

Evaluation Report for the Preschool Program

Department of Student Support Services

Marblehead Public Schools

Marblehead, Massachusetts

Conducted: November/December 2020

Submitted by:
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I. Introduction

The Director of Student Services requested that Seaside Educational Consultants (SEC) conduct an evaluation of the special education program that serves young children with special needs through the integrated model. The administration is requesting this evaluation of the district's Preschool programming to assist in securing recommendation that will address the current status of the Marblehead Preschool programming, services, staffing pattern, utilization of staff, both professional and paraprofessional, the effectiveness of the special education program, inclusion model of instruction, instructional supports services, strategies of inclusion, specialized instructional strategies, and professional development needs of the Preschool program personnel. We want to note that this report also includes the ACCESS program at Glover, which is part of the Preschool continuum. Special education administrative practices and procedures, compliance requirements of early childhood programming, and the intake process will be reviewed.

The evaluators want to acknowledge that this program evaluation took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, which did not allow for extensive classroom observations or observations of therapies being delivered both in and out of the classroom. The evaluators observed classrooms with some IEP students and some community peers while some students were participating in remote learning. The evaluators have based this report on past practices before COVID-19, and the recommendations are based on going forward after schools can return to in-school learning for the majority of students.

A. Purpose

The purpose of an Independent Evaluation of a specific program and its service is to provide a school district with an objective report that identifies areas of strength, needs, and recommendations. An independent evaluation allows for a specific program to be examined from the perspective that looks at what is working well in the program but also speaks to areas that need to be strengthened. This evaluation is focused on the specific domain of programming and services that serve young children with special needs in an integrated setting.

The review process is designed through a multi-step approach to assist the school district's leadership team and the school-based special education personnel in having a guided and focused discussion that will enable effective short- and long-range planning to occur, while recognizing and addressing issues such as:

- Identifying trends and patterns in referrals to Preschool.
- Identifying trends in the characteristics in the students who are being referred.

- Identifying similar profile characteristics in the non-referred and referred students.
- Determining the effectiveness and utilization of current special education personnel and their roles and responsibilities with respect to serving students on Individualized Educational Programs.
- Identifying trends in the program placements of students.
- Determining the effectiveness of the current program and service interventions.
- Staffing and resource needs that reflect student needs.
- Creating a long-range plan that addresses the agreed-upon changing needs of the student population.
- Establishing a comprehensive approach to program and service development that is linked to the annual budget planning process.

This review process brings forth information that will enable the district's administration and program-based special education personnel to develop an action plan(s) that will lead to more effective approaches for serving the students of the Marblehead Integrated Preschool Program.

It is important to recognize that for the information contained in this report to be beneficial to the school district and the Department of Student Services, the stakeholders must come together to discuss the findings and the recommendations. Through a deliberative process, the administration and the program base special education personnel can develop a short- and long-range action plan(s) that will address the agreed-upon issues.

B. Evaluators

Sally Smith, M.Ed., is a Special Education and Early Childhood Consultant for Seaside Educational Consultants, LABBB Collaborative, and the Northshore Education Consortium. Prior to her present professional position, Ms. Smith has 39 years of educational experience that includes Early Childhood Coordinator and Northeast Regional Associate Manager of Walker Partnerships, Director of Professional Development for the Education Collaborative of Greater Boston, four years as Director of Student Services for the Belmont Public Schools following 12 years of involvement with the Early Childhood Program for the Belmont Public Schools as a Preschool special education teacher, an inclusion specialist, and Early Childhood Coordinator. Ms. Smith has also been an elementary and middle school consulting teacher for the Lynnfield

Public Schools and a special education teacher at the SEEM Collaborative. Ms. Smith has conducted numerous professional development trainings and directed over 40 program evaluations of special education programs and services at all grade levels for public school districts. Additionally, Ms. Smith has instructed and supervised graduate students from numerous Boston-area colleges and universities as well as mentored/coached teachers and coordinators. Ms. Smith also has extensive experience with developing effective programming for students on the Autism Spectrum.

Patric Barbieri has been in the field of special education for 32 years working in myriad roles including Special Needs Teacher, Educational Coordinator, and Program Director. He is currently the Executive Director of LABBB Collaborative and has been in this position for the past 14 years. His strength is in developing specialized programs for students with special needs from Preschool through high school. He has also developed a college program in conjunction with Middlesex Community College for students with disabilities for students who attend LABBB. In addition, he has co-developed a vocational training program over the past 30 years for students to develop real work skills working in local businesses. Approximately 75 students from LABBB are working in companies through Middlesex County every day.

II. Methodology

This program evaluation was conducted based on a five-step process.

1. Document Review

Review of written documentation pertaining to this review, such as program description, class schedules, staff patterns, contracted services, role descriptions, procedural guidelines, budget data, student progress data collection systems, the District Curriculum Accommodation Plan, professional development offerings for the program staff, and 12 Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) of special needs students.

2. Observations

Site visit to the Glover School facilitated by the Early Childhood Coordinator to see the layout of the building including Preschool classrooms, Kindergarten classrooms, specialist's offices, gym, library, and Preschool playground.

Observation of the Preschool Program school consisted of three am Preschool classes and the ACCESS program. These observations were 30 minutes in length.

3. Interviews via Zoom

Most of the interviews were conducted via Zoom and were generally 30-45 minutes in length. Individual or Focus Group Interview via Zoom included:

- Student Support Secretary

- 3 Integrated Preschool Teachers
- 3 Paraprofessionals
- 2 Access Paraprofessionals
- 2 Eveleth Kindergarten Teachers
- 3 Glover Kindergarten Teachers
- 1 Psychologist
- BCBA for ACCESS program and Chairperson for the ACCESS program
- Assistant Superintendent
- Glover Principal
- Superintendent
- 2 Speech Pathologists
- Physical Therapist
- Occupational Therapist

4. Interviews in Person

- The Director of Student Services
- The Early Childhood Coordinator/Team Chair

5. Exit Interview

The two Seaside Evaluators conducted a 1.5-hour exit interview via Zoom on December 18, 2020, with the Director of Student Support Services, the Early Childhood Coordinator/Team Chair, and the Superintendent. This discussion reviewed general findings and possible recommendations going forward to enhance the Marblehead Preschool Program.

6. Report Development

A comprehensive report was developed to include recommendations based on the analysis of all collected data and the evaluators' experience with evaluating Mass. Early Childhood Programs and Mass. DESE data and protocols. Possible suggestions on how the district might choose to implement accepted recommendations are included in this report.

Questions for the Integrated Preschool Program staff:

- What are your responsibilities in your role as a teacher? (SLP, OT, PT, Psychologist, BCBA, paraprofessional?)
- How long have you been in your position? Do you feel any of your responsibilities interfere with your ability to teach?
- What trends do you see in the overall Preschool population?

- What do you see working well for Preschool students with special needs in the Preschool Program?
- Are you provided with appropriate materials/equipment? Are there additional needs given the complexity of many of the students?
- Do you feel the current configuration of Preschool classes offered is meeting the needs of the special needs students? Would you make changes?
- What do you use for the curriculum? What published curricula do you implement for academic, social/emotional, fine motor, and sensory regulation?
- How do you communicate with your parents and how often?
- Do you have time to meet with paraprofessionals assigned to your classroom beyond the school day?
- What professional development opportunities have been provided in the last 2 years? Are the professional development offerings specific to Preschool needs? What areas do you need additional in-service?
- How do you select community students for the Integrated Preschool Program? Do you feel that the community students are appropriate models to increase communication and social skills for the special needs students?
- How much time do related service providers spend in your classroom and how do they provide services in the classroom?
- Do you plan the activity with the related service providers for the time they are integrating therapy into your classroom?
- Do you have a regularly scheduled time to meet with the coordinator and related service providers to discuss students and other Preschool issues? Is this time sufficient?
- Describe the transition process from Early Intervention to Preschool? Would you make changes? What is your role? Do you conduct ARENA screenings as part of this process?

- Describe the transition process from Preschool to Kindergarten. What is your role? Does this process need to be changed in any way?
- Do you have any opportunities to meet with Kindergarten teachers? Do you observe Kindergarten classes and do Kindergarten teachers observe your class?
- Do you provide any parent training? What areas do you think parents would benefit from in a workshop?
- What methods of data collection do you use for special needs students? How often and by whom?
- Describe the Extended School Year (ESY) program. Do you take data for eligibility?

Questions for Marblehead Preschool / ACCESS program support staff

- How long have you been an Assistant?
- Did you have experience or education working with typically developing Preschool-age children before you became an assistant in Marblehead? If yes, briefly describe.
- Did you have experience working with special needs Preschoolers prior to your current position? If yes, briefly describe.
- Did the district provide training for you before you started in your position? Describe:
- Do you receive ongoing training and/or professional development? (Who does? What is the format and frequency of this training?)
- Do you meet with the teacher that you support on a daily basis outside of the school day? Before school, after school, other? How much time?
- Describe your role and responsibilities in your current assistant position.
- Are there any responsibilities or aspects of your job that could be changed in some way to improve outcomes for students and make the job more manageable?
- What do you see as the strengths of the Marblehead Preschool Program?

- Who evaluates you? Do you receive a written evaluation each school year?
- Are there areas in the Preschool that could be improved/strengthened?
- Do you communicate with parents regarding their child's school day or progress? If so, when and how? Who oversees this communication?
- Do you collect data on students' goals? Who provides the format for this data collection?
- Do you accompany students to therapies and attend the session (OT, PT, SLP, BCBA)?
- Do you have access to the students' IEPs?
- Are there outcomes you would like to see as a result of this program evaluation?

These questions varied, somewhat, depending on the specific role of the interviewed individual. The discussion expanded beyond these specific questions based on the individual's experience within their respective role as an instructional assistant, their experience in the field of education, the length of time that they have been in their current position, and any other factors that emerged from the interview process.

III. Commendations

This section of the report is for the purpose of recognizing the efforts put forth by the district and the administration in their efforts to meet the needs of the students. Special Education is a complex mandate for public schools to meet. There are competing interests that continue to place significant pressure and financial burden on the school district. Marblehead Public Schools has recognized its responsibility to meet the needs of young children with special needs through the Integrated program.

Specific Commendations:

1. The Director of Student Support Services for commissioning this independent program evaluation to determine what is working well in the Preschool Program and what additions or enhancements may be necessary to improve this high-quality program and meet the needs of an increasingly complex population of young children.

2. The Preschool special education program staff responded enthusiastically to the evaluators' visits to their classrooms displaying an accommodating style for the process of observing classrooms and related service providers.
3. The Kindergarten teachers interviewed in the two elementary schools were open and shared information on the readiness of the Preschoolers from the Glover Preschool Program and the effectiveness of the transition process.
4. Preschool Interviewees demonstrated a positive willingness for participation in this evaluation. The comments they expressed through the interview process contributed substantially to the development of this report.
5. Currently, there are no Preschoolers in out-of-district approved private or collaborative placements.
6. Given the increasing number of students with significant needs the district is open to reorganizing the current configurations of classes to meet these students' needs.
7. The Administration and Integrated Preschool Program staff are committed to providing effective inclusion.
8. The Preschool teachers, support staff, and related service providers all mentioned collaboration as a key strength of the Preschool Program.
9. Classroom space including size, instructional materials, and designated learning centers are designed to serve a wide variety of learning styles and cognitive levels. There are bathrooms and sinks in the classroom, which are essential at this age level.
10. A variety of visuals including the daily schedule, token boards, and individual student schedules are visible in all classrooms and implemented with fidelity.
11. The teachers' use of engaging instructional activities to foster receptive and expressive language, and adaptive skills fine and gross motor development was duly observed.
12. The support staff demonstrated self-initiative working in the Preschool classes and a genuine interest in professional development and consulting time with the teachers and related service providers.
13. There is a strong commitment on the part of the Preschool Program staff and administration to have ongoing, consistent, meaningful communication with parents.

14. The IEPs reviewed were generally well written but most had too many accommodations and too many goals. (see recommendations)
15. The observations in the Preschool and ACCESS classes indicated the use of technology including smart boards in each classroom.
16. Interviews consistently indicated that the new administrative team is seen as very responsive, and communication between staff and the administrative team is excellent. The staff feels that the current administration team is listening and this is very positive.
17. The special education team has been very transparent and made the initiative to bring the community together to listen to their feedback and concerns.
18. It was clear that the district has built many quality special education programs from Preschool through high school to keep kids in the least restrictive environment. Although there have been changes over the past several years, there seems to be a vision to create a continuum of services including 18-22 students.
19. ACCESS Teacher displayed outstanding initiative to incorporate PECs/ACE into her classroom. Data taking was well coordinated among the paraprofessionals in the classroom.
20. The Preschool has developed a detailed Preschool Parent Screening Questionnaire, which should be sent to parents and returned prior to the screening. For students being screened as community peers for the Preschool Program the question "What are your concerns about your child's schooling?" should be removed. Two more informative questions should be added. These are: 1. *Why would you like your child to attend the Marblehead Integrated Preschool, which includes both students with and without disabilities?* 2. *What do you hope your child will learn from attending a public Preschool program?*
21. The Preschool has developed a progress report, which is completed in November and May. While this progress note includes the major areas that Preschool teachers cover to prepare students for Kindergarten, it should be updated to differentiate skills for the 3-year-old vs. the 4-year-old. In addition, the skill areas of the classroom and motor skills should be separated and math skills should be added. Many districts have three separate progress reports. (one for 3's, one for 4's and one for Preschool)

22. The Preschool to grade 3 Special Education secretary is very knowledgeable about the referral process and is familiar with Preschool programming and the Preschool staff. This is a critical position, and weekly time with the Early Childhood Coordinator is critical.

23. The Preschool classrooms are mixed age, and this should continue as it provides more options for placements, particularly when students enter during the school year. There are academic and social benefits to the students which are documented in many articles.

24. The Assistant Superintendent is committed to providing relevant professional development opportunities for all staff from Preschool to High School and aligning a cohesive curriculum across grade levels. She will emphasize the importance of staff understanding the standards and how to implement and assess the standards for all.

IV. Factors Affecting Programming and Services

This section of the report will address factors as they apply to the Preschool Program. It is the intent of the authors of this report to provide the district administrators with current data that will assist in the planning and implementation of program and service enhancements that build on the existing programs and services with the Integrated Preschool Program.

There are numerous factors that impact a district's ability to deliver instructional and related services to students with special needs. Through the evaluation process the following topics have been identified as having an impact on the implementation of special education programming and services:

- *Special Education Census*
- *Severity of Need*
- *Administrative Leadership*
- *Emerging Populations*
- *Space and Location Requirements*

Special Education Census

The census refers to the number of eligible special needs students who are participating in the Marblehead Preschool Program. The census increases on an ongoing basis throughout the school. As children turn three years of age and are determined to be eligible for special education programming and/or related special education services, the district is required to implement an IEP upon the child's third birthday. It is crucial that the district have community-wide awareness of young children who may or are eligible for special education. Through an effective relationship with the various Early

Intervention (EI) programs that serve the district, local pediatrician associations, Department of Public Health (live birth data), Department of Children and Families, the district will have the necessary data to plan and anticipate for the arrival of eligible students at the time of their third birthday. The Early Childhood Coordinator of the Marblehead Program must initiate this type of outreach to be able to more effectively plan for the anticipated and unanticipated arrival of eligible 3-year-old children.

Table I. Census for the Marblehead Preschool Program for Three Fiscal Years

| Fiscal Year | Marblehead Preschool Census | # of IEP Students |
|--------------------|------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| FY18 | 40 | 24 |
| FY19 | 45 | 29 |
| FY20 | 43 | 32 |
| *FY21 | *38 | * 23 **30-32 |

Source > Department of Elementary & Secondary Education (DEE) October 1st Census Reports

* enrollment at the time of the review
 ** enrollment anticipated by June 2021

Table I illustrates the census for three fiscal years. The pattern of enrollment varies slightly over the three years with the average of 28 Preschoolers on IEPs each year. This pattern is affected by the number of live births three years prior to the entrance into the program; families moving in and out of the district; residing children experiencing a sudden change in their medical, physical, behavioral health; and/or learning developmental growth.

At the time of this review, there were 23 special needs students in the Preschool program. With upcoming referrals between January-June 2021 the Preschool expects to end the year with approximately 30-32 special needs students with 11 of these students moving to Kindergarten. The 2021-2022 Preschool year would begin with 22-25 students.

This data indicates the necessity of opening two new Preschool classes as each classroom can only have seven special needs maximum, and this is not ideal when the needs of the students are more significant.

Severity of Need

The needs of the individual students are a major influence on programming. There is a varying and diverse group of disability categories that make up the census of students in the Preschool participating in special education programming. The school-based staff is confronted with having to differentiate the instruction in many forms on a daily basis. Accommodations and modifications to the various curriculums need to occur on an ongoing basis from, to one-on-one instruction, small group instruction, to whole-class instruction. The Marblehead staff demonstrated flexibility both in their ability to meet the various instructional, emotional, and social needs of the students in all of the integrated classes, but equally important was their effort to continuously refine the curriculum for content instruction.

Administrative Leadership

With respect to the factor of administrative operation of special education, the school district appears to now have an effective school leadership team which includes the Superintendent, the Assistant Superintendent/Curriculum & Instruction, Special Education Team Chair/Early Childhood Coordinator, and the Director of Student Services. It is imperative that all administrators in the district are working in unison when it comes to the Preschool Program, especially when it comes to program enhancements and the transition of students to Kindergarten. Additionally, it is very important and essential that they are unified with respect to the building-based daily implementation and overall operation and philosophy of special education.

Marblehead has experienced a number of changes in administrative positions including the Superintendent, the Director of Student Services, the Assistant Superintendent, and Early Childhood Coordinator over the past five-plus years. The Early Childhood Coordinator position has also had approximately 10 people in this position and was reduced from a full-time position in 2014. These changes in administrative leadership have had an impact on the delivery of services and especially in the continuity of administrative management required to establish necessary procedural and instructional practices. Uniformity of operational practice does not occur when administrative leadership is not consistent, and continuity of administrative oversight was lacking with respect to the mission and goals for the implementation of special education within the Integrated Preschool Program.

Emerging Populations

Marblehead, like most school districts, is experiencing an emerging population of children with social/emotional, behavioral, and health/medical needs. The Preschool is finding that children entering the Preschool Program are presenting with more issues and concerns related to dysregulation of behavior and socialization. As these young children matriculate from Preschool programming into Kindergarten and grade one, they are placing increasing pressure on the school-based staff to be more proactive in providing supportive, therapeutic interventions, and social skills development support.

This young group of children places an added responsibility on the program staff because the needs of this emerging population are becoming more demanding of the Integrated Preschool Program staff time on a daily basis.

Space and Location Requirements

The final factor that will impact the Preschool Program is the location, the number of designated classrooms, the appropriate spaces for therapists, and indoor and outdoor playgrounds/gyms.

V. Findings

The following findings are provided to assist the district with the work that needs to be reviewed to improve and enhance the current integrated Preschool programming.

1. While the teachers could articulate to some degree the difference between the Preschool classes, there was not a document stating why a student is placed in one class vs. another. The descriptions for each class/program should indicate the differences in each class and reflect a continuum of classes from full inclusion to substantially separate. There needs to be clear entrance criteria for each type of classroom and what the student must accomplish to exit from one type of classroom to another.
2. The related services of Occupational Therapy, Physical Therapy, Speech, and Language do not have a description of services and the entrance and exit criteria.
3. All schools are listed on the Marblehead School website, but the location of the Preschool on this list is not clear. Preschool should be added as a separate tab under schools.
4. The Preschool website could be improved to include what curricula are implemented in the Preschool as well as a section for teachers to share information regarding what's happening in their classes and how parents may support this learning at home through books and activities. Related service providers should also add suggestions.
5. The comprehensive parent questionnaire is sent to parents after students are screened. Sending this questionnaire to the parents prior to the screening would give the staff information on what areas might need to be looked at in more detail.
6. The Preschool team individually screens all community peers applying to the program using the 2008 Early Screening Inventory. (ESI) The age range for this instrument is 3.0.-4.5, and the norms are not updated. Many students are being screened before their 3rd birthday. Post-COVID, the Preschool should consider group screenings for community peers which will be discussed in the recommendations. For the current year the district should consider a new instrument such as the Brigance Early Childhood 111,

which screens 0-35 months and 3-5. or the DIAL- 4 Developmental Indicators for Assessment of Learning – Fourth, which has an age range of 2.6-5.11. The district can also access Selected Developmental Screening Tools “A Resource for Early Childhood” at <https://earlyeducatorcentral.acf.hhs.gov/> for additional information on screening tools.

7. There is a general feeling among staff that the mission/purpose of the Preschool and the fact that this program is both a federal and state-mandated program is not well understood by the entire K-12 school community. The Marblehead School website should be updated to have grades Pre-K-12.

8. On the Marblehead School website there is a description of the ACCESS and PACE Programs. Interviews indicated that these two programs serve the same population of students at different grade levels. There should be one name. One name would be clearer to both staff and parents and indicate that there is a continuum of services when students transition from Pre-K-12.

9. The document review and interviews did not indicate any written information on the referral process for the ACCESS Program when a student might need to be considered for the program after initially being placed in another Preschool class.

10. Interviews and the building plan indicate that there will be three Preschool classrooms at Glover and two more are allocated to be in the new building when it opens sometime between September to December 2021.

11. The Preschool Program offers 2.75 hours a day in the am or pm four days a week. am and pm classes and some full day for special needs students and community peers. With the current model, some students had to move to another classroom and teacher for a full day.

12. The district has not recently updated the cost of community peers attending the Marblehead Public School Program. The district should be competitive with private Preschool fees.

13. The Preschool brochure should be updated to reflect new program options, the cost, and timelines for applying and acceptance. In addition, the term typically developing peers should be removed from the last page. The statement should be: The Preschool Program includes students with identified disabilities as well as students without disabilities.

14. The Preschool has developed a progress report, which is completed in November and June. While this progress note covers the major areas that Preschool teachers cover to prepare students for Kindergarten, it should be updated to differentiate skills for the 3-year-old vs. the 4-year-old. The area classroom/motor skills should be separate, and math readiness should be added.

15. The Marblehead DCAP does not include appropriate accommodations for Preschoolers.

16. The review of the Preschool IEPs indicates that the number of accommodations was excessive and often redundant (14 plus) and often contained too many goals. The district may want to consider including a section of Preschool accommodations on the DCAP. The accommodations selected for a particular child can be checked off and attached to the IEP. Goal areas can generally be covered by 3-5 goals. (Communication, Classroom Skills, Gross-Motor, Social, and Cognition). Accommodations are easier to understand when they are categorized by setting, timing, presentation, and response.

17. From interviews with Preschool and ACCESS staff in Glover there was a consistent sentiment that they are seen as separate from the general education population.

18. Professional development for Preschool and ACCESS staff is limited and irrelevant to their populations of students. Most curriculum initiatives or programs have been done on the staff's own volition. There should be a point person or team that develops and plans professional development days for the school year.

19. It is unclear how staffing is considered in each classroom or if the district has a philosophy on how staffing needs decisions are made.

20. Paraprofessionals'/Tutors' pay scales and job descriptions should be revised and restructured.

21. Interviews and observations indicate that the curriculum in Preschool and Kindergarten is not cohesive. For example, Lively Letters is used in Preschool, but in kindergarten, Foundations is used.

22. The BCBA, who is primarily at Glover, has limited time in her schedule given the time she spends in the ACCESS program to provide services or regular consultation to the Preschool staff.

23. The psychologist assigned to Glover one day a week primarily conducts assessments. The current role of the Psychologist does not allow dedicated consultation time to the Preschool staff to support working with complex students and families.

24. Both Preschool staff and Kindergarten staff feel that the process for transitioning students from Preschool-K needs to be greatly improved. Both groups of teachers would like to have time to observe each other's classes and also have time for teachers to observe students in Preschool before they transition to K.

25. There wasn't a clear philosophy on how/when specialists are integrated into the classrooms and how collaboration with teaching staff is coordinated.

26. The supervision for specialists was unclear and inconsistent.

VI. Recommendations

The following recommendations are a direct outcome of the evaluation process that was recently completed of the Preschool Program. Each recommendation is followed by an explanation that is intended to further expand on the rationale for the recommendation. These recommendations are intended to provide insight and direction for the administration and Preschool/ACCESS program staff in making decisions regarding the direction that they determine to go in with respect to the existing program and services.

1. Embracing the Preschool / ACCESS Programs as Part of the Glover School Culture

Explanation:

- There must be an initiative to embrace the Preschool and ACCESS programs into the school culture. This should be communicated by the administration to the school leadership so all staff working in these programs feel part of the school community in Glover.
- For inclusion to be successful, the school community must understand the importance of including all students with special needs, and the goal is for all students to have the opportunity to participate in the least restrictive environments.
- The "Bigger Picture" of understanding the consequences of out-of-district placements also should be communicated. If programs or students with special needs are not properly supported or included, this could lead to out-of-district placements and have significant budget implications for the district.
- Preschool/ACCESS staff, including all paraprofessionals, should be included in professional development opportunities if applicable.
- Marblehead Public Schools has developed and invested in some very successful programming for both students with and without disabilities in the Preschool Program Early Childhood. Efforts need to be made to ensure that Preschool continues to meet the needs of the Preschool special needs students as this population continues to increase in both numbers and the severity of needs. The Preschool staff requires sufficient

classroom learning time, consultation, supervision, and professional development to meet the needs of these students with the federal and state mandate of FAPE (Free and Appropriate Education) and LRE (Least Restrictive Environment). To date, the Marblehead Public Schools have met this mandate with no Preschool students being placed in out-of-district placements. Out-of-district placements are costly and remove the child from their community peers for over 40 hours a week. Research indicates that students with intellectual and complex learning profiles can increase their communication, behavioral, social, and academic skills when they learn next to their typically developing peers with the appropriate support.

2. Increase Administrative Oversight with a Full-time Early Childhood Coordinator, Preschool-Kindergarten

Explanation:

- In order to improve the Preschool Program with the initiatives proposed in this report and be ready for changes in classroom structure as students move in or exit Early Intervention, the district will need increased administrative oversight on a daily basis throughout the school year as well as extended time in the summer for overseeing the ESY program and time prior to the opening of school. Some districts extend the Early Childhood Coordinator contract by 4-5 weeks to provide this necessary oversight.
- The district will need to continue to monitor the Preschool population through the census, DPH live birth information as both number and severity of needs can change fairly quickly.
- Given the current size of the Preschool Program and given the plan/need to expand from 3-5 classrooms, the district should highly consider a Preschool-K Early Childhood Coordinator who oversees the Preschool Program and the Kindergarten Special Needs students that require programming beyond just related services only.
- The current responsibilities of the Early Childhood Coordinator/Preschool-grade 3 Team Chair are too numerous to provide adequate supervision to the Preschool staff and implement necessary ongoing programmatic changes. Currently, this individual is responsible on average for leading 130 team meetings a year and this activity takes 70 percent of her time or approximately 3.5/5 days.

- The Preschool-Kindergarten Early Childhood Coordinator’s primary responsibilities would include:
 1. Chairing Preschool and Kindergarten Team meetings
 2. Facilitating weekly Team Time with Preschool staff
 3. Facilitating consult time with Kindergarten Team of K IEP students
 4. Observing referred students or delegating to appropriate staff
 5. Attending Early Intervention (EI) transition meetings
 6. Organizing Arena Screenings/Evaluations for community peers and special needs students and ensuring assessments are current
 7. Planning, Facilitating, and Conducting Professional Development
 8. Mediating complex parent or staff issues
 9. Observing new and struggling students on a regular basis
 10. Reviewing classroom data to plan appropriate classrooms and placement of all students during the school year and for the Extended School Year
 11. Working with Preschool and K staff to ensure smooth transitions of special needs students from Preschool to K
 12. Supervising and Conducting formal staff evaluations of teachers, paras, and Preschool-related service providers
 13. Providing data for statewide reports
 14. Applying for and writing DOE state grants
 15. Keeping the Director of Student Services current on all aspects of the program
 16. Overseeing the selection and implementation of all curricula
 17. Being available for crises (medical/behavioral)

**At the time of this report the current number of Preschool students and the Preschool special needs students projected for Kindergarten for school year 2021-2022, a full-time Preschool-K Coordinator should be adequate to fulfill the above duties. If numbers significantly increase at any point, there may be a need for the addition of a Team Chair to ensure that the Coordinator’s position does not become primarily Team chair.*

3. Re-evaluate Location of Preschool Classrooms

Explanation:

- In the consultants’ experience working with many districts, it has been more efficient and effective to have the Preschool classrooms located in one building. This has been reflected in increased student learning and collaboration among all staff members.
- We realize that space is an issue for many districts; therefore, we have also seen and observed districts making the initiative to acquire a

building to run their own Preschool center outside the school environment so they could be located in one building.

4. Restructure Support Staff Job Descriptions and Pay Scales

Explanation:

The district should consider two options for restructuring the Paraprofessional/Tutor support staff pay scales and job descriptions to promote clear and unambiguous role expectations. The district should also consider a paraprofessional pay scale with steps that is competitive with similar districts.

- Option #1: Combine the support staff positions (Paraprofessionals/Tutors) into one Paraprofessional job description and pay scale.
 - This option would eliminate the Tutor position.
 - While this could have budget implications and may need to be phased in, this would provide a consistent scale for all support staff.
 - The job description should be revised and be comprehensive to eliminate any confusion of the role expectations.
 - The evaluators have provided an example of a paraprofessional pay scale that is in line with similar districts.
- Option #2: Keep the current Paraprofessional and Tutor positions and pay scales but restructure both job descriptions.
 - If the district chooses to keep both current support positions, there must be clear job descriptions that delineate the differences of the two positions.
 - Each job description should specifically list all responsibilities that are required for the teachers to effectively carry out and meet all student needs in the classroom.
- If the district chooses to adopt option 1 or 2, both should require Paraprofessionals to participate in all professional opportunities with their respective schools.
- All support staff should have time built-in their schedule either before or after school to meet with their respective teams.

5. Implement the Same Preschool Curricula Across All Preschool Classrooms

Explanation:

- Interviews and observations indicated that each class is implementing Creative Curriculum. If the district continues with Creative Curriculum, the staff would benefit from training to implement it with fidelity. Interviews indicated that the teachers and related service providers did not have prior or ongoing training by a consultant familiar with the program before implementation.
- The Preschool Program might also want to consider using a curriculum such as Tools of the Mind or Opening the World of Learning, Each of these programs aligns with the Common Core and Massachusetts Curriculum Preschool Frameworks.
- Given that all of the students will be transitioning to Kindergarten, each student should be presented with the same curriculum in all areas as is done in Kindergarten and other elementary grades. In this way, the students learn the same core vocabulary, concepts, and skills that will prepare them for Kindergarten.
- Before moving forward with any curriculum decision, the district should observe these curricula in other districts that are currently implementing the curriculum. The consultants for this program evaluation can provide names of districts and contact information. Once the district decides on any Preschool curriculum, the staff should have initial training and ongoing consultation for the first year of implementation.
- The Assistant Superintendent/Curriculum should be included in discussions around curriculum as there needs to be continuity from Preschool to elementary.
- The Preschool may want to consider using Building Blocks or another Pre-K math curriculum in addition to the core curriculum chosen. Some districts use Building Blocks as this program emphasizes conceptual thinking and reasoning to improve skill acquisition. The program is aligned with state and national standards for Number and Operations, Geometry, Measurement, Patterns and Algebra, Data Analysis, and Classification. The program also incorporates assessment with learning tasks that would be helpful for Preschool data collection.
- The Preschool should continue to implement Second Step for their social emotional program if this curriculum is being used at the elementary level. This program should be implemented daily. Students will be familiar with the program including the vocabulary and strategies when

they enter Kindergarten. The chosen curriculum should be a district at decision.

- Currently, the Preschool uses Lively Letters, a multi-sensory program that turns plain, abstract letters into lively characters for part of their literacy program. Interviews of the Preschool and Kindergarten teachers indicated that Foundations is used when students enter Kindergarten. The district should highly consider implementing Foundations at the Preschool level. The Pre-K version of Foundations supports student's emerging understanding of the alphabetic principles of letter-sound associations and alphabetical order and the written language skill of manuscript letter formation.

6. Provide Professional Development for Administration / Preschool / ACCESS staff

Explanation:

- We recommend providing consistent professional development and giving staff the opportunity for new administrative staff to attend job-alike groups. In these positions it is important to connect with colleagues to be able to exchange information, learn from each other, and acquire insight into how other districts are dealing with the myriad issues they will be facing.
- The staff indicated that the professional development planned for the district is often not relevant for the Preschool staff and has been limited in the past few years.
- Professional development topics and presenters for Preschool Program staff need to be determined in the spring prior to the next school year.
- The Preschool Program staff under the leadership of the Early Childhood Coordinator should decide what is most needed, and these topics should be presented to the Professional Development Committee with the rationale for the importance of such training.
- Support staff spends considerable time working directly with individual students and small groups of Preschoolers. These individuals have varying backgrounds and expertise. If the district is going to continue to rely on these positions to support special needs students in the Preschool, it must provide greater exposure to training opportunities. Instructional assistants need extensive knowledge of the various disability categories, strategies of instruction, and intervention and management of behavioral issues. These individuals need to have a clear understanding of how

instruction is provided to Preschool students with special needs. Training needs to occur for these individuals on an ongoing basis throughout the school year.

Professional Development for Data Collection:

- With the exception of the data collected for discrete trial work, the interviews and observations indicated that observations were mainly done with paper/pencil format and not on a regular basis with the same format in all classes.
- Preschool programs should have consistent data systems that link Current Performance Level(s) to IEP Objectives and Progress Reports. This should also include data collection for ESY programming.
- The Preschool should explore a few of the many models and systems that can be used via an iPad or other smart device to input data. This system should be used across all Preschool classrooms.
- It is important for the program staff to have the data that indicates treatment/behavior/academic goals are being addressed and progress is being recorded. The data needs to be reported in a format that is understood by both students and parents and can be used to drive instruction and supportive interventions by the school-based personnel.

Essential Professional Development

- Many of the topics listed below would be beneficial to offer for Preschool staff which would provide an opportunity for the teachers to work together. Interviewed staff members expressed an interest and need for having more frequent and in-depth training opportunities that focus on the following:
 - Managing challenging classroom behaviors/De-escalation Strategies
 - Creating Trauma-Sensitive Classrooms
 - Managing anxiety in young children
 - Exploring co-teaching models of instruction
 - Positive behavioral interventions
 - Explore PECs/ACE programs for all Preschool/ACCESS Classrooms.
 - Implementing mindfulness activities for all students.

7. Reconfigure Existing Classroom Offerings to Provide a Continuum

Explanation:

- Currently, the Integrated Preschool Program has three classrooms which are mixed-age. This practice should continue as multi-age classes will provide more placement options as special needs students enter throughout the year and because multi-age grouping provides the opportunity for younger students to learn from the older students. Self-confidence and empathy tend to be boosted for the older and more capable students.
- The curriculum in a multi-age classroom is achieved through differentiated instruction with the focus for the 3-year-olds being social/emotional development while the 4-year-olds focus on the mastery of Kindergarten readiness skills.
- The current Preschool has am and pm classes four days a week. Some qualifying special needs students stay a full day, and some 4-year-old community peers stay the whole day as well. The problem with this model is twofold. Both the parents of special needs students and parents of community peers prefer morning programming, making it difficult to fill afternoon classes with the mandated 49/51 percent ratio. In addition, some students have to transfer to a different teacher for the afternoon to balance student needs and keep appropriate student/staff ratios.
- The Preschool should highly consider eliminating the half day PM Preschool option and have all classrooms be full day. Some special needs students will only require the half day option (8:00-12:30) four days a week to make progress while others will need the extended day to make progress. This determination will need to be made adhering to the program descriptions of each class and the entrance and exit criterion to move to a more restrictive or less restrictive program in the Preschool continuum of classes.
- In developing the continuum of classes, all of the teachers and related service providers will need to be familiar with the other models in the continuum. Besides taking data when a student is being considered after initial placement for a different classroom, a trial period in the new classroom can be beneficial.
- While the legal requirement for inclusion is 7/8 (special needs to community peers) with a cap of 15 students total, the ratio in the classrooms that are not full day inclusion and have students with more significant needs a ratio of 4/8 or less should be highly considered.

- If there are more pre-K community students than slots available, students who will be transitioning to K should be given preference for the full day as districts are finding it is often difficult for Preschoolers who have attended half day programs to adjust to a full day. Districts also find that the increased learning time helps with preparing students for Kindergarten.
- Clear, concise classroom descriptions with entrance and exit criteria (*guidelines*) need to be developed for all of the Preschool classes to ensure that each type of class/programming is aligned with ongoing student needs. These classroom descriptions must be reviewed yearly as the needs for certain types of classrooms in terms of size, inclusion, strategies, and staffing are dictated by the needs of students entering each year and throughout the year. Establishment of entrance criteria to the Integrated Preschool classrooms and/or services will act as a gatekeeper reserving the program for those students who are eligible. In addition, when entrance criteria are followed with fidelity, the integrity of the program is maintained, and the goals of the students needing such a program will be accomplished.
- Entrance and Exit criteria should also be considered for the related services of speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, physical therapy, and discrete trial work. Discharge from these services appears infrequent, even when stated goals have been mastered. It is essential that exit criteria be formulated and followed so that when students succeed, they can move to less service time or be discharged. Too often, students continue to receive a related service for an undetermined time such as a full year or year after year. The related service providers should also develop a criterion for why a student needs 1-1 or needs to be removed from the classroom.

8. Develop and Document the Transition Process from Early Intervention to the Preschool Program and from the Preschool Program to Kindergarten

Explanation:

A. Early Intervention Preschool

- While the staff appears to understand the process from Early Intervention to the Preschool Program and services, the district should consider documenting this process. It is essential that all parties who participate in transition fully understand the transition process step by

step, the timelines, and who is responsible for each step. With a documented process an effective transition can occur for all students, families, and sending and receiving staff.

- The district is encouraged to develop a transition guide for parents of referred EI students. This document can be given to parents and also posted on the Preschool website.

B. Kindergarten Transition

- Separate Interviews with the Preschool and the Kindergarten teachers indicated that the transition from the Marblehead Preschool Program to Kindergarten could be improved so that students are appropriately placed and students receive the necessary services/supports to be successful in Kindergarten.
- It is not only essential to have written procedures in place that designate timelines for various activities, but definitions of the roles and responsibilities of those engaged in the transition activities at each level should also be included. It is recommended that the district develop very specific steps for the transition process from the Preschool program to Kindergarten. The sharing of student information to determine the most appropriate programming and support services for students should not be left to a “move-up day” or one meeting held in the spring. Planning needs to begin in the winter months of January or February, and communication should be structured throughout the spring months based on a set timeline for the various activities that ensure that the actual transition of the student is completed in a manner that ensures success.
- In the development of the IEP for students transitioning from the Preschool Program to Kindergarten, the Preschool Team should identify the goals, and the receiving team (*kindergarten*) should develop the schedule as it relates to the service grid of the IEP, determine the frequency of the service, and decide the setting where the service is to be provided. This approach eliminates potential conflicts by the team of the sending program/level when making recommendations for services.
- The Preschool teachers and Kindergarten teachers would benefit from reciprocal visits to each other’s classrooms as well as a time to meet two to three times a year before formal transition meetings are conducted in the spring. This would ensure that all participants in the transition process are fully aware of the needs of the students,

understand the collective issues of the transitioning students, and can plan effective Kindergarten class placements at each elementary school.

9. The Preschool Needs to Develop a Comprehensive Website and Update the Preschool Brochure

Explanation:

- Currently, the Preschool website has a general description of the program, the hours of operation, and the registration process for community peers.
- The website should be a place that parents can easily access to meet the staff, understand the philosophy and mission of the integrated Preschool, and learn about the curriculum.
- The website should also include links to all necessary application/enrollment forms for students to attend the Preschool. (*e.g., application, medical, language survey*)
- The website should have an updated monthly calendar with upcoming events.
- The website can be enhanced by each teacher having a blog about happenings in their classrooms with suggestions for home activities.

There are many excellent websites of other Public Schools Preschool Programs. The administration can review sample websites to assist them in developing a comprehensive one for Marblehead.

10. Implement a Group Screening Process for Community Peers (post-COVID)

Explanation:

- The individual screening process gives the staff no indication of how the child will react in a group situation, which is the expectation in a Preschool class. Many districts have implemented a group screening process (*ARENA Assessment*), which can be accomplished in one school day. Groups of 6-8 applicants come in for 45-60 minutes and go through a shortened Preschool day with meeting time, free play, and activities involving gross and fine motor skills. Some of the Preschool staff members lead the activities while others observe and note any concerns. At the end of each group, staff members review their findings. If there are no concerns, students are accepted or placed in a lottery if there are too many applications for the slots available. If there are concerns, the

Early Childhood Coordinator contacts the parent with a follow-up plan. This might be a referral or one-on-one screening.

- By observing the students in this natural group format, teachers felt they were better able to balance their classes with students exhibiting strong language and appropriate behaviors. Because the parents remained in the Preschool class during the screening, parents have the opportunity to meet the staff, see a Preschool classroom setup, and ask any questions about the program.
- While the children participate in the Preschool activities, the Early Childhood Coordinator and school psychologist or designee can review the student's application and ask parents questions about any concerns they may have regarding their child's development.

11. Provide IEP Training on Accommodations, Specially Designed Instruction vs. Accommodations, Measurable Goals and Benchmarks

Explanation:

- A review of a sampling of IEPs indicated that there were too many accommodations (*15-20 on many*) on all of the IEPs. The accommodations listed represented best educational practices. (*e.g., use clear concise directions*)
- The district should highly consider updating the Marblehead DCAP to include Preschool. Some of the accommodations were not Preschool appropriate. For example: Use alpha smarts/word processing software, computational aids, or access the guidance counselor.
- If the DCAP is updated to include Preschool, the team could check off the necessary accommodations for the particular student and attach them to the IEP. This attachment would be primarily for the parents, as the highly skilled Preschool staff should be implementing these best practices daily.

12. Implement an Integrative Model Approach

- Groups should be co-planned, teacher-led (or co-led) with related service providers addressing specific student needs, modeling, modifying, etc. for those on services.
- Consider flexible service delivery grid models to help avoid locking into "teaching" and owning groups and also to allow flexibility without locking into one set time per week.

- Teams should work towards Collaborative Goal writing. This eliminates redundant goals and objectives and promotes collaboration among the team. This can be provided through professional development trainings. One specific model that has worked for many districts has been provided by Allen Blume.

13. Implement Criteria for Determining Student-to-Teacher Ratios

- The intent for classroom staff should be to maximize student's independence from Preschool through high school; therefore, staffing could change throughout the day to day where a student receives some 1:1 support, but it is not for the entire school day. Developmentally the older a student is, the less 1:1 support should be given.
- The district should have a clear rationale for providing 1:1 support for students. If there is a need for 1:1 support for a student, a plan should be in place that determines the duration of time the support is needed and how this support will phase out.
- If the district communicates a clear philosophy of how classroom support is determined, it will eliminate any confusion as to why this support is provided in the classroom. The goal should be to promote participation in the most inclusive environments possible.

VII. Summary

The Director of Student Support Services requested Seaside Educational Consultants conduct an evaluation of the Marblehead Public Schools Preschool Program. This evaluation focused on Preschool programming, including what is working well in the program as well as areas of concern or areas to improve. The newly appointed leadership team, including the Superintendent, the Assistant Superintendent, the Director of Student Services, and the Early Childhood Coordinator/Team Chair, wanted to secure recommendations that would assist in short- and long-range planning for the Preschool Program. The process, including observations, interviews, and a document review, revealed many positive aspects of the current Preschool program which are cited in the Commendation Section.

These recommendations should be viewed as a point of departure for the leadership team to convene and develop an action plan of short- and long-term goals for improving the Preschool programs. The evaluators understand that there are budget implications, as well as structural and organizational issues which will impact the timeline of implementing any recommendations that are considered.

The evaluators want to express their appreciation to all who participated in this program evaluation process particularly during this stressful time of a global pandemic.

As the district considers implementing the recommendations, the evaluators will be available to do further consultation.