SUPPORTING CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES:

A Guide to Understanding

Early Childhood Special Education Systems

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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/

Understanding Your District's Preschool System

In order to move forward in efforts to increase access to Least Restrictive Environment for preschool aged children, school districts need to examine their preschool systems. It is important to remember that in many districts preschool itself is much like its own "school", meaning there are multiple classrooms or placement options within the program. It is suggested that Administrators meet with Preschool Coordinators or others involved in a district's preschool program to discuss the questions raised below to identify the key components of their system. At the end of this section you will find the *Understanding Your District's Preschool System Rubric* that can be completed by the Administrator and Preschool Coordinator (or others) to document the district's preschool system. The characteristics and discussion questions are not meant to be all-inclusive lists, but rather practices that need to be considered. Depending upon the district, there may be additional characteristics to consider.

DISTRICT OPERATED CLASSROOMS

As a reminder, an Early Childhood setting/classroom is defined as having at least 50% of children without IEPs. However, it is the district's decision to set the actual ratio while keeping the minimum standard. In other words, a district could decide to enroll, for instance, 60% of the students without disabilities, while enrolling 40% identified for special education. 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 maintain those ratios throughout the year. Early Childhood classrooms do not have program approval from the NH DOE, Bureau of Special Education and school districts are exempt from child care licensing.

If a classroom has program approval from the NH DOE, Bureau of Special Education, it is considered an Early Childhood Special Education program.

- How many preschool classrooms do you operate?

- What setting does each classroom correspond to? (Early Childhood or Early Childhood Special Education) How many are Early Childhood? How many are Early Childhood Special Education?

- Do any of your classrooms have program approval from the NH DOE?

- What is the target ratio of each Early Childhood classroom?

- Do you have children without disabilities in your Early Childhood Special Education classrooms? What is the rationale?

Classroom Age Range

Regardless of whether a classroom is Early Childhood or Early Childhood Special Education, classrooms may be dedicated to students of a specific age (i.e. 3 year old classrooms and 4 year old classrooms), or be multi-age (mixed ages).

- What are the age-ranges of each classroom?

- What was the reasoning behind this decision?

Classroom Enrollment Size

Early Childhood classrooms have no required cap on the number of children. Individual school districts determine their own classroom size for Early Childhood classrooms. These classroom sizes should be consistent with school district policies related to class size for K-2. Early Childhood Special Education classrooms are capped at twelve children per classroom, with a minimum of two adults in the room. Regardless of whether children without disabilities are included in Early Childhood Special Education classrooms the total number of children remains 12.

- What is the total enrollment limit for each classroom?

- What factors do you consider in making these enrollment limits?

Teacher Certification

Because the NH DOE does not have oversite of Early Childhood classrooms and school districts are exempt from child care licensing, there are no certification requirements for teachers in Early Childhood classrooms. Like class size, districts set their own certification requirements for teachers in Early Childhood classrooms. Teachers for Early Childhood Special Education Classrooms must meet the certification requirements outlined in the NH Standards for the Education of Children with Disabilities.

- What teaching credentials/certifications do the teachers have in each of the district operated classrooms?

- Do they match the requirements per classroom designations (Early Childhood Special Education or Early Childhood)?

- Does the program have the requisite teacher certifications as needed for the IEP Team meetings?

Staff to Student Ratio

As with teacher certification, there is no state required staff to student ratio for Early Childhood classrooms. Districts need to consider the unique needs of their children when determine staffing levels, and should be consistent with school district policies for K-2. Early Childhood Special Education classrooms must be staffed as outlined in the NH Standards for the Education of Children with Disabilities.

- Does the Early Childhood Special Education classroom(s) have appropriate staff to student ratios?

- What is the staff to student ratio in the Early Childhood classroom(s)? How was this staffing pattern determined?

PRESCHOOL SETTING/ENVIRONMENT OPTIONS

Districts are required to ensure that all children with disabilities, including preschool aged children, have access to the continuum of alternate learning environments and placements.

- How does your district ensure access to the continuum of settings and environments (Early Childhood and Early Childhood Special Education)?

- Does your district provide services in a Service Provider location only?

- What is the total number of children your program has capacity for? (For both children with and with out disabilities)

- What does the district do when that capacity is reached (within individual classrooms and the program as a whole)?

