PreK Special Education Inclusion Practices in Maine: An Exploratory Study of Three Districts

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary

Why was this study conducted?

This study was conducted amid growing national and state concerns about the support for inclusion of students with special education needs in PreK education programs. The question of how to best meet the social and emotional needs of PreK students has been a legislative focus in recent years, including two attempts to convene legislative task forces to restructure the provision of special education services for children aged 3 to 5.

What did we learn from the study?

Broad findings from this study included the following:

***Current PreK practices in the study sample*:**

Structure of PreK Programs:

- Programs included half-day and full-day, most were half-day to meet the demand.
- Programs ranged from 4-5 days per week.
- Instructional time ranged from 2.5-6.5 hours per day, and 12.5-32.5 hours per week.
- Number of students served per day ranged from 14-64.
- Class size ranged from 14-19.

Staffing for PreK:

- Educator to student ratios ranged from 1:7 to 1:9.5.
- Staffing was similar (1 PreK teacher and 1 Ed Tech per classroom), though Ed Tech certification levels varied across classrooms.
- Other school staff and principals assisted as needed to manage behavior challenges and student adjustment to school in September.
- PreK programs do not have direct access to special education teachers and other specialists in the school and district, as CDS is responsible for special services. This fragmented system prevents PreK teachers and students from accessing supports that may be available within the school or district.

Coordination with CDS:

- Schools are taking more responsibility for screening of incoming PreK students, as per guidelines issued last year. CDS provided some limited support for screening.
- PreK teachers make referrals to CDS.
- CDS contacts parents/ guardians for permission to test/ evaluate students, conducts evaluations, develops IEP, provides a case manager and delivers special services.

PreK inclusion practices:

- All four schools expressed a strong commitment to the inclusion of special needs students in the PreK classroom. They attempted to engage students in the same activities as the class when possible.

- PreK teachers and Ed Techs used a variety of grouping practices in the classroom to support the special needs of students and manage challenging behaviors. Ed Techs often worked individually with students in parallel with the teacher, focusing on similar skills.
- PreK teachers and Ed Techs provided students with choices over activities and spaces within the classroom, and frequently changed how learning centers are arranged or which materials are provided to keep students interested and engaged, which helped to manage behaviors.
- Schools have made adjustments in the classroom environment to address sound and light issues that may disturb students who are highly sensitive to these factors.
- Students receiving speech and language services or other special services may be served in resource rooms. Some of the schools provided these services during the PreK instructional time, while others scheduled services before or after class time so students would not miss that time.
- Case study schools at times limited students' time in PreK until they adjusted and/or appropriate services were in place. They did not have the practice of expelling PreK students. For some students with more severe disabilities or challenging behaviors schools may seek placement in a private or public program with more intensive supports.

Challenges with PreK special education inclusion:

Schools in this study described a variety of factors that present challenges for the identification and evaluation of PreK students for special services and their ability to deliver appropriate services in a timely and consistent way, as well as challenges in supporting students with behavior issues that do not meet criteria for special services.

- Fragmented system of responsibility and rules governing how students with different kinds of disabilities and different age groups are served
    - PreK special education assigned to CDS; K-12 special education assigned to district.
    - Students with disabilities and developmental delays served by CDS or districts, addressed through various state education regulations.
    - Students with Autism, mental health issues, motor skill delays and other special needs may not be eligible for special education services through CDS and may be served through a medical model funded by MaineCare.
    - Students who are blind or visually impaired served through Dept. of Labor.
- Inadequate and ineffective communication from CDS to schools/ districts and parents
    - Lack of clear, transparent rules and guidelines on eligibility for special services to guide schools in making referrals.
    - Problems reaching parents through CDS phone calls to obtain permission for evaluations.
    - Lack of communication from CDS to keep schools informed of referral status and coordination with schools to contact parents and get permissions in place.
    - Delays of two weeks cited by districts in getting response from CDS on particular cases or responding to complaints on broader problems such as billing, credentialing of personnel, etc.
- Long delay from referral to IEP implementation
    - PreK students do not have IEP until Jan. or Feb. while Kindergarten and other grades will have those in place several months earlier.

- PreK teachers, Ed Techs and other school staff must cope as best able to support students until evaluations and IEP are completed. There are limited options for PreK.

- Statewide staffing shortages in special education and other specialist areas
  - Statewide staffing shortages in special education and specialist areas impact both the evaluation process, development of IEPs, and delivery of services by causing delays and reduced access to specialists.
  - Schools cited fewer numbers of specialists working in larger, more rural regions, longer travel times to schools, and reliance in some cases on video-conferencing to provide support to students.
  - Staffing shortages may mean that students and parents must travel further for evaluations and to obtain services through CDS and private agencies.
  - Staffing shortages mean that schools do not always have access to the appropriate personnel to support certain special needs of students in schools, which include access to behavior specialists, OT and PT specialists, as well as speech and language pathologists.
  - Schools see high turnover among case managers and specialists working with CDS and private agencies which makes it challenging to provide consistency in support to students.
- Inadequate oversight and supervision of agencies and personnel
  - One district reported that personnel provided through CDS did not have appropriate credentials.
  - One district reported that personnel provided through CDS were working under expired background checks and had safety concerns for students.
  - Schools understood that CDS was responsible for providing special supports to PreK students and for supervising those personnel, noted that CDS does not currently have the ability to directly supervise those working with students in schools. In Kindergarten and other grade levels, districts have special education teachers who can supervise Ed Techs working in classrooms.
- Lack of full funding for PreK programs statewide, and for specialists to work at the PreK level within schools
  - Districts see a demand and need in their communities for both half-day and full-day programs, but many offer half-day programs to increase the number of students served. One of the four schools said even with four half-day sessions per day, they are not meeting current demand in their local, rural community.
  - Districts struggle to meet staffing needs at all grade levels for special education, and have not yet have to provide these services at the PreK level.
  - Schools are seeing increasing numbers of students in PreK with challenging and more aggressive behaviors and struggle to cope with this challenge given the limited staffing available in the PreK classroom. They see the need for support from special education, behavior and mental health specialists. PreK teachers and Ed Techs often do not have adequate training to effectively support these students. Individual support in the PreK classroom from the Ed Tech jeopardizes appropriate staffing ratios.

Additional resources needed:

Funding and Personnel:

- Full funding for PreK programs statewide, both half-day and full-day options are needed. Demand is not met in all communities. Some districts increase number of slots by offering only half-day programs, but some parents/ guardians want full-day programs.
- Additional funding to ensure that schools can maintain staff to student ratios in PreK, to support the adjustment of students to a formal school program, to assist individual students with disabilities or challenging behaviors, to provide supervision of Ed Techs who work with students, and to relieve PreK teachers of the task of collecting data and preparing referrals for students.
- Additional funding for Ed Techs and specialists for PreK if school districts are going to take on responsibility currently assigned to CDS. This is needed to address the current significant delays in evaluating students and getting IEPs and services in place for PreK students.
- Funding and space for appropriate services and supports in resource rooms within schools.
- Funding to address student access issues for some aging school buildings that may not be fully compliant with the federal ADA.
- Funding for PreK teacher salaries and incentives to increase the staffing in special education, particularly to attract specialists to more rural parts of the state.

Professional Development and Guidance:

- Professional development is needed for PreK teachers, Ed Techs, principals and other personnel who plan and deliver instruction and supports for PreK students. Classroom environment, inclusion practices, and managing challenging student behaviors are areas where schools need information and training.
- More clear criteria for referrals and eligibility for special services is needed. Schools struggle figure out the rules to ensure students get appropriate supports.
- Guidance will be needed on how to transition services from CDS to districts if the state policy moves in this direction.

Time:

- Time to plan for a potential shift from CDS to district responsibility for PreK special services, to hire additional personnel, and to engage in foundational professional development to ensure school personnel share knowledge and vision of evidence-based practices for inclusion and PreK education.
- School districts seek a gradual transition rather than a sudden transition that would overwhelm district resources and increase the challenge of staffing shortages in special education.

***Impacts of mini grants from MDOE program*:**

- Funded purchase of additional PreK furniture, materials for dramatic play, manipulatives, storage units, interchangeable pieces for learning centers within classroom.
- Funded purchase of sound absorbing materials and material to soften harsh classroom lighting.

- Supportive cognitive, social and emotional development of children.
- Provided more choice for students and increased student engagement, which also helped to manage student behaviors.

***Impacts of professional development through MDOE program*:**

- Provided new ideas on classroom environment (space, light, sound, color) and its impact on students, and strategies for inclusion of students with disabilities.
- Prompted two schools to select a larger classroom for their PreK program to allow students more space for both individual and small group work.
- Prompted some schools to incorporate elements of nature into the classroom and think more about engaging students with nature outside the school building.
- Provided opportunities for PreK teachers to share ideas with administrators, other PreK teachers, within their district and across schools or districts.
- Fostered deeper conversations about PreK classroom practice, what inclusion means, and changes these districts want to pursue.

What did we conclude overall from the study?

The schools in this study are strongly committed to using the inclusion model for PreK students with special needs. They use a variety of strategies to engage students within the classroom and to support their special needs. Yet, schools also have limited staffing supports within the PreK classroom and, because of state policies that separate PreK special education from Kindergarten and other grades, PreK teachers and students lack access to specialists working within schools and districts.

PreK teachers and Ed Techs support students as best they can, until CDS completes the evaluations and IEP. This takes many months during which time students may lack appropriate supports to address disabilities and developmental delays. This further reduces the gap when students go on to Kindergarten.

Schools reported their students primarily require speech and language services, but they are also seeing increasing numbers of students with aggressive and challenging behaviors. PreK teachers and Ed Techs do not have access to behavioral specialists to assist in forming a plan to manage challenging behaviors. Ed Techs often work with individual students, leaving the PreK teacher with responsibility for all other students in the class.

Many challenges were reported including: district funding constraints, staffing shortages in special education, poor communication from CDS, lack of clarity and transparency in eligibility rules and referral process, delays and barriers in getting evaluations completed and IEPs in place, lack of oversight and supervision of personnel provided by CDS who work with PreK students, and concerns about credentialing and background checks for personnel provided by CDS.

The schools and participants in this study felt they had benefited from the mini-grants and professional development provided by the MDOE's Public Preschool Inclusion Project. The support provided resources for permanent equipment and materials in PreK classrooms to support cognitive, social and emotional learning and development of PreK students. The professional development provided readings and opportunities to share ideas within communities of practice which prompted schools to make changes in the PreK classroom environment as well as think about how they might better support inclusion of students and manage challenging behaviors.

What are some potential implications for education policy and/ or practice?

While the sample for this study was small, it surfaced some important findings for better understanding the kinds of challenges schools currently face in serving students with special needs and students with challenging behaviors in the PreK classroom. It also highlights the concerns schools have about proposed changes in state policy that may require districts to take on more responsibility for PreK students. Based on the interviews for this study, we describe some potential implications for state and local education policy and for practice, and areas that may need to be addressed to overcome the challenges described in this report.

Implications for Policy and Practice:

The challenges identified in this research lead to the following connections to Maine education policy. If a task force to study provision of early childhood special education is created through enactment of the pending L.D. 512, some of these issues may warrant inclusion in its scope of work.

- More program slots are needed to meet the demand statewide for PreK. Demand exists for both half-day and full-day options; some parents who work may require full-time programs or half-time programs with wraparound child care services, and other parents prefer half-day programs based on their child's developmental readiness for school.
- Staff shortages are a factor affecting programs and services in both pK-12 and CDS systems. Salary inequities are reported to exist between PreK teachers and other grades in public schools, and between providers hired by CDS versus public schools. Various incentives may need to be implemented to encourage people to pursue these careers to build the state's capacity in early childhood, special education, and specialist services.
- Continued professional development, access to specialists, and/or coaching is needed to provide PreK staff with tools to support students with special needs and students with challenging behaviors. This includes the use of inclusion practices in PreK classrooms, providing appropriate learning environments and supports to students, and managing challenging student behaviors. Professional learning networks or communities can be an effective way to share ideas and develop a shared vision for PreK education, as demonstrated through the MDOE inclusion training.
- The fragmented policy and regulatory system governing the provision of special services creates inequities in the provision of services between PreK and other grades, and prevents schools from utilizing the special education and other expertise they have in K and other grades.
- Some schools may require funding and space to create appropriate resource rooms for young students to receive special services, or to update facilities to increase students' access to buildings and to comply with the federal ADA.
- Clearer guidelines and criteria for eligibility for special services is needed to inform the referral of students to CDS for special education evaluation. Criteria for providing support for students with intensive behavioral needs appear to differ between CDS and K-12 systems, possibly due to differences in applicable regulations.
- Clear and specific guidance will be needed from the state if the responsibility for PreK special education identification and provision of services shifts from CDS to school districts. This transition would ideally be phased in over time to allow districts to gradually troubleshoot problems and find solutions.

- Regional collaboratives have been shown in prior MEPRI study to provide an effective way to share specialists and services across districts, and these could be further encouraged through policy and funding incentives.

What methods were used to conduct this study?

This MEPRI study sought to address the research gap on PreK special education inclusion. Specifically, this study sought to learn more about current practices and views regarding the inclusion of special education students in public PreK programs, what challenges schools and teachers face in serving these children, and what additional resources such as training, equipment or personnel are needed to serve these students effectively.

Research questions guiding this study included:

- What are the school's current practices regarding PreK special education inclusion?
- What challenges are there in identifying and serving students with challenging behaviors or special needs within the PreK program?
- What additional resources do schools need to identify and serve the needs of students with special needs in their PreK programs?
- What impacts do schools perceive from their participation in Maine's Public Preschool Inclusion Cohort Training and Technical Assistance program?

The study used qualitative research methods including interviews with district and school administrators and PreK teachers and coordinators from four schools and three districts participating in the MDOE's Public Preschool Inclusion Project. A total of eight interviews were conducted involving 12 individuals in fall 2018. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Data analysis included case summaries of each school around the research questions, and identification of themes and patterns across the four participating schools.

How robust are the findings?

This was a small, exploratory study with a limited number of schools and participant interviews. The schools had volunteered to engage in optional professional development provided through the Maine Department of Education by the Center for Disability and Inclusion Studies, which an indication that their teachers and administrators were committed to improving instruction in their preK classrooms. This may or may not be shared by all public preK programs in Maine. However, the sample of districts and schools did reflect variation by geographic region, school and PreK enrollment, and other characteristics. This allowed us to look at patterns between rural and non-rural schools for example, and to represent different school experiences and perspectives in the study. While there were some differences across the PreK programs offered by the four schools, we found fairly consistent descriptions of classroom practice and services to children with special needs or challenging behaviors, and there was strong agreement about the major challenges and needs for resources for PreK across the schools and participants we interviewed. While this study may not have identified the full range of PreK education practices nor all challenges schools face, we feel confident that the findings are fairly representative of experiences and concerns shared by other schools in the state.

