, and art. Their vision and hearing also is tested, and they take a kindergarten readiness test. In some cases, children are referred for services, such as exercises to improve fine motor skills. Once in a while, teachers spot children who could benefit from special education pre-school for a year before enrolling in a regular education setting.

"With the two-day experience, teachers have a pretty good picture of the students' skills, and can plan accordingly for the classes in the fall," said BCLU Elementary principal Diane Petty. "This is helpful in creating fairly equal distribution of the students in each of the fall classes, also."

NEVER TOO YOUNG TO START

BCLUW also holds a round-up for 3-year-olds and their parents, called "A Step in the Right Direction." That round-up is in the spring, and the school cancels kindergarten for a day so 3-year-olds and their parents can come for a half-day program. After a "mixer" activity involving music and movement, children continue to play, while parents meet with staff members to talk about the kindergarten curriculum, services the district offers, and activities they can do at home to help prepare their children for school.

"We're trying to catch kids [who might need assistance] 18 months out of school," said Anderson. "We talk about readiness, fine motor skills, cognition."

Then children and parents then spend 25 minutes at each of four "stations" -- where staff members talk about language, math, music, and arts/crafts activities parents can do with their children at home. Youngsters receive vision and hearing screenings at a fifth station. The day ends with a snack and a chance for parents to ask questions.

"The parents really enjoy the opportunity to be in the building and see our facilities, while experiencing our staff teaching them and the children," said Petty. "This makes for a very comfortable first experience and connection with our future students."

In some cases, the round-up also led to some children getting specialized services, so they were better prepared for school when they enrolled, Petty said. "We've caught some kids with vision and hearing needs and others with speech problems," added Anderson.

While worth the effort in the long run, the round-ups do require a lot of work by teachers. "It's like starting the school year in the middle of the year," Anderson continued. "They need name tags and we send out letters to parents, and change the room for two days. I would recommend it, though; it is a lot of work, but it is a good way to meet kids early, and give parents an idea of what to do."

"This provides the parents with a touchstone. It gives parents an idea of what to expect. This connects families to schools early," says Lew Frederick, director of public affairs for the Portland (Oregon) Public Schools.

ROUND-UP CAUTION

While round-ups are a good way to learn about students and parents, one study cautions against using round-up observations to decide whether a child needs a developmental kindergarten program or should wait a year before enrolling in school. In "Reforming the Kindergarten Round-Up," an article in *Educational Leadership* magazine (Volume 56, Number 6 - March 1999), Drake University education professor Susan Sidney Smith writes that it is unlikely that children who are less mature or seem less prepared academically will benefit from spending another year at home or in a less-challenging school program.

Smith suggests that the focus of the round-ups be on opening and sustaining communication with parents, checking children for any learning impairments that could be corrected before they start school, and sharing meaningful information with parents.

With that done, school is a friendlier, more familiar place when classes start in the fall. "Because this is a short experience, we have very few tears or separation anxieties to deal with [during the round-up]," said Petty. "Bur it also reduces the fear of the first day in the fall, and we have virtually no problems in the fall with fears and anxiety."