- If your district partners with community programs are there written contracts or agreements that lay out roles and responsibilities, including maximum numbers of children and service delivery? (For more information, please see Race2K's publication *Partnering with Community Programs Guide*)

BASELINE PROGRAM

We know that for 1st graders, the regular education program is 6 hours a day, 5 days a week. We build on that the additional services and supports children with disabilities require for a free appropriate public education (FAPE). The same premise holds true for preschool aged children.

- What is the "regular education" (baseline) preschool program?

- Is it different depending upon the age of the child?

- How was a baseline established in your district? Have you considered how this baselines compares to the districts kindergarten program?

- How are the number of hours/days of programming determined for a child with a disability?

- What are the days, times, hours being offered by community preschools/child cares in your area? How does that compare to what the district operates?

ENROLLMENT OF CHILDREN WITHOUT DISABILITIES

Districts have a variety of processes for enrolling children without disabilities in their preschool programs. This is often an over-looked process that is critical when districts operate Early Childhood classrooms/programs.

- How are students chosen to be enrolled as non-identified students? Is there a waitlist or a screening process?

- How do you market you program? Do you have a marketing plan that includes timelines and materials needed?

- What is the process for enrolling non-identified children? Is this process documented?

- If you charge tuition for children without disabilities, who oversees the referral and tuition collection?

- Who manages the enrollment process for children without disabilities?

- At what age are non-identified children able to enroll? Are they accepted year round as they turn 3 or must they wait to enroll in September after turning 3? (Similar to a Kindergarten enrollment procedure)

SERVICE DELIVERY MODEL

Service delivery models should match the needs of the children. Some districts employ related service personnel, such as Occupational Therapists and Speech Pathologists, strictly to provide the service hours necessary to meet the children's needs as dictated in the IEP. Other districts use a model of integrating related service personnel into the preschool classroom and all activities. Others use a combination of both direct service and integrating within the classroom.

- How are services provided to your preschool children? Why are they provided this way?

- Are children removed from the classroom, as in a "pull out model" or are services provided within the classroom?

- Are services provided individually in the classroom, through small group curriculum activities or both?

- What are your Service Provider certifications? Are they appropriately and adequately certified?

- Are you using Service Provider location setting to provide specialized instruction?

CURRICULUM

A variety of curricula and evidence based practices exist to meet the needs of young children in a preschool setting. Some curricula, such as Creative Curriculum, are all encompassing and take into consideration the whole child's developmental skills. Other curricula may target individual skill areas, such as Handwriting Without Tears or Lively Letters. Some use the Early Childhood component of the districts K-1 curriculum to address their preschool curriculum needs. For whichever Early Childhood curriculum or evidence based practices a district chooses to incorporate into their program, 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. It is important to remember that curriculum is necessary to address and guide the development of the whole child. Consider social/emotional, motor and speech/language development, as well as cognitive development when choosing a curriculum or curricula.

- Which curricula does your program utilize?

- Are your curricula evidence based?

- How are curricula used in program planning?

- How often are curriculums reviewed and evaluated?

- Are all preschool staff involved in professional development activities pertaining to the program's curricula?

ADMINISTRATIVE STRUCTURE

Another often overlooked area in preschool coordination is the administrative aspects of the preschool program. Who oversees preschool within a district is important to ensure that the program has sufficient resources and support to run smoothly and provide a quality preschool program.

- Who handles referrals in your district for preschool?

- Who oversees the day to day operations?

- Who is responsible for overseeing and assuring program quality?

- Who is responsible for teacher oversite/evaluation?

- Who is the LEA in IEP meetings?

- Who is responsible for POMS (Preschool Outcomes Measurement System)?

- Who attends the Interagency Agreement meeting and works with Early Supports and Services (ESS) to ensure smooth and compliant transitions?

- Who is responsible for the general paperwork of running the program? Is there a preschool administrative assistant assigned or is this the teacher's responsibility?

- Who is responsible for overseeing preschool services and programming in general?

- If community placements are used, who monitors the effectiveness and appropriateness of the program?

- How are building level administrators involved in the preschool program?

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

Family engagement at the preschool level is extremely important, whether you are providing an Early Childhood or Early Childhood Special Education program as research has demonstrated it is critical for student success. Family involvement takes place naturally through the IEP process.

- How are families involved in your preschool program?

- Do the families of non-identified children receive the same communications as the families of children with disabilities, such as progress reports, parent/teacher conferences, etc.?

- Is there a mechanism for on-going home-school communication?

- Does the district have a family handbook for your preschool program?

- Does your program provide information to families about how they can support their child's learning at home?

DATA COLLECTION/PROGRESS REPORTING

For most district preschool programs, the collection of data and reporting of progress happens automatically through IEPs and the Preschool Outcome Measurement System (POMS). Many districts collect data on all of their preschoolers through checklists and more formalized screening tools. Many districts also conduct POMS evaluations on all of their preschoolers, although this is not a requirement of the NH DOE.

- How is data collected in your program?

- What data is collected in your program?

- How is data shared with staff?

- How is data shared with families?

- How is data collected for progress reporting in individual IEPs?

- How is data used for to inform program design and improvement?

- Has the district examined their Indicator 6 data? What does it tell you about the program?

- Is POMS data used to inform the program?

INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT

Through the process of examining your district's preschool system concerns, unknowns or areas for improvement may be identified. When a district wants to work to address these areas, Implementation Science (a research based framework for system change) tells us that we need some specific structures in place to enable this to happen. Specifically, a Leadership Team is needed to coordinate and drive the work.

SUPPORT TO DISTRICTS TO EXAMINE PRESCHOOL SYSTEMS

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

Understanding Your District's Preschool System Rubric

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 *Understanding Your District's Preschool System* section of the Guide and then use this Rubric to document the district's preschool system. The meeting to complete the Rubric typically takes about 1.5 hours. The characteristics and discussion questions are not meant to be all-inclusive lists, but rather practices that need to be considered. Depending upon the district, there may be additional characteristics to consider. Included in the Rubric is a space for Explanation/Comments to capture specific information or criteria as well as a place to capture potential next steps. 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 and completing this Rubric should you feel you need assistance.

DATE:

PERSONS COMPLETING RUBRIC:

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 in each classroom				
Total enrollment limit for each classroom				
Teaching credentials/certifications of staff in each of the district operated classrooms				
Staff to student ratio				
Ratio of identified to non-identified students				

Notes/Possible Next Steps:

DISTRICT OPERATED CLASSROOMS CONTINUED

	No/No Evidence	Somewhat/Partial Evidence	Yes/Evident	Evidence/Comments
All classroom design, staffing and ratios match their program approval status				
Teacher credentials match the requirements per classroom designations in all classrooms				
The program has the requisite teacher certifications as needed for the IEP Team				
The district has written policies regarding classroom enrollment limits for Early Childhood classrooms				
The district has written policies regarding staff to student ratios in Early Childhood classrooms				
The target ratio for each Early Childhood classroom. What is it?				
Early Childhood classrooms maintain their ratios at all times during the school year				
Both Early Childhood & Early Childhood Special Education classrooms maintain their class enrollment limits at all times during the school year				
Children without disabilities are placed in district operated Early Childhood Special Education classrooms. If so, why?				
There is a plan for when ratios reach their maximum to provide programming for additional children eligible for special education. If so, what is it?				

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 classrooms to ensure access to LRE				
There a plan for when the capacity is reached within the program as a whole to ensure access to LRE				
Notes/Possible Next Steps:				

BASELINE PROGRAM FOR CHILDREN WITH AND WITHOUT DISABILITIES

	No/No Evidence	Somewhat/Partial Evidence	Yes/Evident	Evidence/Comments
There is an established "regular education" preschool program.				
There is a baseline program for 3 year old programming.				
There is a baseline program for 4 year old programming.				
There is process to determine the number of days/hours of programming determined for a child with a disability requires. If so, specify				
Notes/Possible Next Steps:				

ENROLLMENT OF CHILDREN WITHOUT DISABILITIES

	No/No Evidence	Somewhat/Partial Evidence	Yes/Evident	Evidence/ Comments
The district has a marketing plan for recruiting non-identified peers.				
The district has a process for enrolling non-identified students in the program				
There is someone who manages the enrollment process for children without disabilities. Who?				
If appropriate, the district has a written procedure regarding tuition				
If appropriate, the district has a written procedure regarding tuition assistance or scholarships				
If appropriate, the district has a written procedure regarding who is responsible for tuition collection				
The district has procedures in place regarding when during the year non-identified students are able to enroll				

Notes/Possible Next Steps:

