

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

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION	Page 2
Using this Guide	Page 2
Preschool Data Elements	Page 3
Support to Districts	Page 4
EXAMINING WHERE SERVICES ARE PROVIDED TO PRESCHOOL CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES	Page 5
Educational Settings/Environments for Children Aged 3-5	Page 5
Continuum of Program Placements (Environments)	Page 7
Options for Providing Access to Early Childhood Environments	Page 8
Preschool Program Self-Assessment	Page 9
UNDERSTANDING YOUR DISTRICT’S PRESCHOOL SYSTEM	Page 12
District Operated Classrooms	Page 12
Classroom Age Range	Page 12
Classroom Enrollment Size	Page 13
Teacher Certification	Page 13
Staff to Student Ratio	Page 13
Preschool Settings/Environment Options	Page 13
Baseline Program	Page 14
Enrollment of Children without Disabilities	Page 14
Service Delivery Model	Page 14
Curriculums	Page 15
Administrative Structure	Page 15
Family Engagement	Page 16
Data Collection/Progress Reporting	Page 16
Infrastructure Development	Page 16
Understanding Your District’s Preschool System Rubric	Page 17
EXPANDING YOUR DISTRICT OPERATED PRESCHOOL PROGRAM	Page 31
Revisiting Current Program Structures	Page 31
Classroom Age Ranges	Page 31
Classroom Enrollment Size	Page 31
Baseline Program	Page 32
Community Early Childhood Program Options	Page 32
Exploring Capacity for Expansion	Page 33
Fiscal	Page 33
Space Needs	Page 33
Staffing	Page 34
Opening a District Operated Early Childhood Classroom/Program	Page 34
Mission/Vision	Page 34
Preschool Administration	Page 34
Curriculum	Page 35
Infrastructure Development	Page 35
Expansion Capacity Checklist	Page 36

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/>

Expanding Your District Operated Preschool Program

As discussed earlier, school districts have a variety of ways to ensure access to the continuum of settings and environments. In some districts, the numbers of preschool aged children being identified are forcing districts to revisit their preschool model as a whole to ensure they can meet the growing number and needs of children. For many districts, the decision to open an Early Childhood classroom (or an additional classroom) seems to be an easy answer to address the issue of providing access to an Early Childhood setting. But there are a variety of factors that must be considered when growing your preschool program. These factors go beyond simply the fiscal impact of adding staff and materials or whether or not the district has the physical space to grow. There are also infrastructure components that must be considered to ensure the district has the capacity to grow. At the end of this section is an *Expansion Capacity Checklist*. It is suggested that Administrators meet with Preschool Coordinators or others involved in a district's preschool program to discuss the questions raised below and complete the Checklist 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.

REVISITING CURRENT PROGRAM STRUCTURES

Before thinking about opening another classroom, could program expansion be possible by revisiting current district program structures such as:

Classroom Age Ranges

There are several options to address the age ranges a district can establish for preschool classrooms (regardless of whether they are Early Childhood or Early Childhood Special Education classrooms). Classrooms may be designed for specific ages (i.e. 3 year old classrooms and 4 year old classrooms). Multi-age classrooms may provide for flexibility in keeping the numbers of students equalized. In some communities, families have preferences for age groupings and this may need to be given consideration in order to enroll non-identified peers. Multi-age versus age specific classrooms may also be a philosophical decision. The age ranges of a classroom may also be affected by how many physical preschool classrooms are available in the district. In the case of larger districts, a variety of types of classrooms may be offered, whereas in smaller districts, multi-aged classrooms may provide for more flexibility. Remember that the types of classrooms provided by a district may vary from year to year depending on the number and ages of preschoolers.

- Could expansion be possible by changing the age grouping/design of classrooms?

Classroom Enrollment Size

Early Childhood classrooms have no maximum enrollment requirements. The maximum number of students in an Early Childhood classroom is a district decision. Physical space and staffing needs should be considered when deciding class enrollment numbers. An additional consideration for districts is the ratio of children with disabilities to non-identified children. The Early Childhood setting distinction dictates that the classroom may have no more than 50% of the children with disabilities; it is the district's decision to set the actual ratio while keeping the minimum standards. In other words, a

district could decide to enroll, for instance, 60% of the students without disabilities, while enrolling 40% with special needs. While actual classroom enrollment may vary at any given time during the school year, it is important for districts to consider their ratio standards and strive to maintain those ratios throughout the year. Early Childhood Special Education classrooms are capped at a maximum of twelve children per classroom.

- Do we need to look at our class enrollment limits? Can they be changed?
- Can we change our ratio?
- Is there a waiting list of non-identified children to enroll to maintain appropriate ratios if more identified children are enrolled?

Baseline Program

We know that for 1st graders, the regular education program is 6 hours a day, 5 days a week. Otherwise known as a free adequate public education. For children identified for special education we build onto that the additional supports, services, etc. that a child needs in order to receive a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE). Similarly, we need to establish what the regular education preschool program for children without disabilities is. As discussed in previous sections, the baseline program varies greatly from one district to another. A district's baseline program may be impacted by the size of the district, number of children they serve as well as what is consistent with what is offered in community preschool programs.

Remember, the child's needs and IEP will drive the number of hours/days required to meet FAPE for any individual child identified with a disability. Just as every child's needs are different, their preschool schedule may be different. Some children may require a two day per week program to meet their needs and some children may require a five day per week program to meet their needs, while other children may require a full day program.

Districts throughout NH establish preschool program models based on the individual needs of their preschoolers as well as the needs of the district. Just as community preschool/childcare programs offer unique schedules for their families that should be the case for school districts. If program expansion is necessary, consider the following:

- How many additional sessions will be required to meet the district's growing needs?
- How will adding an extra day of programming to an already existing two or three day per week program impact the need?

Community Early Childhood Program Options

When looking at expanding current program options within a district, one option may be placement of some children in a community Early Childhood program. Community programs can be as different as district programs, and may bring their own set of unique strengths and challenges. Related service staffing and financial commitment are among the considerations. As a district, it may be beneficial to be proactive, by becoming familiar with preschool programs in the community so that if it becomes necessary to place children in a community setting the district is already familiar with available programs. Please see Race2K's **Supporting Children with Disabilities: A Guide to Working Together for School Districts and Community Preschool Programs** for strategies and tools to help when talking with and exploring community programs.

EXPLORING CAPACITY FOR EXPANSION

Many factors can contribute to a district considering expansion of their preschool programming options, including an increase in the number of children requiring special education, desire for more local control over programming and ensuring children are able to access Early Childhood programs. The first step when considering expansion is to explore and evaluate your district's capacity for possible expansion. It will be important to consider the short and long term implications in terms of finance, space and personnel.

Fiscal

In NH, services for preschool aged children is only required for those identified as eligible for special education. However, school districts are responsible for ensuring access to LRE. Growing your preschool program may mean more children or paying for children in community placements. Regardless, this may mean increased cost.

- How is our current preschool programming funded?
- Are we currently spending our entire Federal 619 allotment?
- Do we have access to additional funding to pay for staff, staff training, materials or space?
- Are there any other grant opportunities that are appropriate for preschool?
- Are there any opportunities to leverage funds such as Title I?
- Is charging tuition for non-identified children an option to consider? If so, how would that be factored into our preschool budget?
- In expanding, how will transportation be impacted? Will it be a barrier for families?

Space Needs

When considering expanding a district program, space needs should be examined. For many districts, classroom space is a challenge. Most often, preschool classrooms are housed in an elementary school. However, districts throughout the state have also become creative in addressing space issues by housing preschool classrooms in local high schools, CTE centers and community early learning centers. If there are classroom location options available within a school building, bathroom availability or proximity should be considered. Drop off and pick up locations and playground space should also be considered, in terms of proximity to the classroom, as well as size and safety factors. However, a benefit to classrooms located within another school building includes the possible use of school amenities such as the library and gym.

- Is additional classroom space available within the current program space?
- Is classroom space for expansion available in another school district building (another elementary building, for example, or might space be available within the high school or CTE)?
- If there is space in another location, is the space appropriate for preschool aged children? (i.e. bathrooms, playgrounds) If not, what would it take to make it appropriate?
- How might the program be impacted if there are classrooms in multiple locations?

Staffing

When considering any expansion within a preschool program, a district must consider staffing and staffing patterns. In addition to determining numbers of teachers and paraprofessionals (both in terms of certification and student/teacher ratio), districts will need to consider the related Service Providers necessary to meet the children's IEP needs.

- Do we have a sufficient number of teaching staff with appropriate certifications?
- How will program growth impact the service delivery model?
- Will additional staff be required? Who? What types, qualifications/certifications?
- Do we have appropriate Administrative support or structures in place to manage additional classrooms and children?
- How will we ensure teachers have the requisite amount of planning time?

OPENING A DISTRICT OPERATED EARLY CHILDHOOD CLASSROOM

Districts tend to just jump into the logistics when considering moving towards opening a district operated Early Childhood classroom(s). Where will the class be? How many students? Who will the paras be? But before that, the district needs to ensure that it has a vision and mission for the preschool program as a whole. Opening an Early Childhood classroom(s) includes a philosophy shift from including a few non-identified children in special education classroom, to developing Early Childhood classrooms for all children and providing additional support when necessary to meet the needs of a child with disabilities.

Your Program's Identity –Mission and Vision

- Is preschool a separate program? Is it integrated as part of an elementary school? Does it have an identity of its own?
- Does your program have an identity beyond being a program for preschool aged children with disabilities?
- Does it have a vision or mission statement that reflects all children?

Preschool Administration

In growing or expanding your program you will be adding children. This will entail additional paperwork and coordination, both in terms of children identified for special education and non-identified students.

- Is there a written district procedure regarding Early Childhood class size?
- Is there a written district procedure regarding staff certification for Early Childhood classrooms?
- Is there a written district procedure regarding staff/child ratio for Early Childhood classrooms?
- How will the district recruit or advertise for non-identified children?
- Who will manage the process and what will be required to enroll non-identified students?
- If tuition is collected, who will be responsible and what is the procedure for collection?

Curriculum

If your district has been operating only Early Childhood Special Education classrooms/programs, there may be a need to explore Early Childhood curriculums or evidence based practices. It will be important to provide all program staff with training and professional development opportunities to learn how to use the curriculum effectively across disciplines within the classroom

- Do we use curricula?
- Are the curricula evidence based?
- Are our curricula aligned with Early Childhood expectations?
- Do we need to explore additional curricula?
- Do we have the resources to train all classroom staff in curricula development?

Infrastructure Development

Implementation Science (a research based framework for systems change) tells us that we need some specific structures in place to enable system change, which would include program model growth. Specifically, a Leadership Team is needed to coordinate and drive the work.

SUPPORT TO DISTRICTS TO EXPAND PRESCHOOL PROGRAMMING

Opening an Early Childhood classroom/program is no small task. 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 program to access to Early Childhood classrooms/programs. For more information on the Race 2K project or to request technical assistance please visit www.race2k.org

Expansion Capacity Checklist

It is suggested that Administrators meet with Preschool Coordinators or others involved in a district's preschool program to discuss the questions raised in the *Moving Your District's Preschool Programming Forward* and complete the Checklist 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. As a reminder, Race2K is also available to assist you in discussing your district's program and options for moving forward.

DATE:

PERSONS COMPLETING RUBRIC:

EXPANSION CAPACITY CHECKLIST

Current Structures	In Place?	Notes/Next Steps:
Could expansion be possible by revisiting classroom age ranges?	Yes No Unsure	
Can the district increase ratios to provide expansion? If so, what could they be?	Yes No Unsure	
Could the district increase class enrollment to provide for expansion? If so, what would that be?	Yes No Unsure	
Could the district add an additional session to the program schedule to achieve program expansion? What would that look like?	Yes No Unsure	
Could the district add an additional day to the program schedule to achieve expansion? What would that look like?	Yes No Unsure	
Are there community programs that the district could partner with? If so, who?		
Fiscal	In Place?	Notes/Next Steps:
How is our current preschool programming funded?	n/a	
Are we currently spending our entire Federal 619 allotment?	Yes No Unsure	
Do we have access to additional funding to pay for staff, staff training, materials or space?	Yes No Unsure	
Are there any grant opportunities or ability to leverage funds such as Title I?	Yes No Unsure	
How will expansion impact transportation?	n/a	

Space Needs	In Place?	Notes/Next Steps:
Is additional classroom space available within the current program space?	Yes No Unsure	
Is classroom space for expansion available in another school district building? If so, where?	Yes No Unsure	
Is the available space appropriate for preschool aged children? (ie: bathrooms, playgrounds) If not, what would it take to make it appropriate?	Yes No Unsure	
Will the program be impacted if there are classrooms in multiple locations? If so, how?	Yes No Unsure	
Staffing	In Place?	Notes/Next Steps:
Do we have sufficient staff with appropriate certifications?	Yes No Unsure	
How will program growth impact the service delivery model?	Yes No Unsure	
Do we have administrative capacity to manage a larger program? If not, what will be needed?	Yes No Unsure	
Program Identity	In Place?	Notes/Next Steps:
Do we have a preschool program mission or vision statement that is reflective of all children?	Yes No Unsure	
Does our preschool program have an identity as an Early Childhood program?	Yes No Unsure	
Are our current curricula aligned with Early Childhood expectations? If not, what will be needed?	Yes No Unsure	
Infrastructure Development	In Place?	Notes/Next Steps:
A Leadership Team including administrators, practitioners, and other stakeholders is in place to take responsibility for addressing and making decisions regarding program policy, initiatives and implementation	Yes No Unsure	
The Leadership Team has administrative support	Yes No Unsure	
The Leadership Team meets on a regular basis (at least once a month for 1 hour)	Yes No Unsure	

