

SUPPORTING CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES:

*A Guide to Understanding
Early Childhood Special Education Systems*



DEVELOPED BY THE

RACE 2 K

*Maximizing results for preschool children
with disabilities because kindergarten is too late.*

Funded by the NH Department of Education, Bureau of Special Education
and a project of the Parent Information Center

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Introduction

Administrator involvement in day to day operations of their district's preschool programming varies greatly across the state. As more and more focus is being put on Early Childhood Education both on the state and federal level, Special Education and other district and building level Administrators are realizing the need to better understand preschool and the requirements as it relates to serving preschool aged children with disabilities. The US Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) and the New Hampshire Department of Education (NH DOE) have a strong commitment to ensuring that preschool children with disabilities are educated in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). This means that children are educated in an Early Childhood setting and removed to other settings only when the nature and severity of the child's disability is such that, even with supplemental aids and services, their needs cannot be met in the Early Childhood setting. As with school aged children, school districts are required to ensure access to a continuum of alternative learning environments for preschoolers. For some districts, ensuring access to Early Childhood programs means collaborating with community Early Childhood and preschool programs. For some districts, this means expanding district operated program models to include Early Childhood classrooms.

USING THIS GUIDE

This guide was developed by the Race 2K project to provide a general overview of preschool in the context of ensuring preschool children with disabilities have access to the Least Restrictive Environment. In addition, it also provides tools and strategies to help Administrators better understand and examine their district's system for providing services to preschool aged children with disabilities. The guide is divided into several sections.

- *Examining Where Services Are Provided to Preschool Children with Disabilities* - In this first section we discuss the terminology, and provide clarification around the settings and environments related to serving preschool aged children with disabilities. This section includes a program self-assessment.
- *Understanding Your District's Preschool System* - In the second section information is provided to support conversations between Administrators and Preschool staff around the components and qualities of the district's preschool system including classroom types, service delivery models and quality components. This section includes a rubric to help document a district's preschool system.
- *Expanding Your District Operated Preschool Program* – The third section discusses how a district can expand their district operated preschool program to meet the increasing number of preschool aged children with disabilities and/or to include Early Childhood classrooms. This section includes a checklist to help explore capacity for expansion.

This guide is intended to be used as a tool for school districts to reflect on the capacity and characteristics of their own programs and/or classrooms. The Rubrics and other tools included are to help Administrators and Preschool program staff examine and discuss their program's characteristics and components. It is suggested that Administrators and Preschool program staff meet to discuss the questions raised and complete the Rubrics and/or tools together. It is important to remember that this Guide and its tools are not designed to "evaluate" a program but rather to generate discussion about the characteristics of the program and the capacity of a district to meet the needs of children with disabilities within the LRE.

PRESCHOOL DATA ELEMENTS

As part of the State Performance Plan/Annual Performance Report (SPP/APR) the NH DOE monitors districts on their performance on 14 Indicators. Indicators 6, 7 and 12 are specific to the education of preschool age students with disabilities. These are important aspects of preschool special education administration Administrators should know about.

Indicator 6 – Preschool LRE

Percent of children aged 3 through 5 with IEPs attending a:

- A. Regular Early Childhood program and receiving the majority of special education and related services in the Regular Early Childhood program; and
- B. Separate Special Education class, separate school or residential facility.

Indicator 6 data is collected via the NH Special Education Information System (NHSEIS). For more information on how to ensure your district is correctly entering the required data for Indicator 6 please visit: http://www.picnh.org/settingsmodule/presentation_html5.html

Indicator 7 – Preschool Outcomes Measurement System (POMS)

Percent of preschool children aged 3 through 5 with IEPs who demonstrate improved:

- A. Positive social-emotional skills (including social relationships);
- B. Acquisition and use of knowledge and skills (including early language/communication and early literacy); and
- C. Use of appropriate behaviors to meet their needs.

Districts utilize either AEPSi or My Teaching Strategies to assess children and gather the required data for POMS.

Indicator 12 – Early Transitions

Percent of children referred by Part C prior to age 3, who are found eligible for Part B, and who have an IEP developed and implemented by their third birthdays. Data for Indicator 12 is collected via NHSEIS.

Services for infants and toddlers and preschool aged children with disabilities are provided under the same federal law – the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). IDEA is divided into sections or parts. Part C provides services for children birth through age 2 and is known in NH as Family Centered Early Supports and Services (FCESS). Area Agencies are responsible for providing FCESS. Some provide services directly, others use contracted vendors to provide services and some use vendors and provide services directly.

The IDEA and NH Standards for the Education of Children with Disabilities requires that all children referred by FCESS have eligibility determined prior to age 3, and if eligible for special education, an IEP developed and signed by the child's third birthday. In addition, the NH Standards for the Education of Children with Disabilities requires every school district to have an Interagency Agreement with their local Area Agency. These Interagency Agreements lay out the roles and responsibilities as well as the timelines for the early transition process. The Race2K project is funded by the Bureau of Special Education to support the implementation of the Interagency Agreements. You can find your regional Interagency Agreement on the Race2K website along with more information on the early transition process including Tip Sheets and an on-line learning module. <https://race2k.org/transitions/>

SUPPORT TO DISTRICTS

The Race2K project is funded by the NH Department of Education, Bureau of Special Education to assist school districts in their efforts to support preschool aged children with disabilities. Project staff are available to assist school districts in both assessing current preschool program models and capacity and in implementing strategies to expand their program to provide access to Early Childhood classrooms/programs. For more information on the Race 2K project or to request technical assistance please visit www.race2k.org.