SERVICE DELIVERY MODEL

	No/No Evidence	Somewhat/Partial Evidence	Yes/Evident	Evidence/ Comments
Services are provided to your preschool children in a variety of ways.				
Children are removed from the classroom, as in a "pull out model"				
Services are provided within the context of the classroom				
Services are provided individually in the classroom, through small group curriculum activities or both				
Service Providers are appropriately certified				
The district provides services in a Service Provider location for identified children who only require related services to receive a free appropriate public education				

Notes/Possible Next Steps:

CURRICULUM

	No/No Evidence	Somewhat/Partial Evidence	Yes/Evident	Evidence/ Comments
The program utilizes a curriculum. Which curriculum(s) does your program utilize? Are they evidence based?				
Curriculums are used in program planning. How?				
Curriculums are reviewed and evaluated. How often?				
All preschool staff are trained in all curriculums				
All preschool staff are involved in on-going professional development activities pertaining to the program's curriculum				

Notes/Possible Next Steps:

ADMINISTRATIVE STRUCTURE

	No/No Evidence	Somewhat/Partial Evidence	Yes/Evident	Evidence/ Comments
The preschool program has a written mission and/or vision statement				
There is a designated person to handle referrals in your district for preschool. Who?				
There is someone who oversees the day to day operations of the preschool classroom(s). Who?				
There is someone responsible for overseeing and assuring program quality. Who?				
There is someone responsible for teacher oversite/evaluation. Who?				
There is someone designated as the Preschool LEA representative. Who?				
There is a designated person responsible for POMS (Preschool Outcomes Measurement System). Who?				
There is someone designated to attend the Interagency Agreement meeting and works with Early Supports (ESS) and Services to ensure smooth and compliant transitions. Who?				
There is a designated person who is responsible for the general paperwork of running the program Who?				

ADMINISTRATIVE STRUCTURE (CONTINUED)

	No/No Evidence	Somewhat/Partial Evidence	Yes/Evident	Evidence/ Comments
If community placements are used, there designated staff to provide services in the programs. Who/what providers?				
If community placements are used, there is a designated case manager for those students. Who?				
If community placements are used, there is a designated person who monitors the effectiveness and appropriateness of the program. Who?				
If community placements are used, there are written contracts or agreements that lay out the tuition agreements, roles and responsibilities, including maximum numbers of children and service delivery partners				
There is a communication system established between preschool administration and building level administration				

Notes/Possible Next Steps:

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

	No/No Evidence	Somewhat/Partial Evidence	Yes/Evident	Evidence/Comments
Families are involved in your preschool program. How?				
There are processes in place to engage all families, both those with and without disabilities				
All families within the program receive the same types of communication, progress reports, etc.				
There is a mechanism for on-going home-school communication.				
The district has a handbook for the preschool program				

Notes/Possible Next Steps:

DATA COLLECTION/PROGRESS REPORTING

	No/No Evidence	Somewhat/Partial Evidence	Yes/Evident	Evidence/Comments
Program and child specific data is collected in the program. In what manner?				
Program and child data is shared with staff. How?				
Child data is shared with families? How?				
There is a process for collecting data for progress reporting in individual IEPs				
Data is used for program design and improvement. How?				
Indicator 6 data is reviewed on a regular basis to inform program growth				
POMS data is used to inform program design and structure				

Notes/Possible Next Steps:

INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT

	No/No Evidence	Somewhat/Partial Evidence	Yes/Evident	Evidence/ Comments
The district has established a Leadership Team that has a broad representation of stakeholders.				
The Leadership Team has administrative support. Administrator attends meetings and trainings, is active in problem-solving to ensure the success of the work.				
The Leadership Team has regular meetings. Team meetings are scheduled at least 1x per month for a minimum of 1 hour. Team member attendance is consistent.				
The Leadership Team has established written mission/ purpose that team members are able to clearly communicate.				
The Leadership Team develops a written action plan that includes all critical elements and guides the work of the team. Action steps are identified to ensure achievement of the goals. The team reviews the plan and updates their progress at each meeting.				
The Leadership Team reviews and revises the plan at least annually				
Staff are aware of and supportive of the need for program growth. How has staff buy-in been assessed?				

INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT (CONTINUED)

	No/No Evidence	Somewhat/Partial Evidence	Yes/Evident	Evidence/ Comments
A feedback and communication loop has been established. Staff input and feedback is obtained throughout the process and the Leadership team provides update to stakeholders on a regular basis.				

Notes/Possible Next Steps: