What is the Purpose of Your Prekindergarten Program? Strategies for Administrators

The ECC Pre-K Series for Indiana’s Prekindergarten Providers

September, 2009

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With support from
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**Introduction to the ECC Pre-K Series for Indiana’s Prekindergarten Providers**

Of Indiana’s 293 public school corporations, only about 120 provide prekindergarten education, not including programs for the provision of state and federal early childhood special education. Indiana is one of the few states holding out on funding a system of early education. Prekindergarten programs are locally planned and funded, and the absence of a state-funded system inhibits efforts to inform and coordinate program development.

The Early Childhood Center of the Indiana Institute on Disability and Community has addressed this problem in recent studies.

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**What Is the Purpose of Your Prekindergarten Program? Strategies for Administrators** was written by Alice Frazeur Cross with Michael Conn-Powers, both of the Early Childhood Center. The mission of the Early Childhood Center is to advance the universal design of early education practices that promote school readiness for all children. The Center engages in research, program and product development, and community outreach in early education enhancing school readiness for all children. Center efforts employ universal design principles to strengthen the physical, instructional, health, and social-emotional elements of early education that helps all children and their families enter school successfully.

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- School improvement and inclusion
- Transition, employment, and careers
- Aging issues
- Planning and policy studies
- Disability information and referral
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What Is the Purpose of Your Prekindergarten Program? Strategies for Administrators

Public school administrators are faced with numerous challenges, some of which are based in early elementary classrooms:

- Children may not be ready for kindergarten.
- Kindergarten teachers may find they are not able to implement the curriculum at the beginning of the school year.
- The district or a school may not be achieving adequate yearly progress (AYP).
- Readiness gaps may appear among groups of children entering the district’s elementary schools.
- The corporation may need to provide inclusive learning opportunities for children who receive early childhood special education.

A prekindergarten program may solve these challenges, provided your school corporation takes the time to establish the program’s purpose and anticipated outcomes. A clearly stated program purpose will guide up-front decision-making and planning to ensure that the program makes effective use of valuable resources and achieves desired outcomes. It will also guide and align program components including funding and resources, staffing, curriculum and instruction, scheduling, and program evaluation. And finally, a clear statement of purpose is critical to communicate your intent and direction to program funders, families, staff, administrators, and the community.

**Essential Questions for Determining a Purpose for Your Prekindergarten Program**

This paper presents four essential questions to help you identify a purpose for your anticipated prekindergarten program or to update one for your existing program. By working through the questions, you will develop a purpose statement that can be translated into vision and mission statements and that can help you articulate clear program goals.

This logical approach to planning is used throughout education, social service, business, and other sectors. The questions are:

1. What is the critical problem facing your school and community that prekindergarten can solve?
2. What outcomes do you expect to accomplish by implementing a prekindergarten program to address your critical problem?
3. What prekindergarten service delivery model will you employ to solve the problem and accomplish your intended outcomes?
4. What resources would be needed to implement the proposed service delivery model effectively and achieve the intended outcomes?

As shown in Figure 1, the problem definition should always be the first question. The other three questions – resources, outcomes, and service model – can be addressed in any order. It is likely that a planning team will move back and forth through these three because an answer on a later question might require revising an earlier response. The statement of purpose follows the questions. Each element should align with the others until the purpose is clearly stated.

We’ll explore the four essential questions in the context of the “Limestone Falls School Corporation,” a fictional school district that hopes to solve the problem of children not being ready for kindergarten. The district expects that its solution will be implementing a prekindergarten program.
1. **What is the critical problem facing your school and community that prekindergarten can solve?**

It is important that school administrators considering a prekindergarten program take the time to identify and define the problems and goals they hope to address. Documenting the extent to which a problem exists, and why, provides a clear basis of support for adopting a prekindergarten program and will help to guide its overall scope and focus.

Data are essential for making decisions based on objective evidence. It is likely that your school corporation has a wide range of existing data. Following are examples of enrollment and placement data that might be useful in defining problems and goals. They include the number of children who are:

1. Currently enrolled in kindergarten,
2. Enrolled in each elementary school,
3. Kindergartners with individualized education programs (IEPs),
4. Kindergartners served in segregated special education classrooms,
5. English language learners, and
6. Eligible for low-cost or free lunches.

Your corporation may conduct a fall assessment of the skills of entering kindergarteners or conduct a spring kindergarten “round-up” that includes screening or other assessment. Either approach would yield school readiness data about children who can/cannot:

7. Follow directions,
8. Attend to teachers’ instructions,
9. Solve social problems without pushing, etc.,
10. Identify their names in print, and
11. Communicate their needs and wants.

Important data to identify problems might emerge from school and student performance data, including:

12. ISTEP+ scores for third graders and ISTEP-KR scores for children ages three through five, and
13. AYP scores for the individual elementary schools and for the corporation as a whole.

Additional data could come from parents who would inform you about:

14. Whether their children attended an early education program before entering kindergarten.

The table on page 4 shows an important step in data collection and analysis; presenting data for each school and for the corporation as a whole. This data presentation also reveals how various results might influence each other. For example, if data show that a high percentage of children who did not attend early education lack readiness skills, the lack of early education may be contributing to the problem, and a prekindergarten program might be adopted. Alternatively, if the percentage of children who are English language learners is similar to the share of children who lack school readiness skills, it would be important to determine whether they are the same set of children. If they are, the prekindergarten program might need to focus on English listening and speaking skills.
Chapter 2. The planning team decides what data to collect to define the problem.

The team adopted a plan to collect needed data. First, it would identify the data already available (items 1-6 on the data list above). Next, it would acquire a screening tool that addressed important school readiness skills (items 7-11) and arrange for teachers to implement it during the first month of the school year. Last, it would modify the kindergarten child information sheet that parents complete to ask if their children had attended an early education program before kindergarten (item 12). By collecting this information, the planning team was prepared to answer the questions:

- Which children are not ready?
- In what ways are they not ready—socially, cognitively, health-wise, language and communication, or academically?
- Why aren’t children ready?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kindergarten enrollment in the prior year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 classes with a total of 217 children</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kindergarten</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Stony Brook</th>
<th>Rocky Ridge</th>
<th>Fieldstone</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Have an IEP</td>
<td>36 children (16% of current enrollment)</td>
<td>10 (15%)</td>
<td>15 (16%)</td>
<td>11 (15%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are English language learners</td>
<td>26 children (11% of enrollment)</td>
<td>7 (11%)</td>
<td>11 (12%)</td>
<td>8 (11%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are eligible for low cost or free lunches</td>
<td>113 children are eligible (49%)</td>
<td>28 (43%)</td>
<td>48 (52%)</td>
<td>37 (52%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack school readiness skills</td>
<td>52 children lack 5 key skills (23%)</td>
<td>14 (22%)</td>
<td>22 (24%)</td>
<td>16 (23%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kindergarten</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Stony Brook</th>
<th>Rocky Ridge</th>
<th>Fieldstone</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Did not attend early education</td>
<td>67 children (29%)</td>
<td>25 (38%)</td>
<td>22 (24%)</td>
<td>20 (28%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The table above shows an important step in data collection and analysis; presenting data for each school and for the corporation as a whole. This data presentation also reveals how various results might influence each other. For example, if data show that a high percentage of children who did not attend early education lack readiness skills, the lack of early education may be contributing to the problem, and a prekindergarten program might be adopted. Alternatively, if the percentage of children who are English language learners is similar to the share of children who lack school readiness skills, it would be important to determine whether they are the same set of children. If they are, the prekindergarten program might need to focus on English listening and speaking skills.
Chapter 3. The planning team analyzes the data and identifies its problem.

- The team concluded that it had sufficient evidence documenting its problem: about 23% of its students were not—in one or more areas—ready for kindergarten. About 11% were English language learners. Nearly 30% had not had early education experience, and 16% had IEPs. Screening results and written anecdotal notes from teachers confirmed that nearly a fourth of the children lacked school readiness skills. The team also gained some insight into why children did not have the skills. It learned that nearly half of the children (49%) came from lower-income households that were eligible for low cost or free price lunches.

2. What intended outcomes might be achieved using a prekindergarten program to address your problem?

It is worthwhile, for many reasons, to articulate intended outcomes in advance of a program start-up. The process of developing outcomes ensures that expectations held by stakeholders for the program will be revealed and commonly understood. The process also serves as a check on the problem definition; if there is conflict about the outcomes, it may be that the problem hasn’t been correctly stated.

The first component of the outcome should describe the participants who will be the focus of the program, with enough detail to ensure that the participants won’t be confused with other children in the school. The second component should explain what the participants will be able to do as a result of their involvement in the program and when.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The prekindergarten program will enable: Which participants?</th>
<th>Will be able to do what by when?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All children who are four years old</td>
<td>Will recognize the relationships between letters and sounds at kindergarten entry.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The preschool children who are English language learners</td>
<td>Will acquire sufficient English for listening and speaking to begin kindergarten able to take part in learning activities and routines.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Each prekindergarten-age child at our Title 1 schools</td>
<td>Will acquire the critical learning and academic skills identified by the school corporation for successful kindergarten entry.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Every preschool child who has at least three risk criteria</td>
<td>Will acquire school readiness skills in the approaches to learning, cognitive, motor, social-emotional, and communication and literacy domains before attending kindergarten.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Every preschool child whose family receives any form of public assistance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any family whose prekindergarten child qualifies for low cost or free lunches</td>
<td>Will be provided the health services required for attending prekindergarten. Can access GED and computer classes and any needed transportation and child care during the time the child is enrolled in prekindergarten.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 4. The Limestone Falls planning team drafts outcomes.

The team proposed these outcomes for their prekindergarten program:

- All children who are four years old will (a) recognize the relationships between letters and sounds, and (b) follow three-part directions at kindergarten entry.
- All parents will have access to GED classes.

3. What service delivery model could be provided to achieve your outcomes?

Schools need to consider three components in outlining their overall service delivery approaches. These components are:

1. Ages and characteristics of the children to be served (e.g., three and four year-olds or four year-olds only; all children or children most in need);
2. Length of the school day, school week, and school year for prekindergarten (typically half- or full-day classes, three to five days per week, and school or calendar year); and
3. Range of services to be provided (which education, family focus, social service, and health care, including mental health, vision, hearing, and dental services).

Decisions concerning the service delivery approach reflect the problem the school district is attempting to solve, the prekindergarten program’s intended outcomes, and the resources available for developing and implementing the program. The characteristics of the children to be served will be specified by the definition of the problem.

Schools should consider other decision-making factors as well. For example, what do research and evidence-based practice reveal about the intensity of early education necessary to bring about the outcomes? A particular problem might require a two-year program for three and four year-olds scheduled for half-days, five days a week. On the other hand, full days, five days a week for four year-olds might be more likely to produce the needed results. One of the parameters to be considered is that when the amount of classroom instruction is increased in intensity, and the amount of resources remains constant, the number of children served must be reduced.

The service delivery model suggested by the program outcomes may require a range of services to be provided. In addition to early education, prekindergarten programs typically include parenting workshops, health care screening, and transition planning. Each of these services requires additional resources. Would the school corporation be able to send its nurse to the prekindergarten settings to provide screening? When resources are constant, any increase in the number of services provided puts downward pressure on the number of children that can be enrolled.

Chapter 5. The planning team adopts a service delivery model.

Using the three components of service delivery models described above, the planning team readily decided that the program would serve all four-year-old children, as stated in their outcomes. Team members also decided that the program would follow the same school day, week, and year as the elementary schools. That would make it easier for the school to plan and provide more instructional time for teachers. Parents would not have to do mid-day pick-up or delivery of children. The team also agreed that the schools would not provide all of the social and health care services to children whose family incomes qualified them for low cost or free lunches. The planners said that they would help families get services from other providers in the community, such as the mental health clinic and the WIC (Women, Infants, and Children) program.
4. What are the resources needed to address the purpose and intended outcomes?

Taking an inventory of the resources that are available and identifying broad areas of expenses increases the likelihood that an appropriate purpose is adopted and can succeed. It isn’t necessary to do a detailed budget and cost-benefit analysis at this stage, but it is necessary to have a general idea of the resources that would be available and the ones that would be needed.

Any discussion of resources should include “intended quality of implementation.” The National Institute on Early Education Research (NIEER) has identified standards of quality associated with programs that make large gains in children’s learning and development (Barnett, Hustedt, Friedman, Boyd, & Ainsworth, 2008). The standards address the education of teachers and assistants, curriculum, professional development, class sizes, teacher: child ratios, services, and monitoring. Accreditation standards for early childhood programs developed by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) address even more details than those of NIEER (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Because of the link between quality and outcomes, it is important to review these standards during discussion of service delivery models and resources. At the conclusion of your inventory, you might find that the emerging purpose will need to be modified based on resource constraints.

Funding sources that might support a prekindergarten purpose include: general funds from the district; federal Title 1, Early Reading First, Even Start, and Head Start program grants; parent fees; and philanthropic grants (Cross, A. F., 2005). Two documents that provide information about funding sources are the Guide to U.S. Department of Education Programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2008) and Finding Funding (Lind, Crocker, Stewart, Torrico, Bhat, & Schmid, 2009).

Key questions to ask about funding sources are:
- Does the program purpose fit the intent and requirements of the funding source, and would the program be eligible?
- How much money could be generated from the source?
- When will the money be available and how long would it last?
- Does the money have a matching requirement?

Expenses include: instructional personnel, which can amount to 75% of the total budget; administration; insurance; retirement and other benefits; professional development; physical plants and building space; operations and maintenance; instructional materials; equipment and technology; and the number and quality of offered services (transportation, food services, social services, health/dental/vision screenings, and parent education). Key questions to ask about expenses are:
- How many teachers might be required to achieve the outcomes with the proposed service delivery model?
- How will start-up costs differ from ongoing expenses? Is renovation needed? Is there funding for capital improvement?
- Are there expenses that are already covered that could be shared, such as housing an administrator or program in an existing elementary school?
Chapter 6. The team makes some hard decisions about resources.

The Limestone Falls planning team considered existing resources, potential funding, and anticipated expenses. The team first looked at facilities. Each elementary school had space available that could be used for prekindergarten. Two of the schools were new enough that they had suitable designs for children of prekindergarten age. The other school would require renovation. Plans for updating that school were already underway, and it was still feasible to make some modifications with funding from the capital expense line of the corporation budget.

The team next discussed what funding might be available. Discussions with the chief financial officer indicated that it was unlikely that major funding would come from the school corporation. The team considered using parent fees but decided that would not be feasible for the population of children who were in need of prekindergarten.

Team members had already been gathering information about funding from sources outside of the district. After reviewing the options, they identified three possible funding programs: Title 1, Part A; Even Start; and Early Reading First. They decided that Title 1, Part A and Even Start provided funding that most closely matched their problem description. Title 1 would support teaching personnel and materials that would improve school readiness, and Even Start would fund parent education in conjunction with children’s prekindergarten experience.

The planning team’s final decision was to modify its original outcomes. The funding needed to provide full-day prekindergarten for every four-year-old in the district was not available. If the district could launch the program, it would be possible to expand the program for more children later by using parent fees. The team modified its proposed outcomes to:

• All children who are four years old and Title 1-eligible will (a) recognize the relationships between letters and sounds and (b) follow three-part directions at kindergarten entry.
• All parents of children enrolled in Title 1 prekindergarten or Even Start will be able to access GED classes.

Synthesizing to create a statement of purpose

This paper shows how identifying the purpose of a prekindergarten program involves the four distinct steps of defining the problem a new program would solve, identifying outcomes, choosing a likely service delivery model, and assessing resources. The synthesis of this work is the written statement of purpose. It should reflect each stage of the work but retain a strong narrative focus. It should not veer into the philosophical positions or dreams that one or more individuals might have for the program.

One strategy that can be effective in writing a purpose statement is to select reviewers to examine the work leading to the purpose statement:

• The reviewers will need to consider questions related to the problem, such as: Was there a sufficient number of data sources? What critical sources, if any, are missing from the data collection? Were the data used correctly? Is the analysis sound?
• In regard to outcomes, the questions are: Do the outcomes accurately reflect the problem definition and the purpose statement? Is it possible to identify which children or children and parents are the focus of the outcomes? Do the outcomes identify what is to be achieved and by when?
• With regard to the service delivery model, the questions are: Did the planners use any research literature to support their model? Did the model include the quality and quantity of services needed to successfully fulfill the purpose?
• The questions related to resources are: Was the inventory of sufficient depth to recognize any major gaps in money or material? Was the conclusion about the availability of existing resources realistic? Were new sources of funding identified to meet the needs of the program and to enable outcomes to be achieved?

The process of developing and implementing a new program will always involve unexpected twists and turns. Modifications may take place in any aspect of the program purpose, outcomes, funding, or resulting infrastructure. But the essential questions presented in this brief should guide the school corporation throughout the program development and implementation process.

Chapter 7. The story concludes with a clearly defined purpose.

Having worked through the four essential questions, the planners used their responses to craft a proposal to be submitted to the Limestone Falls School Board. The team carefully laid out the problem and provided data for evidence. It proposed that a prekindergarten program could be a solution to the problem of children’s readiness for kindergarten. The planners offered a purpose along with a tentative set of outcomes, a proposed service delivery model, and possible sources of funding.

The purpose of the Limestone Falls prekindergarten program is to address the school readiness needs of all four-year old children who are eligible for Title 1 or Even Start services. The Limestone Falls Prekindergarten Program will offer all eligible four-year-old children a full-day educational program teaching important early literacy and direction-following skills. In addition, it will offer all eligible parents access to GED classes.

Resources and References