Examining Where Services are Provided to Preschool Children with Disabilities

The language and terms used to describe district preschool programming can often be confusing. It is not uncommon to hear terms such as “integrated preschool” or “inclusive preschool” to describe a district’s preschool program. When a district says, “We have an integrated preschool”, what does that actually mean? These terms are not used or defined in the IDEA or NH Standards for the Education of Children with Disabilities. It is important that a common understanding of the educational settings and programs being providing our preschool population is developed. Below we will discuss the settings and environments in more detail.

At the end of this section you will find a *Preschool Program Self-Assessment*. It is intended to provide a snap shot of your district’s program. Administrators may complete the self-assessment independently to help them conceptualize what is discussed in this section. Administrators may also choose to meet with Preschool Coordinators or others involved in a district’s preschool program to discuss the questions and complete the Self-Assessment together. It is important to remember that this Guide and tools are not designed to “evaluate” a program but rather to generate discussion about the characteristics of the program and the capacity of a school district.

EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS/ENVIRONMENTS FOR CHILDREN AGED 3-5

As part of developing the IEP, the IEP Team must determine the location or “setting” where each special education and related service will be provided. When we hear the word setting, we frequently jump to placement or the program where the child will be going. People are sometimes confused by the concepts of a setting or environment versus a placement. A setting is the generic category; the type of place. The program is the placement, the actual place, with a name and a specific curriculum, staffing, etc. As an example, you would like to go out to eat. You’d really like Mexican food (the setting). Now you are trying to decide between two restaurants - Hermanos or Margaritas (the placement).

The Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) at the US DOE defines three different types of educational settings/environments for children aged 3-5 which align with the NH Standards for the Education of Children with Disabilities:

- **Regular Early Childhood Setting** (listed in NHSEIS as 3-5 Early Childhood Program)
- **Special Education Settings** (listed in NHSEIS as 3-5 Special Education Classrooms, 3-5 Separate School, and 3-5 Residential Facility)
- **Other** (neither a regular Early Childhood setting nor a special education setting. Listed in NHSEIS as 3-5 Homebased/Child’s Home or 3-5 Service Provider Location)

REGULAR EARLY CHILDHOOD SETTING

In the school aged context, the Early Childhood environment/setting would be equivalent to the Regular Education Environment (aka the regular first grade classroom). An Early Childhood setting is defined as having at least 50% of children without IEPs. In other words, at least half of the class will always be children who are not identified for special education. Programs associated with this setting include but are not limited to programs in these categories:

- Head Start
- Preschool classes offered by the public school system
- Private preschools (Community Preschool Programs)
- Family Child Care or other Child Care Center

SPECIAL EDUCATION SETTINGS

Early Childhood Special Education Program

In school aged context, this would be similar to self-contained programs or specially designed classrooms. An Early Childhood Special Education classroom is defined as having less than 50% of the children without IEPs. In other words, the majority of the children in the classroom are children with disabilities. It is operated by the local school district and can include, but is not limited to Special Education classrooms in regular school buildings, trailers or portables outside the regular school building.

Separate schools

A separate school is defined as a publicly or privately operated separate day school facility designed specifically for children with disabilities.

Residential programs

A residential facility is a publicly or privately operated residential school or residential medical facility on an inpatient basis.

OTHER SETTINGS

Home

A preschooler with a disability may receive some or all of their special education and related services in the child's home. Home is defined as the principal residence of the child's family or caregivers. The term caregivers includes babysitters.

Service Provider Location

Service provider location is defined as receiving special education and/or related services such as speech therapy in a:

- Therapist or clinician's office in a public school
- Private therapist or clinician's office
- Hospitals facilities in an outpatient basis

Unlike with school-aged children, Service Provider Location is an appropriate setting in NHSEIS for preschool aged children. A child may require speech therapy, but not a preschool program. In this case, services may be provided by a speech pathologist individually or in a small group at a site such as a speech room in a local elementary school, or in a district preschool classroom after hours.

CONTINUUM OF PRESCHOOL PLACEMENTS (ENVIRONMENTS)

It is important to remember that settings drive placement and that settings and placement are determined based on a child's individual needs and not on the pre-established service delivery model of the district. When developing the IEP, the IEP Team decides what special education and related services the child requires and the setting in which the services will be provided starting with the Early Childhood setting. Keeping LRE in mind, the settings in which services will be provided then drives the preschool placement. Even when options seem limited, program placement must be determined by what is necessary to meet the child's needs.

The NH Standards for the Education of Children with Disabilities defines the continuum of Preschool Placements. In terms of district operated classrooms we will discuss two:

Early Childhood Classrooms

An Early Childhood setting/classroom is defined as having at least 50% of children without IEPs. In other words, at least half of the class will always be children who are not identified for special education. Early Childhood classrooms include district operated classrooms or community Early Childhood programs. Early Childhood classrooms do not have program approval from the NH DOE, Bureau of Special Education. This is because the NH DOE does not have authority or approve Early Childhood classrooms. Additionally, because district operated programs are exempt from child care licensing there are no state level requirements for maximum class size, teacher certification or staff to student ratio.

Early Childhood Special Education Classrooms

An Early Childhood Special Education classroom is defined as having less than 50% of the children without IEPs. In other words, the majority of the children in the classroom are children with disabilities. These classrooms require program approval from the NH DOE. The maximum number of preschool children in an Early Childhood Special Education classroom is twelve. For a classroom with only one qualified teacher and no paraprofessional, the maximum number of preschool children is eight. For a classroom of 8 – 12 preschoolers, staff requirements include one qualified teacher and one qualified paraprofessional or two qualified teachers. Early Childhood Special Education classrooms must be staffed as outlined in the NH Standards for the Education of Children with Disabilities.

It is important to remember that program approval is classroom specific, and does not apply to the entire Preschool Program. There may come a time when children are not assigned to an approved Early Childhood Special Education classroom. If an approved Early Childhood Special Education program is no longer being utilized, district Administrators should contact the NH DOE to discuss options and potentially close the program in NHSEIS.

OPTIONS FOR PROVIDING ACCESS TO EARLY CHILDHOOD ENVIRONMENTS

While the continuum of placements is defined clearly, how a school district provides access to Early Childhood environments can be different. Some districts partner with community preschool programs exclusively to provide Early Childhood environments for all of their district preschoolers. Some school districts operate their own Early Childhood classrooms/programs. Others partner with community preschool programs along with operating their own district preschool programs to provide a free appropriate public education (FAPE). There can be multiple classrooms, offering Early Childhood and Early Childhood Special Education within one school district. One size does not fit all. The priority is on offering access to a full continuum of settings and environments and having a clear understanding of what your school district's options are and how each fits in the continuum of environments.

The Race2K Project has created a guide to support school districts explore community preschool options called the ***Supporting Children with Disabilities: A Guide to Working Together for School Districts and Community Preschool Programs***. This Guide discusses characteristics and components of preschool/childcare programs that are necessary to consider when meeting the needs of children with disabilities. There are three components to the Guide, including the Program Profile, identifying key characteristics of a preschool/childcare program; Program Rubric, which provides a means to generate discussion about program characteristics and capacity; and Formalization, which guides the coordination and formalization of the working relationship between districts and community childcares and preschools. While the Guide was not developed to assess a program's quality, the guide does draw heavily on the Division for Early Childhood (DEC) Recommended Practices for quality Early Childhood programs. Thus, the Guide can also be used as a tool for a school district to reflect on the characteristics of their own Early Childhood programs/ classrooms. The Guide can be viewed and downloaded at <https://race2k.org/lre/supporting-children-with-disabilities-a-guide/>

Preschool Program Self-Assessment

This Self-Assessment is intended to provide a snap shot of a district's program. Administrators (and Preschool Coordinators or others involved in a district's preschool program) may complete the self-assessment independently to help them conceptualize what is discussed in the *Examining Where Services Are Provided to Preschool Children with Disabilities* section and then meet to discuss their responses in more detail. Administrators may also choose to meet with Preschool Coordinators or others involved in a district's preschool program to discuss the questions and complete the Self-Assessment together. Included in the Rubric is a space for Explanation/Comments to capture specific information or criteria. It is important to remember that this Guide and tools are not designed to "evaluate" a program but rather to generate discussion about the characteristics of the program and the capacity of a school district.

PROGRAM NAME:

DATE:

PERSONS COMPLETING SELF-ASSESSMENT:

DISTRICT OPERATED CLASSROOMS - IDENTIFY THE CHARACTERISTICS OF EACH DISTRICT OPERATED CLASSROOM (ADD COLUMNS AS NECESSARY)

	Classroom 1	Classroom 2	Classroom 3	Classroom 4
Classroom setting (Early Childhood or Early Childhood Special Education)				
Classroom has program approval from the NH DOE				
Age-ranges				
Total enrollment limit for each classroom				
Teaching credentials/certifications for in each of the district operated classrooms				
Staff to student ratio				
Ratio of identified to non-identified children				
Notes/Possible Next Steps:				

PRESCHOOL SETTING/ENVIRONMENT OPTIONS

	No/No Evidence	Somewhat/Partial Evidence	Yes/Evident	Evidence/Comments
The district has access to the continuum of settings and environments (Early Childhood and Early Childhood Special Education)				
The district provides services in a Service Provider location for identified children who only require related services to receive a free appropriate public education				
There is a plan for when the capacity is reached within a district operated classroom to ensure access to LRE				
There is a plan for when the capacity is reached within the district operated program as a whole to ensure access to LRE				
If the district partners with community programs to offer Early Childhood programs there are written contracts or agreements that lay out roles and responsibilities, including maximum numbers of children and service delivery partners with community programs				

Notes/Possible Next Steps: