Report to the Concord Public School Preschool Evaluation Committee

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Background

This report summarizes the review of the Concord Public School preschool programs in coordination with the District’s Preschool Evaluation Committee. Based upon the direction of the committee the review focuses on several aspects of the program:

- An overall description and analysis of what the programs currently do.
- How these programs represent “best practices” in the field.
- How aggregate and student data can be used to assess program effectiveness.
- How the programs should be structured in the future.

It was very clear from the onset that the Concord Public Schools offer a relatively broad range of high quality programs to families in Concord, more than is typically found among schools in New Hampshire. Initial discussions in forming these above areas of focus with the evaluation committee reflected a fundamental ambivalence within the district in relation to these programs. Was the review to focus exclusively on programs serving children identified with special needs1, that is, on those programs that the District is legally obligated to provide? Or was it to focus on the broader range of programs? The committee chose the latter. This theme, the commitment of the schools to programming for preschool-aged children in Concord runs throughout this report, and probably drives the decision-making process for the future.

Indeed, the fundamental issue identified in this review was not whether children with special needs are receiving adequate services that reflect best practice. They are. It became, what is the district’s role and/or opportunity in providing services to the broad range of children in the community. It is a very diverse group of children who arrive at kindergarten, and the question is not how they can uniformly be ready for elementary education but rather what can the district do to address very different learning needs prior to that transition.

In conducting this review I have spent a total of 6 days observing in classrooms, reviewing documents and data, interviewing staff, and holding focused groups with both staff and parents. (see Appendix A) The preschool program staff have been entirely cooperative, honest, and enthusiastic. My general and overall impression of the staff is

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1 For consistency and efficiency I will refer to children eligible for special education services as children who are “identified.”
that they are highly competent and committed, and that the programs are very strong in relation to the many other programs I have seen in New Hampshire.

I have collaborated closely with Barbara Hemingway who provided me with everything I needed, and more. One very clear finding of this report is that her leadership is a significant driving force in the success and survival of these programs. However, the intent of the report is not to evaluate staff or determine compliance with State or Federal regulations. It should also be noted here that none of the findings can be attributed to only one person, and that confidentiality was guaranteed. In preparing the report I have selected the issues of most import, and have chosen not to report on specific recommendations by staff members related to one staff position or child. I have also made no attempt to hold potential recommendations to the end. They are referenced throughout, and summarized at the end.

In 1995 the district contracted with Bruce Mallory, also of the University of New Hampshire, to conduct a review. At that time the focus was exclusively on the Child Development Program (inclusive preschools). The principles that guided his inquiry - social integration, responsive curriculum and instruction, parent collaboration, and high staff qualifications - continue to represent best practices in the field. However, specific best practices, particularly in relation to working with children on the autism spectrum and addressing issues of diversity, have continued to evolve, and hence are applied to the interpretation of data in this report.

His findings included a number of recommendations including those related to inclusion and ratios of coded versus typically developing children, partnerships with community programs and within the schools, and the establishment of program administration. These recommendations were, for the large part, implemented. Indeed, the development of programs designed primarily for non-coded children serves the intent of the 1995 report’s first recommendation of providing inclusive settings with appropriate ratios of coded to non-coded students.

Before addressing each of the areas identified by the evaluation committee it may be useful to frame a number of tensions or dichotomies that exist in relation to the early childhood programs. These are not necessarily problematic or unique to Concord’s programs, but may help characterize the opportunities and challenges that the early childhood programs present. These may be seen as healthy tensions that indicate a rich and diverse program responding to complex needs.

*Elementary-early childhood.* Early childhood staff identify more with their programs than with the elementary schools in which they are housed. Their pride and devotion is an asset. At the same time many of them feel separate, and on occasion a sense of lower status, from the other programs in the elementary schools. Should school consolidation continue to move forward, attention will need to be given to both the integration of the programs into the schools and maintaining the necessarily unique qualities of early
childhood programs. (e.g. play-based curriculum, extensive parent-teacher partnerships, integrated therapies)

Special needs-typical programs. For the large part all the programs attempt to offer high quality curriculum for young children, placing children with special needs with typically developing children. However, as the ratio of children with special needs rises in a particular classroom the less that program looks like a typical inclusive classroom. In the case of the reverse-mainstream preschool classrooms this is a violation of state program identification standards.2 This is further confounded by placing other children with significant, but not special education eligible, challenges in these classrooms as well. Hence, the attempted balance is easily disrupted. If the consolidated schools of the future wish to maintain an emphasis on placement of all children in preschool programs that actually are such, then consideration will need to be given not only to the ratio of coded to uncoded children but also to the overall characteristics and needs of the preschool population.

Legal obligation -commitment to pre-k programming. The fundamental tension underling this review is that of the District’s commitment to early childhood education. Clearly the district fulfills its legal obligation to serve young children with special needs. At the same time, it offers a relatively large variety of programs to children who are not identified with educational special needs. As school consolidation continues it is essential that the District clarify which of the programs are universally available, which the district truly supports, and how children across the community have equitable options.

District-non-district. The district effectively and appropriately utilizes community programs as placement options for identified children. With the heavy demand for such placements there is some tension related to which families benefit from those placements. Also, within the schools some programs are staffed by school employees and others through other sponsoring agencies. This leads to discrepancies in salaries and perceptions of support among staff.

Challenging-typically developing. There is a broad range of needs among the children not eligible for special education services. This is a diverse group, some of whom are non-English speaking, others economically disadvantaged, and still others with a range of risk factors. Early childhood special education staff members are acutely aware of children who are likely to enter the special education system after kindergarten and who would benefit from early provision of specialized services. Indeed, these opinions reflect what the literature also supports, that such intervention can ameliorate later problems.

2 The state requires that such programs not have more than 50% coded children enrolled. If they are more then each enrolled child’s IEP should reflect the fact that it is a special education classroom. Obviously, this is counter to the intent of least restrictive placement or inclusion.
With the resources available, how do many, and which, of these children receive support in the context of programs designed for typically developing children?

1:1-inclusion. The use of 1:1 teacher assistants using direct instruction is the predominant programming approach applied with high need children, many of whom are identified as falling within the autism spectrum. The approach, and its associated consultation and documentation of children’s progress is highly effective, and the district benefits from excellent consultation. Some staff feel that not enough 1:1 time is being offered to these children, while others feel that inordinate emphasis on this approach inhibits opportunities for skill development in social situations.

Program placement. There is some tension about program placement decisions. In one sense, it is a good problem to have in that children may be placed in a variety of programs. One challenge, however, is in maintaining equity. Speech and language needs are by far the most prevalent concerns among identified preschoolers. However, the preferred option of 5 day-a-week placement with typically developing role models (e.g. Crimson Tide) is restricted to a relatively small proportion of children. For the large part the team process for determining such placements seems responsible and based upon each child’s individual needs. But issues of equity inevitably arise.

Eligibility-universal access. The boundaries and entry requirements among the programs vary, with some schools offering preschools programs for all parents and others (Title I) now requiring developmental status via measurement. In some cases fees are charged, in others not. Although little was said of this during the review process, it will be a factor in conceptualizing preschool options as the schools consolidate.

School-community. The school system is legally responsible for providing services to young children with special needs. It also provides Title 1 and Family Center programs in the belief that these help prepare children and families for formal schooling. In some cases this overlaps with the responsibilities of other agencies (e.g. Head Start) and in others it pays for placements in community programs (e.g. Woodside). All of these services are provided in an overall community context in which families need child care. At this point the school’s programming decisions are affected primarily by the needs of children identified with special needs, but as schools are organized into elementary clusters, planning will need to include consideration of the overall profile of early childhood options within the community.

This set of tensions or dichotomies in the early childhood program are, again, not necessarily problematic, as much as characteristics of a program with many facets and unanswered questions about the future. Keeping them in mind may help frame how the District moves forward with these programs.
Description and analysis of what the programs currently do

Nature and range of programs. Concord offers families of young children more options for young children than most typical New Hampshire school districts. These fall into several categories:

- Reverse mainstream preschools
- 1:1 instruction by teaching assistants
- Related services – S/L, OT
- Community placements for children with special needs
- TALK group
- Language Play Group
- Community Center Programs
- Title I preschool classrooms
- Parent groups

Despite the challenge of deciding, along with parents, which option is best for each eligible child, this range of programs is broad and meets many needs very effectively.

The reverse mainstream preschool classrooms, 2 at Eastman and 1 at Rumford, are programs that focus intensively on implementing the individual plans for children with special education codes while at the same time offering typical preschool curriculum opportunities to all of the enrolled children. These programs represent the most significant component of the early childhood special needs effort, serving a large portion of those children as well as those with the most significant educational needs. The demand to meet individual needs is great as these programs exceed a 1:2 ratio of children with significant challenges to those without. Often children without a formal program plan, non-identified children, also present challenges. The children with the most pronounced special education needs are often supported by 1:1 teacher assistants. These teaching assistants often work in the classroom as well as individually outside the classroom. Related services are highly integrated in these classrooms with the Rumford program utilizing a team approach in the classroom, and the Eastman programs sharing personnel between classrooms, and with other programs.

Observation data on these classrooms indicates that they are very effective in addressing the individual program needs of identified children. The three classrooms vary a great deal in teaching style and curriculum emphasis, but all are clearly developmentally appropriate, and all somewhat more structured than a typical preschool program. Teachers and other adults in the classroom were clearly nurturing and communicated well with other program staff while conducting classroom activities. In one classroom, during brief observations, there was more emphasis on small group teacher-directed projects, in which assessment data was collected, while another offered more free choice and gross motor options. All three were text rich with a good deal of
pre-literacy activity. And all three, again, experienced a good deal of transition of children with 1:1 assistants moving in and out of the classroom in order to provide individual direct instruction. Related services (OT, SL) are provided both in and out of the classrooms, and seem to be well coordinated with the curriculum. 1:1 assistants and related service personnel act as members of the classroom team, as well as providers of direct services. This also represents best practice.

Some best practices observed were a linked-systems approach in which assessment data was directly linked to program activities, integrated therapies, and interactive reading aloud. These classrooms form a solid, and inclusive, core for the early childhood special education effort. Concern was expressed that OT services are spread too thin, and that children with autism don’t get the number of hours of service recommended by state and national standards. Among the related services staff the concern with hours seemed to be related to demand on time when therapists are shared between elementary and preschool programs.

The TALK group at Eastman provides additional support to children with speech and language needs. The TALK group curriculum methodically supports speech and language development, with the cooperative leadership of an educator and a speech pathologist. Again, best practices in relation to supporting language development through natural interactive activities was observed – prompting, expanding, modeling. Additional language/play groups, not observed by the reviewer, are offered at Rumford as is a group specific to children with autism. These serve the function of transitional programs for children turning 3 during the year, as well as providing additional services for those for who the short duration center-based programs are insufficient. These programs serve a relatively small number of children, but serve a very useful role in the overall menu of services as long as the IEP requirements of children transitioning in are being met.

The Family Center programs offer parents in the community an early opportunity to engage with the school. The Thursday morning group at Dame School was observed, but similar programs exist at Rumford and Beaver Meadow. There was a clear mix of families of varied economic status including some whose primary language is not English. The atmosphere was both warm and active. Parents and children, guided by program staff, worked together on developmentally appropriate projects, and then all participated in large group song and dance activities. Although this review didn’t include observation of parent coffee times or chats, these are reportedly well-attended and as with the center times offer opportunities for parents to come together for support.

The dual intent of forming relationships with the school and offering developmentally valuable ideas for families seems to be well-served here. Additional goals of reducing parental isolation and perhaps identifying developmental concerns early may also be served. Program staff are clearly skilled and devoted, recognize that
they are not all school employees, and are concerned about the future of their program. It would be useful to test the assumption that involvement in these programs leads to a stronger school-parent partnership through the elementary years.

Some observations and interviews were carried out in the district’s Title I and tuition-based preschool classrooms (Title I at Rumford and Beaver Meadow, preschool at Dame). These classrooms offer play-based curriculum for a variety of children. Some children with special needs are included in these programs, but these programs provide fewer of these slots than the more intensively special education focused reverse-mainstream classrooms. Hence, the identified children included here typically have fewer needs for intensive programming. Recent research among states with pre-K programs indicates a highly positive effect on school readiness. (Gormley et al, 2008, Barnett et al, 2007)

Observation of these programs indicates strong and committed staff who implement a solid, developmentally appropriate curriculum. As opposed to the reverse mainstream classrooms the curriculum is less influenced by the needs of identified children, so they look like more typical early childhood settings. As with the other classrooms, however, they are in elementary spaces adapted for preschool children. The hope of many of the early childhood staff is that when new buildings are constructed or renovated with early childhood in mind that appropriate sources will be consulted on the design.

These classrooms play important roles in addition to providing inclusive options for identified children, they help prepare children from a variety of backgrounds for more formal schooling and they allow the school staff to identify children not previously screened for special needs. A concern identified by both administrative and teaching staff was that there are many high-need children in these programs. These children include those whose primary language isn’t English, as well as those who exhibit a variety of risk factors. Although some specific services are provided, they aren’t eligible for many of the supports provided to identified children. Intervening early with such children does have its benefits. Indeed, much of the literature on the positive effects of quality preschool programming is based upon intervention with disadvantaged children. These programs represent such an effort, but evidence from this review indicates that more consideration needs to be given to the nature of services to this diverse group.

One consideration here is how supervision and guidance are provided. The programs seem affiliated more with the early childhood special education program than with the elementary education program. This makes sense, as the developmental needs and curriculum are similar. But there is little formal relationship established. Some staff are district employees and some are not. As consolidation proceeds it will be essential that supervision and curriculum guidance be consistent and represent best practice in
early childhood education. At the same time it is apparent that some decentralization of early childhood services will need to occur with support and guidance best provided at the school level.

Identified children are also placed in selected community programs. Concord has a strong history in this regard going back to the Community Options project of the mid 1990’s and the recommendations of the Mallory report in 1995. This clearly serves the purpose of inclusion for these children. These programs include Head Start, which is federally mandated to serve children with special needs, Crimson Tide, which is a school-system early care program that prepares high school aged students for early care professions, and Woodside School, a private preschool program. I visited Woodside, and found a strong program well-designed to serve preschoolers and their families. The identified children were effectively included in all activities and the program staff felt that coordination with the school and support from school staff was excellent. However, slots available in these programs are limited, which raises issues of equity in placement. Some examination of additional community placements may be warranted given that many of such programs meet family’s child care needs and offer inclusive placements for more hours.

*Early childhood process from intake to program evaluation.* One method of analysis that may demonstrate program effectiveness is to examine the process of children from initial entry into the program through transition to kindergarten. This process is well defined by regulations for children with special needs, but some consideration of the process for other children served by the schools may require some scrutiny.

The process for identifying children with special needs proceeds from initial screening and identification, through an intake process that includes assessment and placement decisions, to program implementation, and then to evaluation. The intent in this report is not to detail each element of that process, but rather to review how it is working for children, their families and the school system. It should be noted here that the entire process is managed essentially by one person – the preschool special education coordinator. At present this seems to work adequately, but as schools are organized into clusters portions of this role may need to be decentralized.

There are a number of entry points for these children. Many, particularly those with established handicapping conditions, are referred directly from Early Supports and Services (ESS). Some children who have received ESS are not referred, or do not meet eligibility criteria for special education. Most are referred directly by parents, either directly or through the childfind screening process. An occasional referral is received through medical sources. Others may be referred by local community preschools, but often these referrals do not result in a determination of eligibility. Concern was expressed with the amount of resources involved in following up on a high proportion referrals that do not result in a determination of eligibility.
The assessment of children referred to the special education program seems to proceed effectively. Interviews with staff and observation of meetings indicate that appropriate evaluation procedures are in place for the purpose of determining eligibility and placing children in programs. The teaching and related service staff are clearly experienced, and the state’s child development clinics are available for those who require more extensive evaluation.

The response to questions about on-going assessment, however, was mixed. Progress for children identified with autism who receive intensive direct instruction from 1:1 aides is extensively documented. The district also uses both the AEPS assessment and the Brigance as developmental measures, and is required to complete preschool outcome assessments within six weeks of the beginning of school. Software used for IEP development is reported to be helpful, but transitioning to a new system is time consuming. Some staff feel that completing the assessment measures is extremely burdensome, while others find it useful and do not find it difficult to complete. One variation in how they are completed is in how and whether teacher assistants are involved in completing the assessments. These staff members may have much of the knowledge that is required by these assessments.

One point in the process that brings together many of the program’s challenges is the meetings in which potential placements are determined for the upcoming year. The entire early childhood special education professional staff participates in this process of projecting placements in all of the programs across the district. An advantage of this system is that there is extensive knowledge about the children as well as a great deal of disciplinary expertise in the room. There is also knowledge about the characteristics and capacities of all the programs. This is essential in that what is available in one setting may not be in another. The group process seems to work, but it also may be that less powerful voices are not recognized. It also requires considerable follow-up with families by the coordinator and her staff. This represents a substantial effort. With further school consolidation it may be that some of the functions of the coordinator could be assigned to personnel at each school. If, in the future, a range of relatively equitable programs is available in each elementary cluster then intake and communication with families may best occur at that level rather than centrally, with some central support for children with extensive needs and placements in other community programs. That is, each of the four elementary clusters would have a comprehensive early childhood program.

Program implementation was discussed above in the description of the programs. The reverse mainstream classrooms balance typical preschool curriculum with meeting the specific needs of identified children. The use of 1:1 assistants, both in and out of the classroom, is extensive. And, the provision of related services, such as speech and occupational therapy, is highly integrated. All of this, again, is under the supervision of the early childhood special education coordinator. Placement of children
with special needs in the four other preschool classrooms is also managed by the coordinator. However, overall staff and curriculum supervision and guidance for these programs is less clear.

The balance between meeting the needs of identified children and carrying out a typical preschool curriculum informed by current best practice is difficult. As noted above, there is considerable variation in the curriculum among these seven classrooms. This variation is due to several factors, differences in the number of identified children, the varied presence of 1:1 assistants and therapists, teaching style, goals of the programs, physical facility and the demands of non-identified children. Clearly, for many of these reasons these programs should look different from each other. At the same time, it is clear that children get a different experience in each. This gives the coordinator and staff many options to create a match between a child and a program. Issues of equity inevitably come up. By many accounts this system is stretched to the limit in attempting to meet the needs of both identified children and children with a variety of other needs. It works, but requires a perpetual balancing act for the coordinator and her staff.

Consolidation of elementary programs again, offers the possibility for equitable services to be established and maintained in each cluster. Whether or not this is coordinated centrally or within each cluster, it is difficult to conceive of an equitable and effective system in which some functions are provided in one school and others in another.

Curriculum
As noted above the programs seek to replicate typical, high quality preschool programming. That is, the use of developmentally appropriate practice via a play-based, child-centered, physically active, literacy rich environment in which children learn collaboratively. Recent brain research on children at play indicates that a complex, challenging, interactive and nurturing environment is required for optimal brain development in young children (Brown, 2009). A good deal of this is represented in the Concord programs. This reviewer was impressed with the quality of experience children received, with various elements – physical activity, play-based, literacy rich - represented more or less strongly in each of the classrooms.

One area that might be given more attention, based upon current brain research, is supporting learning among the children as they interact with each other, particularly as it related to the development of executive functions (e.g. planning & organizing, impulse control). The preponderance of 1:1 assistance and the embedding of IEP goals tends to focus teaching on the individual child, even in group situations. However, it is often the negotiation of knowledge between children and involvement in planning processes that lead to the development of organizational skills required for later learning (Shonkoff, 2000). There may also be other professional development priorities in relation to curriculum. The key point here may be less the identification of any particular
deficiencies in the curriculum, which is strong overall, than giving more formal attention to the process of maintaining best early childhood practices.

**Parent Involvement**

The parents who participated in the focused group were uniformly positive. They were parents of identified children who received services at Eastman School, but some also had experience as parents of typically developing children in those programs. The other first hand data on parent involvement came from observing the Family Center program at Dame. Parents were highly engaged with their children, other parents, and program staff. The cultural, and apparent economic, diversity was particularly notable. One aspect of non-school-based preschool programs in the community is that they are highly segregated both in relation to cultural background and economic status. Perhaps the Family Center is an intervention that brings these families together earlier under the umbrella of the schools.

Although some staff indicated that they could do more in developing partnerships with families, they evidenced a great deal of pride in their efforts in this domain.

**Staffing**

Overall, the early childhood staff members are dedicated, highly qualified and competent. As noted earlier they seem to work extremely well together. An almost universal concern expressed by staff was the need for more time to communicate with each other as teams.

All of the teachers interviewed were very positive about the early childhood programs. In particular, they noted the quality of communication and respect among the staff. There were differences among them in relation to their perceptions of the burden of assessment and the need for additional staff support. Clearly, the teachers in the reverse-mainstream classrooms both require and get more consultative and staff support than those in the other classrooms.

The 1:1 teaching assistants are experienced and devoted to the students they work with. They clearly know their students well, and seem to be well-prepared to intervene with the students they are assigned to. They also seem to work well with the other classroom staff. As in other New Hampshire districts they are highly utilized with children who have intensive needs. In some senses their knowledge of these children seems under-utilized.

Some scrutiny of overall utilization of 1:1 assistants may be useful. The assignment of an assistant seems almost automatic when a certain level of programming is determined. This is, in part, the result of a reverse mainstream approach that is burdened with a very high proportion of identified children. If this ratio were lower, perhaps more specifically trained staff, speech/OT assistants or co-teachers, assigned
directly to classrooms might offer a more inclusive environment. Although this might seem like a challenge to the direct teaching strategies now used to prepare students for inclusion, it may be more an issue of distributing staff effectively than one of teaching philosophy.

This concern with staffing patterns relates to the related services personnel. Some say that they are stretched too far, particularly when they also serve elementary aged students. This is reported not only by the therapists, but also by the other staff with whom they work. They integrate very well into the preschool classrooms, and truly provide a great deal of leadership and expertise to the early childhood effort. Many of them expressed the need for their services for some of the unidentified children in preschool programs. It was clear from interviews with teachers in the Title 1 and tuition-based classrooms that some sort of consultative support is warranted for those programs, whether or not the source is the same as that for the reverse-mainstream classrooms.

The early childhood coordinator holds all of this together. She has developed effective systems for managing referrals, supporting families, selecting placements, and supervising staff. Her consultative role with the preschool programs not primarily intended to serve children with special needs is less clear. She provides a good deal of support to these programs. Some of that is essential as identified children are placed in these classrooms or are identified as requiring assessment. But, as with many referrals from Head Start, many of these children do not meet eligibility requirements for special education. A clear finding of this review is the need for official supervision of these programs. Whether the early childhood coordinator can do both jobs is not clear. The first step would be to determine what is required for supervision and support of those programs as consolidation evolves.

Data

The early childhood special education program, the child development program, has an array of child specific data including referral information, assessment scores, evaluation results and placement information. Much of this is kept by the coordinator. The information on children and families in the other early childhood programs, Title 1 and Family Center, is less extensive. The district has an impressive information system with the capacity to identify outcomes in relation to assessment scores for various groups of children that would allow for some comparison among the various groups of children with and without preschool experience or between various preschool experiences. Hence, there are a number of possible opportunities to use data in the evaluation of the early childhood programs. And, some of the data currently kept by the preschool coordinator within the early childhood program would be useful to include in the larger data base.
Although the transition to greater and more consistent assessment information on the identified children has been a difficult transition for some staff it could be useful if examined in aggregate form. The primary reason for such assessment is to document the progress of individual children. However, in aggregate it could also provide useful program information. For example, if the AEPS and Brigance scores indicate that many children, for example, have lower scores in social emotional development then the program might begin to bring more curricular focus in that direction.

These assessments would likely not be useful in relation to later academic outcomes as there is little correlation between such early developmental measures and scores on standardized tests. However, including these scores might provide some longitudinal information on which sets of children are more successful later on. That is, certain score profiles might predict to placement in special education or other services, and hence influence early programming decisions.

Screening information on children entering Title 1 preschool programs is probably less useful. Such measures are relatively crude indicators of educational need, and probably serve more as a proxy for previous preschool experience and socio-economic status than true developmental potential. Since those variables might be seen as discriminatory, a numerical screening serves as an objective measure and may be why it is recommended for placement decisions. Readiness measures, however, are notoriously unreliable predictors as children at this age vary tremendously in the rate of their development and learning. The developmentally young child at 5 may, in fact, become the most academically proficient child in second grade, and vice versa. Readiness itself is a problematic notion when the children arriving at school speak different languages, have or have not had preschool experience, have been exposed to a variety of toxic stresses, or exhibit a range of disabilities. It may be more useful to determine how children in each of these groups benefit from the variety of programs the school offers.

A more useful tack, in relation to the use of data to understand the progress of children served by the early childhood programs, may then be to include specific data on referral sources, program placement, and child background information. Questions that can be addressed with such data would include:

What proportion of and which (i.e. code, program placement) children referred from ESS and other sources remain in special education or other services over time?
What proportion of, and which, children in Title 1 programs enter or leave special education?
Do identified children placed in community programs exhibit a different trajectory than those in district placements?
How many, and which, children from Head Start, Title 1, and preschool programs eventually enter and/or leave special education programs?
How do special education codes change over time? Which children start in one code but eventually are identified with behavioral disabilities? And, how does this vary in relation to previous preschool placement?

The staff could probably identify many other questions that might be addressed by a data management system that can link children’s background variables (i.e. SES, referral source, code) with preschool placement, and academic outcomes, in particular special education placement, and perhaps graduation rates and other long term outcomes. Indeed, research indicates that the long term benefits of quality early childhood education are more significant than short term academic gains. The benefit to the district of examining these trajectories would be in assessing how children, in fact, benefit from the early programs, not so much to determine program efficacy, as experimental research models would be required to do that, but rather to determine which children are best served by which programs.

So data can essentially be used in two ways, as input to determine how to improve the programs and as a means to determine which children benefit from which programs. In addition to looking at child assessment data in aggregate, the use of some measure of the classroom environment might be applied in providing program staff feedback. This might be particularly useful for the Title 1 and preschool programs for which child progress is not monitored as thoroughly as the reverse-mainstream classrooms. Two such measures are the Division of Early Childhood Recommended Practices Assessment and the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale (ECERS). These measures could be administered annually or biannually to determine the relative focus of each classroom over time.

One concern with assessing the trajectories of different groups of children over time is the very apparent changes in the demography of children served in the programs. Two trends that have large implications for programming are particularly apparent, the increase in the number of children identified in the autism spectrum and children whose primary language is not English. The value of documenting such categorical data at entry into the preschool programs cannot be overestimated, as identifying these trends early may have major implications for programming.

The influx of children with autism has clearly resulted in increased demands on the classrooms and staff. As these numbers have gradually increased, the program itself has evolved to include these children. At what point, however, can the existing model no longer appropriately adapt to this increase? As noted above in the discussion of the use of 1:1 assistants, perhaps other models need to be considered, perhaps different staffing patterns or distribution of these children among more programs. Some of this has already occurred with the addition of an autism assistant who provides consultative support to 1:1 assistants and classroom staff.
The increase in children who are refugees or immigrants has also required programmatic changes among the classrooms in which they are placed. The Family Center programs seem to offer a warm transition to school for these families. The classrooms themselves also provide developmentally appropriate socialization experiences. Because of the limited number of hours in these programs, however, not too much can be expected in relation to learning English. This is not a uniform population, not only are the language and cultural backgrounds varied but the experience of immigration is also likely to range from fleeing from violence to purposeful immigration. Research on the effects of immigration on children (Suárez-Orozco, 2001) show that first generation immigrants often do very well in school, but whether that applies to this most recent wave is not clear.

In relation to managing and interpreting data it will be important to recognize this changing demographic early and examine the outcomes for these children in relation to early childhood program placement.

Conclusions/recommendations

Create a common early childhood menu. The largest and most obvious conclusion in this report is that the district should plan for a similar menu of early childhood services in each of the four elementary school clusters that are planned due to changing enrollment and school consolidation. This recommendation is based, in part, on a need for equity. Families getting services at one school may be offered services not available at another. Children with one code may access services not available to children with another identification. It is also based upon practicality and a stated belief in inclusion for children with special needs. In a practical sense, it allows for a decentralization of early childhood programs so that they are manageable in scope. The current district-wide approach requires administration and supervision as well as some related services to be stretched between programs. These programs, however, should maintain common standards and continue to share resources, staff development opportunities and other elements of maintaining a common early childhood effort within the district.

An important element in relation to constructing such a menu is the degree to which other community programs, both public and private, are considered. What is the overall demand for services to this population in the community, which agencies are currently meeting their portion of the demand, which other agencies can be supported to meet some of the needs? The need for and adequacy of child care for families in Concord is part of the larger context in which school services are offered. Any definition of what schools offer should be planned, and hopefully coordinated with, that larger context.
Corollary to this recommendation is the establishment of a committee to oversee this transition, perhaps made up of members of the current evaluation committee along with staff members representing the various sites and disciplines. This group could develop the proposed required and optional menu of services for each cluster. They could also be consulted on the design of any new facility, so that it is appropriate to the needs of preschool programs.

The vision implied in this recommendation is that each cluster offers early childhood programming within which the needs of young children with special needs are served. To this point, it is the services for children with special needs that have been the primary forces that has driven the development of the programs. The stance taken here is to think first about quality early childhood education, and then of how children with special needs are included. Imagine an elementary program that was first defined as special education with teaching for all the other children added on afterward. This process should start before new buildings are designed.

This recommendation, of course, leads to the more basic question of what the District and community’s commitment to programming for pre-kindergarten aged children truly is. The fact that 38 states around the country have already moved toward pre-k is not a sufficient rationale. It may be what the future holds, and is certainly supported by the Obama administration’s education agenda. But more important, particularly in New Hampshire, which defines itself by local control, is the genuine belief that these programs are valuable. The support from research is clear, both in terms of child outcomes and long-term costs for taxpayers. But the administration and the community itself should be clear about what they want.

Provide supervision to early childhood education classrooms across programs created primarily for non-identified children. With the numbers of children with varying needs in these classrooms increasing more attention to their specific needs is needed. These programs offer an extremely valuable service, as they fill the gap between what is provided by the special needs programs and that by programs outside of the school-system. If these programs are consolidated within each of the elementary clusters they may be able to lessen the demand on the reverse-mainstream classrooms in relation to the number of high need identified children served by those programs. Currently, the curriculum in these programs is developmentally appropriate and play-based. However, as the challenges of various children become more demanding such an approach is threatened. Further examination of the curriculum in these programs, as well as direct supervision representing best practice in early childhood education is recommended.

Whether this role is given to one person across the programs or held within each cluster depends, in part, on the goals of the programs and the availability of appropriate
staff. One element that should not be lost is the importance of supervision that represents high quality early childhood education.

**Examine existing staffing patterns in relation to future program goals.** The use of 1:1 assistants is at a tipping point. They carry much of the weight in relation to services for high need identified children. They are well suited to the current model that capitalizes on consultative support and relatively structured classrooms. However, it is hard to imagine their numbers increasing while simultaneously conducting typical preschool programs. Related service personnel present a somewhat different challenge. They often play roles in the classrooms, work with children individually, and consult with other staff. This plays out differently in each classroom and school. Currently staffing decisions are somewhat at the mercy of individual demands of children’s IEPs, rather than on the choice of a particular program model. Interestingly, at Rumford it is integrated therapy whereas at Eastman it is more consultative. If, as the literature suggests, integrated therapy is preferable then is one set of children getting something that another isn’t?

Again, with changes in the structure and distribution of the programs, is there a staffing pattern that distributes 1:1 assistants and related services staff equitably throughout the early childhood programs? What kind of staffing would be most effective in a reverse-mainstream classroom? Certainly, some related services personnel will need to travel between programs. It may be that fewer 1:1 assistants and more therapy aides will be part of the new structure, but should not occur at the cost of direct programming for children. It may also benefit the district to better utilize the knowledge that 1:1 assistants have about individual students.

This recommendation is unquestionably vague, as it depends on the development of a vision by stakeholders, availability of resources, and student demand.

**Establish the use of aggregate student data and classroom-based measures to produce quantitative feedback to early childhood classrooms.** Curriculum in the preschool classrooms is literally entrusted to very capable early childhood educators. They operate with a freedom that their elementary and secondary peers might envy. However, one of the expectations of this review was to recommend methods for evaluating the efficacy of those programs. Although truly determining efficacy would require an experimental research model, there are a couple of ways data can be used to help with program change and improvement.

One method is to look at aggregate data from the developmental measures applied with children with special needs. This and other measures of development used with the non-identified children could be examined to determine the overall profile of students in the programs. Another, perhaps more useful recommendation, is to use environmental assessments such as the Division of Early Childhood Recommended
Practices Assessment or the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale (ECERS) on a reasonable schedule, and as program changes are made.

Addend the data management system so that the trajectories of students with various background characteristics can be examined over time. The district has an impressive capacity to generate and analyze student data. And, the early childhood programs offer a number of categorical variables that ought to be considered in examining the progress of students into elementary school and after. Children’s characteristics as provided at intake and from preschool assessment may be included. Perhaps more useful will be categories such as referral sources, program placement in preschool, ESL programming, special needs codes, and subsequent movement into or out of special education.

Examination of how codes change over time, entry into and out of special education, and academic outcomes may be very useful in determining the trajectories of the various groups of children who attend the various preschool programs. (Some questions that could be addressed by such analyses are listed earlier). This information could be valuable in identifying professional development and curriculum needs. One example, would be to look at children who attend longer day, full-week, out-of-district programs. A finding that they, for example, score higher on later academic measures may indicate the effectiveness of the placement, but it more likely will identify a particular set of children who get those placements, leading to a reevaluation of which children are placed in which program.

The above recommendations represent the findings of this review from the perspective of an advocate for quality early childhood education, and inclusive education for children with special needs. Hopefully, they also accurately reflect the cumulative vision of the people working in the school district’s early childhood programs. It has been a privilege and a delight to work with this group of competent and dedicated educators.

Respectfully submitted,

John Hornstein
References