Introduction

Amid growing national and state concerns about the support for inclusion of students with special education needs in PreK education programs, the Maine Children's Growth Council and Maine Children's Alliance prepared a report for the Maine State Legislature with participation from the Maine Department of Education and Maine Department of Health and Human Services (MCA & MCGC, 2016). The report summarized the literature and collected input from stakeholder groups on social and emotional development of young children and related challenges in early childhood education. Informed by the report findings, legislation was proposed in 2018 through LD1870, *An Act to Reorganize the Provision of Services for Children with Disabilities from Birth to 5 years of Age*, suggesting major changes in the administrative governance of PreK special education. In subsequent policy actions, the bill was scaled back to a task force to further study and make recommendations for restructuring the administration of special education for young children. At the same time, the 128th Maine State Legislature charged the Maine Education Policy Research Institute (MEPRI) to conduct a study of PreK special education inclusion practice in a sample of Maine schools. Despite legislative approval, the task force was not funded and LD1870 died on adjournment of the 128th legislative session in the fall of 2018. However, the MEPRI study continued on and was conducted in the fall of 2018. This report presents findings from that study and will inform both state and local education policymakers.

Background

Reports of school practices in Maine and nationally have identified high rates of expulsion for special needs students from public PreK programs, with rates significantly exceeding those at the kindergarten level (Gilliam, 2005, 2016). Data from these studies have revealed potential problems with local school policies and practices regarding the inclusion of special education students at the PreK level. Broadly, there is a lack of empirical research on this current issue and an absence of recent data for Maine, which this study sought to address. There is a growing body of evidence regarding effective instructional and classroom management strategies to serve students with special needs, effective mental health interventions for students, and an understanding of the critical importance of professional development for teachers and administrators to support successful inclusion of students with special needs at the PreK level

and beyond (Gilliam, 2016; Gilliam et al, 2016; Maine Children's Alliance & Maine Children's Growth Council, 2017). The Maine Department of Education (MDOE) distributed an administrative letter in January 2018 from the Commissioner of Education providing guidance to schools for suspension and expulsion for public preschool programs that serve four-year old students.

This study is directly pertinent to the proposed bill in the current legislative session "Resolve, to Create the Task Force to Study and Plan for the Implementation of Maine's Early Childhood Special Education Services" (L.D. 512), resurrecting the goal of the unfunded LD 1870 in 2018. If enacted, the task force would prepare a report by December 2019 with recommendations for providing services to children aged 3 to 5 with special needs. This report identifies several areas that would benefit from further investigation by such a task force.

In 2018, the MDOE also initiated an intervention program (Public Preschool Inclusion Project) to provide professional development, technical assistance and mini-grants to schools that applied to participate. Each school engaged a team of participants including the elementary school principal, PreK teachers, educational technicians, special education teachers, and the district special ed director. Nine schools from four districts and different regions of Maine participated in the cohort program that included online courses and professional learning communities that paired schools together to share ideas.

Research Methodology

This MEPRI study sought to address the research gap on PreK special education inclusion. Specifically, this study sought to learn more about current practices and views regarding the inclusion of special education students in public PreK programs, what challenges schools and teachers face in serving these children, and what additional resources such as training, equipment or personnel are needed to serve these students effectively.

The study used a qualitative case study research design, consisting of interviews with district special education directors, school principals, PreK coordinators, and PreK teachers from four schools representing three school districts. The three selected districts were among four districts that participated in Maine's Public PreK Inclusion Project in 2018. One district was selected from each of the three regional cohorts in the program, and schools were sampled within two of the larger districts that operate more than one PreK school program. The four schools

studied represented about half of the nine schools participating in the state's program. The three districts highlighted in this report represent northern (one district) and central Maine (two districts), and include both rural and non-rural locales according to National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) designations, as well as small and large district enrollments. While NCES categorizes one school/ district (A) as a "town-remote" locale, it serves primarily small rural communities and will be referred to generally as a "rural" school/ district in this report for ease in comparison.

Confidential interviews were conducted in October through early December 2018 using a semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix A). Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. Interviews were generally 30-60 minutes long, with a mean length of 42 minutes. Eight interviews involving 12 individuals were conducted. Most were individual interviews, but two interviews included both a principal and a PreK teacher, and another was a focus group interview with both PreK program coordinators from Head Start and PreK teachers. Only one special education director and one PreK teacher were unavailable to participate; all other schools were represented by all staff types. In total, 12 people were interviewed for this exploratory study and included: four principals, two district special education directors, two Head Start regional program coordinators, three PreK teachers from three of the four schools studied, and one educational technician. Data analysis included case summaries of each school around the research questions, and identification of themes and patterns across the four participating schools.

Research questions guiding this study included:

- What are the school's current practices regarding PreK special education inclusion?
- What challenges are there in identifying and serving students with challenging behaviors or special needs within the PreK program?
- What additional resources do schools need to identify and serve the needs of students with special needs in their PreK programs?
- What impacts do schools perceive from their participation in Maine's Public Preschool Inclusion Cohort Training and Technical Assistance program?

Findings

In this section, we describe findings related to the broad research questions framing this inquiry. For the purpose of confidentiality, we have not named the districts or schools in this report, but refer to them as Districts A (northern Maine), B (central), and C (central). Two schools in District C (C1 and C2) participated in interviews; District C is a larger district with

multiple schools participating in the state's program. Similarly, we refer to participants using generic job role descriptors so as not to identify individual participants.

Description of the Schools and PreK Programs

Demographics of the Four Schools. The four schools selected for this study differed on some important demographic characteristics. Three of the schools served a limited number of grade levels (2-4 grades), while one school had a more traditional elementary school grade configuration of grades PreK-8. Enrollment for the four elementary schools ranged from roughly 130 to 330, and the percentage of students eligible for the free or reduced school lunch program ranged from 43% to 95%. Three of the four schools had eligibility rates of 70% or more. These data were obtained from the MDOE and reflect the 2016-17 school year.

Structure of the PreK Programs. Two districts in the study (encompassing both rural and non-rural schools) delivered and staffed their own PreK programs while one rural district contracted with a regional Head Start program and shared some staffing. Two districts ran half-day programs to better accommodate the number of families and students needing their public programs. Participants indicated in the interviews that a shift to a full day program would reduce the number of children they could serve in PreK. In school B, which serves several neighboring rural communities, interviewees believed that the two half-day programs did not meet the demand for public PreK. They had about a third more (30 more) children in Kindergarten than they did in the two PreK classes, and felt that more families would participate if additional slots were made available. By contrast, administrators in the non-rural schools (C1 and C2) felt they were meeting the level of demand in their school communities. School A ran a full day program in response to the demand from working parents or guardians.

Programs also varied in number of days they were offered across the three districts and four school programs. The full-day program in rural school A was offered five days per week; the half-day sessions in school B were offered four days per week, and the half-day sessions in the two non-rural schools (C1 and C2) were available five days per week.

The length of the instructional day for students also varied across the schools, ranging from 2.5 hours per day for a half session to 6.5 hours for the full-day session. The two non-rural schools (C1 and C2) offered half-day sessions of 2.5 hours each, rural school B offered half-day sessions of 3.5 hours each, and rural school A offered a full-day session of 6.5 hours. The combined differences in number of days per week and instructional time per day result in a

significant difference in total instructional time per week for a PreK student that ranged from 12.5 hours to 32.5 hours per week.

Class size, teacher to student ratios, and the total number of students served each day also varied substantially across the three districts and four schools in this study. The full-day program in rural school A served 14 students in one class each day. Rural school B served 64 students per day in two classrooms (i.e. four half-day sessions), with a class size of 16 per session, and indicated there were many more children in the sending communities that could not be served due to space and funding constraints. Non-rural schools C1 and C2 served 33 and 36 children per day in one classroom with two half-day sessions, with class sizes ranging from 15 to 19 students, and indicated they were meeting the local demand.

School staffing for the programs. There was little variation across the four schools in the type and number of staffing for the PreK classrooms, however the differences in the class enrollments meant there were significant differences in the teacher to student ratios. All four programs were run with a regular PreK teacher and an Educational Technician (Ed Tech). With two staff members working together in the classroom, the educator to student ratios varied from one adult per seven or eight students in the rural programs to one adult per 7.5 or 9.5 students in the non-rural program. The non-rural program could accommodate up to 20 students per classroom for a ratio of one educator to ten students. In reality, ratios can be much higher at times when one educator (typically the Ed Tech) is called on to work with a child demonstrating behavior challenges while the other teacher supervises the remaining students.

There were some differences in the level of certification for the Ed Techs assigned to work in the PreK classrooms, ranging from Ed Tech I in a more distant, rural school to Ed Tech III in the other schools. The different levels of certification indicate differences in educational preparation and the level of responsibility for working with students with special needs. For example, an Ed Tech I may provide supports to students under the supervision of the classroom teacher but may not deliver instruction on new material to the student, while an Ed Tech III may provide direct instruction to a student under the supervision of a certified special education teacher.

Beyond the classroom teacher and Ed Tech, each of the four schools had access to different kinds of personnel who could provide other kinds of support to the PreK classrooms, but this was limited by both state regulations and by district budget and staffing constraints. Staff

who might be tapped to assist with PreK students demonstrating social, emotional or behavior problems could include various part-time staff: a guidance counselor, school psychologist, or social worker. Literacy specialists might also work with PreK students as needed. Principals and other staff also were frequently called upon to lend a hand, particularly at the beginning of the school year as the PreK students were adjusting to being in a formal, group program. School specialists may also provide some resources and suggestions to PreK teachers and Ed Techs who are seeking ways to meet a child's needs in the short term, until the student's referral process and Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) are concluded several months into the school year. However, special education teachers and other specialists are not allowed to provide direct services to PreK children, as that is the responsibility of Child Development Services (CDS). The availability of specialists and support staff to assist PreK teachers and students varied across the districts and schools.

For children who have an IEP, the state's Child Development Services (CDS) normally contracts with outside agencies to bring in specialists to the school or provides services elsewhere. While districts or schools had special education teachers, speech and language specialists and other specialists, these personnel do not work directly with PreK students but only with Kindergarten and higher grade levels. One exception was in the non-rural district that hires its own speech and language specialist and CDS reimburses the district. Table 1 below summarizes the significant variation we found in program structure and number of students served across the three districts and four schools participating in this study.

Table 1. Description of the PreK Programs

	School A	School B	School C1	School C2
NCES location category	Rural, distant (north)	Town, remote (central)	Small city (central)	Small city (central)
Full or Half-Day	Full	Half	Half	Half
Days per week	5	4	5	5
Student hours per day	6.5	3.5	2.5	2.5
Student hours per week	32.5	14	12.5	12.5
Classrooms operating	1	2	1	1
Sessions per day	1	4	2	2
Students per class session	14	16	15, 18	17, 19
Teachers per classroom	1	1	1	1
Ed Techs per classroom	1 (Level I)	1 (Level II or III) per room; Plus 1 floating	1 (Level III)	1 (Level III)
Educator to student ratio	1:7	1:8 (Max.)	1:7.5, 1:9	1:8.5, 1:9.5
Students served per day	14	64	33	36
Meeting local demand?	Yes	No	Yes	Yes

Coordination with CDS. Maine's education statute (Title 20-A) includes several chapters addressing the education of students in special education programs, both in public and private facilities, and Chapter 307 is specifically focused on infants to age five or six years. As outlined in the MDOE's implementation regulations in Chapter 101, the responsibility for the provision of special education and other services for students with disabilities are separate for PreK students and K-12 students. Historically, the administrative guidelines have assigned the responsibility for evaluation and services for children from birth through age five to the state's agency CDS, while responsibility for children after age five (generally Kindergarten) is assigned to the school district. Education of blind and visually impaired students is further separated and addressed in regulations within the Department of Labor. Students with Autism are addressed by yet another area of the law and services are funded through MaineCare. With public schools housing and providing PreK programs, there has been a need to coordinate between the school/ district and CDS for the provision of supports for students with disabilities. Numerous accounts over the years have identified many challenges in coordinating services between the state agency CDS and school districts, and will be described in another section below.

In general, the process of identifying PreK students for evaluation and special services typically begins with screening tests conducted by schools and CDS for incoming students. For the four participating schools in this study, this screening typically occurred in September, but

one school also offers screening in June. Given the high mobility of some students among districts in the state, schools must also screen students who enroll later in the year. In the past, CDS staff have provided the screening at the school site. Last year, principals indicated they were informed by a letter that schools would become responsible for the screening. In fall 2018, the PreK teachers and other staff performed the screening for incoming students, and CDS staff assisted in the screening to a limited extent in three of the four schools. Based on the screening, some referrals are made to CDS immediately. In other cases, PreK teachers may continue to observe a student over the first few weeks of school to determine if a referral is needed and to narrow down the area of difficulty for the child.

Once referrals are made to CDS, the state agency contacts the parent or guardian to obtain permission to conduct the appropriate testing or evaluation of the child. Once permission is obtained, CDS has 60 days in which to complete the evaluation, and another 60 days to develop the IEP for the student. This whole process typically takes several months. The schools participating in this study indicated they seek to prioritize referrals to expedite the reviews, and also offer to assist CDS in contacting parents if needed. While schools wait for the outcome of this process and for CDS to take over services, they must find ways to support students in the classroom in the meantime, using the limited options and personnel available to them for the PreK level. As indicated earlier, district special education teachers and specialists are generally not allowed to work with PreK students as this is the responsibility of CDS.

Inclusion of students in classroom practice. Both principals and teachers in all four schools from the three districts included in this study indicated a strong commitment to the inclusion model for PreK students with special needs or challenging behaviors. These schools seek to engage all students in the normal classroom activities, which include whole group and small group instruction and play. A PreK teacher shared,

> We try to make it so they are part of what we're doing. So it might be that that student needs more one-on-one attention, but he/ she is still in the classroom, or maybe it's more of a small group.

A principal explained,

> There is very little difference in how we treat kids with IEPs and the regular ed kids. The expectations are the same. Usually, when their behaviors are challenging, that's certainly handled by the classroom teacher. The classroom teacher may put something in place for

the Ed Tech to support the student while they're struggling. Certainly, communication with home is something we do on a regular basis to let them know how things are going.

For students that require more personal space to maintain appropriate and safe behaviors, the Ed Tech may work with the child one on one. Principals and teachers indicated that small group work and individual support from Ed Techs is often more effective for these children than expecting them to sit still in a whole-class activity. Sometimes a child can listen to a story being read to the class from a separate space in the room. For example, one PreK teacher described how she noticed a student listening attentively to a story while pretending to "wash dishes" in the play kitchen. Other times, Ed Techs will engage students in a small group or individually to focus on the same skills that other children are working on with the PreK teacher. One teacher described how she was working on gross motor movement with most of the students while an Ed Tech took a small group outside to the playground to practice the same skills by sorting balls.

While all four schools indicated they strive to treat all students the same way, and that generally you would not see differences in how students are engaged in the classroom, they did acknowledge the need to provide safe and appropriate ways to engage students who may have disabilities or exhibit challenging behaviors. They used a variety of strategies to achieve that goal. Selective and flexible grouping strategies were used to support students through small groups or individual work with support from an Ed Tech. Providing more space for students to spread out in the PreK classroom, as described earlier, was another strategy used to support students' need for more quiet space and time. Providing softer lighting in the room, thinking about the impact of different colors, and reducing sound levels in classrooms were additional strategies used to meet students' different needs and to obtain a calming effect on children. The choice to purchase additional materials for centers and manipulatives also was intended to increase students' engagement and reduce problematic behaviors. One teacher explained how an Ed Tech might take a child who is upset over to the new rice table filled with a variety of manipulatives. The act of touching and exploring these manipulatives was often helpful in calming a student down and teaching them how to manage their emotions and behavior.

These schools indicated they observe and collect data on problematic student behaviors, figure out what might trigger certain behaviors, and develop a plan of action. Teachers and Ed Techs work to model appropriate behaviors for students and have students practice them. When behaviors escalate, other staff in the school might assist temporarily as needed. One PreK teacher

described using incentives to encourage positive behaviors, through a framework known as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) in which she had been trained: "We try to think of what would be the best carrot for them. . . . and our expectations vary for the students. But when they do that, they get a reward."

Once a PreK student has an IEP, principals and educators indicated they follow the IEP. A principal explained, ". . . we just give every child what they need in that moment. So we figure that out and if we know what that is, then that's great. But [for] the children with IEPs, we definitely follow the IEPs." Students who may need some specialized services, such as speech and language support, Occupational Therapy (OT) or Physical Therapy (PT) or other, may need to be in a more quiet space than the regular classroom and have access to specialized equipment. Students typically receive these kinds of services outside the regular PreK classroom. Students in the two more rural schools were more likely to receive these special services during the class time, through pull out to a resource room. In the two non-rural schools, administrators and teachers sought to avoid reducing students' time in class by scheduling these services either before or after their class session.

None of the schools indicated that they would expel students from PreK for behavior problems. However, they did emphasize that safety of all students and staff is a priority. In rare cases, they may reduce the number of hours that a child attends the PreK program until the child adjusts to being in a classroom and appropriate supports are in place with an IEP.

Challenges with PreK Special Education Inclusion

The four schools participating in this study described challenges in serving students with special needs and those who demonstrate challenging behaviors in the PreK classroom. These challenges primarily centered around these areas: 1) a fragmented system of responsibility and rules governing how students with different kinds of disabilities and different age groups are served; 2) inadequate and ineffective communication from CDS to schools/ districts and parents; 3) long delay from referral to IEP implementation; 3) statewide staffing shortages in special education and other specialist areas; 4) difficulty with oversight and supervision of agencies and personnel with whom CDS contracts to serve students, and 5) lack of full funding for PreK programs statewide and for specialists to work at the PreK level within schools. These challenges are described below as they relate to first the referral and evaluation phase, and later to the service delivery phase. Within the section on service delivery, we discuss challenges in serving

both students with known or suspected disabilities or IEPs and students who may simply present with challenging behaviors but not meet the criteria for referral for evaluation for special services.

Challenges Identifying and Evaluating Students. For three of the schools participating in this study the number of PreK students with an IEP was fairly low, from one to four students. One school with a larger program serving several rural districts (school B) expected as many as ten students to require IEPs this year. Taking into consideration the significant difference in the PreK enrollment across these schools, the percentages of students in these programs needing IEPs also varied considerably. Rural school A indicated they had only one referral this year (out of their PreK enrollment of 14 students) and none last year. Non-rural schools C1 and C2 indicated they have less than 15% of students (14% and 10% respectively) who require an IEP in PreK each year. By contrast, in rural school B, the percentage of the 64 PreK students needing an IEP can vary dramatically from year to year (from 17% to 50%), which makes staffing needs difficult to anticipate. Except for school A, the other three schools had frequent interaction with CDS for referral of PreK students. All four schools indicated that the predominant reason for making referrals to CDS for their PreK students was for speech and language services.

As described earlier, many students enter PreK without having been in a preschool before, and are unlikely to have IEPs at this point. While the initial screening done at the beginning of September helps schools to anticipate some of the special needs of their students and the numbers of students who may need a referral to CDS, there is also a need to observe the student in the classroom for awhile to get a better sense of their specific challenges. PreK teachers noted that as these young children are adapting to being in a formal school setting for the first time, they need to allow time to see if students' difficulties actually involve a disability or are just part of the normal adjustment to school and being in a group of other children. Thus, it can be challenging for teachers to identify which students may need referrals and the exact nature of the difficulty. One Head Start educator commented,

> I think in preschool we get so many children who are unidentified. So when they come in at the beginning of September, now [November] is when we're really starting to get a grasp on these kids. It takes a while to learn what they're trying to tell us. That's one of the challenges I think of preschool . . .

In making a referral, teachers must fill out paperwork that is submitted to CDS for review and action. Yet, principals and teachers emphasized how frustrated they are by the unclear

criteria for referrals and the "mystery" around the whole referral process. Some schools indicated it has taken them "years" to figure out what the criteria are for students to be eligible for certain kinds of evaluation and services. They were adamant that the criteria and process for referral and obtaining service for students should not be a "mystery" but should be made clear and unambiguous to schools. A principal summed up by saying, "It should be very transparent what you would need to show." In particular, schools indicated the criteria are not clear for approval of a one-on-one support tutor (Ed Tech) for a student.

Beyond the challenge of navigating unclear rules for referrals, PreK teachers also spoke of the challenge of finding time to collect data to support their request for a child to be evaluated and completing the referral paperwork. This is extra work added to their regular classroom duties and is not something expected of teachers in other grades. By contrast, teachers in Kindergarten and other grades can draw on the support of special education teachers to do observations, collect data, and complete paperwork to evaluate a child for special services. A principal described this inequity in teacher responsibility and workload between PreK and other grades:

> You have to be very knowledgeable about special ed law. . . . You have to write a behavior plan. You have to collect data. You have to analyze the data, and you have to collate the data, so that when you come to the meeting you're able to say, "Here's my proof that this child needs this." That's a lot for a teacher to do. And we don't expect it out of any of our K-3 teachers . . . the kindergarten has a team of people who go down to help her collect the data. And some of that's provided by special ed because they're in the referral process and we're collecting data. For PreK, it's me, the Ed Tech, the guidance counselor, whoever. But mostly it's falling on the teacher to collect that data.

As described earlier in this report, once a referral is made by the school to CDS to request an evaluation for a student, the state guidelines allow several months for the evaluation and IEP to be completed. Although the school may urge CDS to expedite their review for some high priority cases, the four schools indicated that CDS generally does take the maximum time they are allowed and they do not hold the first IEP meeting until sometime in January or even February of the PreK year. This significant delay in getting students tested and having a plan in place means they do not get services started until the spring of the PreK year—much later in the year than would be the case for Kindergarten and other grades served by the school district. The delay in getting appropriate supports in place has negative implications for the PreK teacher and staff who must figure out how to help the child with the minimal resources available for PreK, for other students in the classroom who have difficulty understanding a child with speech or

language impairments or experience disruption from behavior problems, and for the child in question who may struggle to make him or herself understood or to successfully engage in classroom activities. As one Head Start educator put it, teachers are "just trying to make their day as successful as possible. Sort of trial and error," until a more formal evaluation is available.

Different factors may account for the long delays that schools experience in the referral and evaluation process. Schools described both problems of communication from CDS as well as the statewide staffing shortages to access specialists to evaluate students. The problems related to communication from CDS are partly based on the fragmentation of special education law and rules that prohibit CDS from discussing a child's case with a school until parents have given their signed permission. The schools in this study described how CDS attempts to reach parents or guardians by phone, and explained why this approach is often ineffective. First, parents may not recognize this state agency although schools do attempt to alert parents ahead of time that CDS may contact them. Second, some parents have not had positive experiences in school themselves and may be fearful of any state agency contacting them about their child. Some parents may, in fact, confuse CDS with child welfare services. Third, many of the parents with children needing special services may live in poverty and may be highly mobile. The schools indicated this population rarely has a landline telephone and they prefer to be contacted by text message to their cell phone rather than a phone call. Some have not set up voicemail on their cell phones, so the CDS cannot leave a message for them.

Principals and PreK teachers found it frustrating that CDS would drop referrals when they don't hear back from parents, and indicated that CDS does not communicate with schools to assist in contacting parents or to let schools know they have dropped a referral. The process must start over again when the school contacts CDS and learns a referral was dropped. The schools in this study indicated they have learned from this experience to be more proactive in alerting parents that CDS will contact them, and offering to assist CDS in contacting the parents or obtaining the parental permission for evaluation. Thus, significant challenges were described in both communication from CDS to schools and to parents during the referral process. A principal shared a sense of frustration about this challenge,

> They [CDS] would call the parents about the referral. The parents didn't know who CDS was. They said, "No thank you." And then we weren't always notified that the parents declined. Here the kids are, requiring service, or at least an evaluation, and we're not notified that there was an issue with getting the permission slip!

Similarly, a Head Start educator in another school explained,

> We've worked really hard to try to improve that. To help facilitate paperwork. It is a challenge. There are times when children get dropped from CDS because of timeframes. And because phone numbers might change, or the parent didn't follow through with calling . . .

Schools also cited delays and challenges in accessing testing for student evaluations. CDS typically contracts with private agencies and specialists to conduct the testing, but this may require parents to travel some distance to a testing site. This can be a significant challenge for parents in terms of both time and finding transportation, and schools explained that it can be a barrier that either delays or prevents students from being evaluated at all. A Head Start educator commented, "For some of our families . . . that's a huge barrier. Families cannot transport [the child] so the child sometimes goes without services." Without the evaluation, CDS cannot develop and implement an IEP. In the more distant, rural regions of the state, travel to testing sites could be longer and a greater barrier for some families.

In addition to the obstacle of travel for testing and evaluations, schools indicated that the statewide shortage in specialists for special education contributes to a backlog and delays in the evaluation process for students who have been referred. A Head Start educator observed, "Well, there's a staffing shortage across the nation, of PreK staff, as well as CDS staff. And we're definitely feeling the impact of that." A principal reflected, "I think that the staffing for CDS has become trickier and trickier. . . . It seems that the supports are almost starting to ebb away. . ." The schools also wondered if CDS is adequately staffed to process referrals, deliver services, and communicate with schools in a timely fashion. MEPRI did not collect data for this study around staffing or caseloads for CDS or the agencies with which CDS contracts.

Challenges Providing Services to Students. Given the delays in getting students evaluated and IEPs developed by CDS for PreK students, it is clear that services to students are also delayed. The four schools we included in this study all said that the IEP meeting was not held until January or February, and services followed. However, the availability of services also depended on the availability of Ed Techs and specialists in the region and their caseloads.

While schools wait for CDS to put an IEP and staffing in place, they are compelled to put together some plan of action to support students as they are able. The options for supporting PreK students are limited by law, as they cannot draw on the special education teachers and other specialists in the school that are available to Kindergarten and other grades. In most cases, this

means that the Ed Tech and PreK teacher act as a "tag team", where the Ed Tech will assist an individual child at different times of the day, leaving the PreK teacher with responsibility for all other children in the classroom, a less than ideal staffing ratio. The PreK teacher may also seek assistance from other school staff including the social worker, guidance counselor or principal to assist with a child in the classroom. Without information from testing and evaluations, school staff have only their own observations and data on student behaviors to determine what may be amiss and how to adjust the child's classroom experience until an IEP is in place.

One school complained that CDS had scheduled IEP meetings in another town, during school hours. This made it difficult for the PreK teacher and perhaps parents to participate, and the district requested meetings be held at the school during non-school hours. The participants we interviewed indicated they feel it is important to involve the classroom teacher in developing the IEP and monitoring implementation, as the teacher is most familiar with the classroom setting and how individual children are engaging in that environment. A district director of special education explained that some CDS staff have training that allows them to serve in multiple roles with respect to the IEP team, but the CDS case manager may lack first-hand knowledge of the classroom and the child and has only the evaluation reports on which to base the IEP.

> . . . so if it, the case manager is a certified special ed teacher, that person is going to serve two roles. She'll write the IEP and run the meeting. But may not have any knowledge of the student, other than reading the reports.

Another challenge related to the provision of services centered to the rule changes that occur for the thresholds that determine eligibility for a variety of supports. For example, educators in school B described how some PreK students have problems with motor skills but don't meet eligibility for services. A teacher explained,

> So, if we have a child who is perfectly fine with their speech and language development, and their cognitive [development], but they have some *major* motor skill [delay], whether it be fine motor or gross motor or combined, we are told they can't get that as a stand-alone service.

An educator also explained that, based on eligibility rules, if a child's speech can be understood over 50% of the time, the student is not eligible for speech and language services. Educators worried that students were entering Kindergarten with more significant deficits and more time would be needed to reduce these gaps.

> . . . 50% is pretty significant, of not understanding. What we've seen is then they go to kindergarten and we have Kindergarten [teachers] saying, "Whoa, these children need speech. Why don't they have speech already in place?" Then it has to start from square one in kindergarten.

All four schools had concerns about the limited number of special educators and specialists statewide, and indicated that this staffing shortage means real delays in getting access to supports in the schools. For the rural districts, it was a more significant challenge, particularly for the more distant, rural school A. A district director of special education described how specialists in northern Maine may have larger geographic regions and more travel time to visit schools.

> We're such a big area, and there's just so little providers available to us. You know, you think, oh well, you have four providers up there. But you have 400 miles. In a day, to travel to all of those sites that need to have kids seen, it's nearly impossible.

One of the ways agencies may try to overcome the challenges of a staffing shortage and long travel times is to offer remote support via video-conferencing to students. This option was not viewed as an ideal way to support students in the classroom, and the schools strongly preferred having in person support for students. A district director explained,

> So, that really concerns me, I guess, because I think one on one, face to face, is probably the best that you can get. I think it's the most beneficial that you can get. And especially at that age, it's really hard to get them to attend to a TV screen . . .

Related to staffing concerns, participants shared concerns about not having a consistent case manager for students served by CDS and the agencies with which they contract. The change in personnel was viewed as problematic in providing consistent and effective services to students. A district director of special education observed, "Sometimes through CDS you have a different case manager, a different therapist, a different teacher every, there's a high turnover."

One district expressed concerns about the credentialing and background checks for personnel working through a contract with CDS in schools and classrooms. Sometimes the district discovered that the background check had expired, but the individual was still working with students in other districts. Some individuals may have a criminal record since the last background check. A district director of special education shared one example: "I had two people coming in from different agencies, one an interpreter, and one a speech pathologist, whose criminal history record checks had expired. And other districts were using them." The

same administrator also described how some personnel sent by agencies do not always have the appropriate credentials needed for the type of service they are providing. Due to concerns for safety and confidentiality, schools want to ensure that any personnel sent by CDS to work in their schools have passed background checks and confidentiality agreements. In some cases, districts will require these personnel to work with students in a resource room rather than the classroom to ensure confidentiality for all other students in the classroom.

The schools in this study indicated that while CDS is responsible for evaluating students, developing the IEP, providing appropriate services, and supervising the personnel who work with students in schools, they do not feel that CDS consistently provides adequate supervision and guidance of Ed Techs and other personnel working with students in the classroom. A district administrator shared,

> I think it was last year, we realized that nobody's supervising the Ed Tech. . . . Basically, you've got a student with specially designed instruction on their IEP, but nobody's overseeing it. . . . and it's not the [district's] responsibility to do that. . . . That's CDS.

Besides the concerns over delays in obtaining services, fewer options to support PreK students, and the impact of statewide staffing shortages, schools also voiced concerns about the limitations of their space resources in the schools to support students with special needs. They noted that some students may need to receive speech and language services in another room to reduce distractions, and resource rooms were not always readily available. Schools also had limited equipment in their resource rooms, so some students may need to travel to other sites to receive special services.

One district emphasized the challenge that schools face when some parents choose the medical route of receiving special services through placement in a private facility funded through MaineCare. These are for-profit businesses, and therefore may benefit from keeping children as long as possible. Parents may find the extended hours of care helpful if they work full time. However, schools and teachers face a challenge in integrating these children into Kindergarten if they stay in a private facility past the age of five. They noted that some children come into the public system at the late age of seven and are unfamiliar with classroom and school routines that other Kindergarteners have learned in PreK, making their transition difficult.

Most of the preceding discussion has focused on students who may require special education services. Yet, schools also must cope with a variety of challenging student behaviors

in students who do not qualify for special services, and may lack staffing and training to meet that challenge. For PreK students, some behaviors are related to the normal adjustment students are making from home or childcare into a formal, school based program. Other challenges are simply developmental, such as biting or hitting other students that can occur among young children learning to engage in a social group. However, the schools in this study also described seeing increasing numbers of young children coming to school who are "very angry" and showing aggressive behaviors. Many of these children have experienced various kinds of trauma. The transition back to school after a disruptive event in a child's life, or after long school vacations, can make it especially difficult for these students, and puts greater demands on the limited staffing available for PreK students.

It is important to note that the role of CDS is to support students with developmental delays and/ or disabilities, but does not include students with mental health issues which is not considered a "disability" based on the eligibility requirements of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). As described earlier, the Ed Tech often assists in the classroom by intervening with a child as needed, to redirect, calm, and model appropriate behavior. At other times, schools may also draw on assistance from the principal, social worker, school psychologist, or other staff to assist as needed. The need to devote a staff member to assist a single child pulls staff away from other students and duties. Only in rare cases did schools indicate they may reduce a child's time in the PreK program, and they did not have a practice of expelling children from PreK but try to serve all students who come to their schools.

Additional Resources Needed

Administrators at both district and school levels, along with teachers, shared the belief that PreK education is currently not adequately funded in Maine. As described earlier in this report, three of the four schools felt they were meeting the demand in terms of the number of student slots in their programs. However, three of the four schools offered only half-day PreK programs to accommodate the number of students in their communities. They pointed out that if they shifted to a full-day model, it would reduce by half the number of students and families being served and leave some unserved. Participants interviewed for this study observed that there is a need for full-day PreK programs given that many parents or guardians work full time. Full-day programs would increase instructional time, social time for students, special services and supports including nutrition and meals, which would have positive impacts for student learning

and development. However, participants also noted that attending a full-day program can be difficult for many three or four-year-olds, and that some may need time to transition to a full day.

As noted in the section describing challenges, these schools also felt the need for more funding for additional staffing to assist with PreK classrooms. The need to provide individual support to one child means the other teacher in the room is left with responsibility for more than ten students, and potentially as many as 19. PreK children attending these public programs reflect a very broad range of social and academic skills and school readiness. Some children may have previous PreK experience and be reading already. Other children have never attended a formal program with other children and may still be toilet training. PreK students normally have a period of adjustment as they get used to being in school and learning routines, and other school staff and administrators are pulled from their duties to lend a hand when a child needs time to cool off or has escaped a classroom into the hallway. Some students come to school having experienced trauma or major disruptions in their lives or have undiagnosed disabilities. These students demonstrate more challenging behaviors that can cause safety concerns and require trained staff to offer appropriate supports.

As Maine contemplates shifting to a model that places more responsibility on school districts to support special education in PreK, the four schools in this study strongly urged that increased funding for appropriate space and personnel are needed, as well as professional development and time to allow for a smooth and gradual transition rather than a sudden change. Space needs were noted by schools in terms of both regular classroom space available in the school and space for resource rooms. Participants noted they were at capacity now or "bursting at the seams" and did not necessarily have the type of resource rooms that students may need. School B was an older building that did not meet the requirements for physical accessibility for people with disabilities, and so could not accept some students with physical disabilities.

Personnel needs included a need for more Ed Techs as well as special education teachers, speech and language specialists, Board Certified Behavior Analysts (BCBAs), and other specialists who could work directly with PreK students in the school. When a student requires individual support or has an IEP that requires one-on-one tutoring or support, this severely decreases the Ed Tech support available to other students in the classroom and increase the number of Ed Techs needed. Given the shortages in availability of specialists, particularly in the

more distant rural areas of the state, schools feel they need better access to this resource. Some comments regarding the need for additional funding for PreK education statewide included these:

> I think that's a big difference between PreK and the other grades, is that the funding is not the same. It's not fully funded. The biggest part is just not being able to get resources for children with special needs. (PreK teacher)

> If the school takes over these extra supports, then the first thing I know we're going to ask is, "Where are we getting the money from? How are we going to fund this?". . . The ones I'm more concerned with are the ones that, when the IEP comes back to say this student needs a one-on-one. That's a big commitment to have a person in the classroom. I mean, it could be a big funding issue. Especially if you have four or five kids who need this. (Principal)

> If we're going to continue with the inclusive model, then you really need to make sure that the teachers have somebody for support for a special education consultant to come in and work with them. And the Ed Techs that are in the classroom. (District SPED director)

Participants were unsure how the state should address the shortages statewide, but felt that incentives might be needed to encourage specialists to work in more remote areas. One district administrator noted that the regional collaborative model for providing special services can work well and could be expanded in the state and within regions to increase capacity and consistency in the staff who work with students. Others noted that there may not be enough funding for degree programs to train special education teachers and specialists, and they felt it can be hard for Ed Techs and others to find the courses they need. Educators described some of the factors that may discourage people from pursuing a career in PreK and special education. These participants said they feel that PreK is held in lower respect than other grades as there is a public perception that PreK is "child care" rather than a formal educational program, and that PreK teachers are paid lower salaries. Work conditions that may deter people from pursuing special education include the high caseloads, time spent on paperwork, stress and risk of injury in some situations. Some of these factors could be addressed through increased funding.

The four schools in this study also noted that if school districts may be required to take responsibility for screening, evaluating or testing students, and developing IEPs, more professional development will be needed to support that change, as CDS or contracted agencies have performed those tasks in the past. This past year schools took a larger role in PreK screening. Overall, schools felt very optimistic that, if funded for appropriate staffing, they could evaluate students, develop IEPs, and start delivering services to PreK students much more

quickly than is currently happening under CDS. As evidence, schools pointed out how quickly they are able to support their students in Kindergarten and other grades. As one principal shared,

> It's all going to fall back to, you know, it takes time and money to do the assessments, do the evaluations, write the plans, provide the supports. But it's, as a school administrator, we can do the K to 3 really well. Because I have my own people who do the assessments. Once we identify somebody, we're all over this. But the PreK kids, it's never quick enough.

Schools anticipated that another positive outcome of giving districts responsibility for PreK special education would be a more fluid transition for students as they move from PreK to Kindergarten, with less disruption in services.

Finally, schools indicated a need for time to plan for and implement changes if the state seeks to make major changes in responsibility for PreK special education. School districts need time to find appropriate space, train and hire personnel, and more time may be needed to build the statewide capacity to meet the personnel demands for specialists. A Head Start educator said, "I think when, if they do make a transition, it then, they're going to, time and money to support the planning, and then the ongoing implementation." A principal observed,

> I just feel that our institutions K to 12 are really not ready for this. We don't have the right things in place to be able to do it yet. . . . It will take some time. It's going to be, it's going to take some education. I do think, too, the first important thing is for us to at least be able to provide universal PreK, which our district does not provide right now, because it's a funding issue.

Growing a larger workforce of trained special educators and specialists to meet the demand of continued increases in the number of students with special needs and significant behavioral problems is currently one of the biggest challenges facing the state, and has been the subject of other MEPRI studies and reports (Fairman & Seymour, 2018).

Perceptions of Early Impacts from Program Participation

While this study did not seek to evaluate the MDOE's Public Preschool Inclusion Project, described in the first part of this report, we did ask administrators and teachers about their perceptions of impacts from the mini-grants schools received in spring 2018 and from the professional development component. The professional support consisted of an online course with assigned readings, writing prompts, and communities of practice that paired schools within or across districts. District administrators, school principals, special education teachers, PreK teachers, and PreK Ed Techs all participated as a school team, for most of the schools. In one of

the schools we studied, the principal alone participated as the PreK teacher was unavailable. That principal had prior work experience as an Ed Tech.

Impacts of mini grants. Three of the four schools in this study did receive a mini-grant to purchase items that would support developmentally appropriate instructional practices and set up of PreK classrooms, a focus of the spring 2018 course. All four PreK classrooms featured the learning center or work station classroom arrangement, which allows students to rotate among several different kinds of learning and play areas by choice and interest, and to work alone with an Ed Tech, in pairs, or in small groups as needed. Overall, schools used the funding to obtain permanent instructional materials for their classrooms, rather than consumable supplies, as this was identified as a bigger need and one that could not typically be met by district funding.

Two of the programs (one rural and one non-rural) ordered additional pieces of interchangeable wooden furniture including tables and chairs, play kitchen, play store, and short shelving units for books and other items. All furniture was at the appropriate size and height for three or four-year-old children. The same two programs also obtained a variety of new manipulatives such as a rice table, magnetic board, building blocks or sets, as well as items for dramatic play such as play people figures and dress up costumes. PreK furniture pieces were modular and could be arranged in many different ways in the classroom, allowing teachers to change themes and type of play for the week and increase student interest.

Principals and teachers described the broad goals of supporting students' cognitive, sensory and fine motor skill, social and emotional development and learning in selecting the new items for all students in the PreK classroom. More specific goals were to provide more options for student choice over activities and more variety in activities to maintain students' high engagement. Teachers felt the new materials and choices had the positive impact of increasing students' level of engagement and helping to manage student behaviors. A PreK teacher reflected,

> I mean, they love everything that I got. The blocks, I see more children playing with the blocks. And the play people, they also love those. . . . I think they're probably more engaged. Every time I put something new out, they're just all excited and they're really busy.

A PreK teacher from another school said, "We have a sensory station [rice table with small manipulatives] . . . And we use that as something to help calm students." In one school, the PreK

teacher selected play people that not only represented different types of work roles and careers, but also represented racial/ ethnic diversity.

> I just wanted to see the children being productive in the different centers, and being really engaged. . . . And also, [the] play people that I got, it's a very diverse set. Like, there's an African American family, and a Native American family and I was trying to add diversity too.

One school was an older building with very high ceilings and windows. They ordered material for the ceiling to absorb sound and also wrapped some of the light fixtures for softer lighting in the room. These changes were specifically intended to address the sensitivities that some students have to loud noise and bright lighting that can trigger behavior problems.

Impacts of professional development. The MDOE's professional development consisted of two components: an online course in each semester and Communities of Practice to discuss and share ideas in teams across schools. Overall, principals found the courses to be more helpful and informative than did the PreK teachers. Teachers felt they were already well informed about the topics discussed in the readings and courses through their training and classroom experience, (such as the concept of universal design to provide access for students with disabilities and strategies to support inclusion of students with disabilities in classroom activities), while some principals who did not have prior training or experience at the early child level felt the information helped to fill some gaps for them. One principal observed,

> I just thought it was very informative for me, and they had a lot of these interesting articles. I got a lot out of it as a principal. What should be possibly going on in PreK classroom versus I think that's what you're supposed to be doing.

However, both administrators and teachers gained some new ideas through the courses and assigned readings which they found helpful and inspired some changes in the PreK room set up. For example, participants talked about how the course made them think more about the importance of sound and light in the classroom environment and how it may impact students differently, particularly for students who are especially sensitive to sound and light. These schools made some changes to soften the sound and lighting in their PreK classrooms for the fall 2018 as a result of the professional development. One principal explained,

> I mean, we have kids who, loud noises, they have to wear something to drown out some of the noise, they just, there's too much noise coming at them. We have kids who need some quiet time, some lights that aren't as bright.

Another principal commented,

> So, the other thing that we purchased was, to help with our old lights, they actually give a nice feeling to the room, because they're kind of a material that can wrap around the lights and give it a hue that is softer lighting. . . . We really had some great ideas, and we got that through looking at the sound environment literature and thinking about, as a team, what would be good for the learners.

Principals and PreK teachers were also inspired by the course to incorporate more natural elements from outdoors in the classroom, or to think about new ways to engage PreK students in outdoor play. The PreK teacher in one non-rural school brought in branches and other natural objects for creative displays and for students to explore in the classroom. The principal in another non-rural school talked about how they are finding other ways to have PreK students explore nature outside the school building. In addition to the paved playground, they were seeking ways to make use of the trees, sand, and other elements on school grounds. They hoped to incorporate the element of water as well. A principal explained, "It got all of us thinking about natural classrooms as well. Not just inside, but outside. Things like water and trees and mud and rocks. Those kinds of things that kids can explore and climb and build." Another principal said, ". . . we knew the things we wanted to do, bring the outside in. We have plants in there, and she's got a huge butterfly. A lot going on in there."

The spring 2018 course focused on classroom environment for PreK helped principals and PreK teachers think about how space is used in their PreK classrooms and how space can support the different needs of children, particularly at times when some children may need to have individual attention or work in a small group to manage challenging behaviors. The two non-rural schools (C1 and C2) both reassigned their PreK classrooms to larger classroom spaces over the summer and were seeing positive impacts of having more classroom space in fall 2018. They felt having more space made these rooms less cluttered, easier for students to move around among the learning centers, provided more storage space for materials, reduces conflict over space between students, and allowed for students to work individually if needed. Comments from the two schools included these:

> It also contributes, a bigger space contributes, in some way, to the social emotional needs of kids. . . . It gives us a little more space of our own, and that helps a lot of kids who, especially the ones that have behavior issues . . . (Principal)

> I feel like the more space that you have, it does help them emotionally. They're not fighting over resources as much. You have more room to add more work station choices. . . . And they can move from one place to another very easily. (PreK teacher)

The opportunity to share ideas across schools and personnel through the posting of comments and Communities of Practice was the most highly valued component of the program's professional development. Participants described how this provided a rare opportunity to break down some barriers between administrators and teachers, between PreK and other grades, and between schools in the district. Principals and PreK teachers talked about how new ideas were shared, relationships were forged, and PreK teachers gained a greater sense of respect and validation of the importance of their work. In the non-rural district, the participating PreK teachers built on their new collaboration to take the lead in developing a new science unit for PreK in their district. Some participants noted that PreK teachers and educational technicians are often overlooked in some districts and not included in professional development opportunities, so this program was much appreciated. School teams used the collaborative time to envision changes in their PreK classroom environment and instructional practices. They felt the program fostered discussions that moved to a new level and were helpful in pushing some changes forward. One principal observed,

> I think there was a lot, I think it built that community. I do think that PreK is an island unto itself in a school. It's different in a lot of ways. I think it helped develop those professional bonds between those people.

A Head Start educator shared a similar view,

> I think more importantly, it supported and pushed collaborative conversations within the district. Brought more administrators to the table, special ed department from the district, as well as what we're doing, in really making more people aware of the needs and what inclusion means in PreK. And really shifted the conversations that are happening within our collaboration in this district.

Conclusion and Implications for Policy and Practice

While this study was small in terms of the number of participating schools and participants, it nonetheless provides some evidence about how students are currently served within PreK classrooms and some of the major challenges in identifying and supporting students with disabilities and other students who simply present with challenging behaviors. We found that all four schools supported the inclusion model for students in PreK classrooms but also used a variety of strategies, such as grouping, to provide the environment and supports that students

may need. Students may work individually or in small groups with an Ed Tech in the classroom as needed, and may receive other special services, typically speech and language, outside the classroom in a resource room either during the PreK session timeslot or before/ after the session.

One big challenge that schools in this study face is the need for more staffing support, primarily Ed Techs, to support students who may need one-on-one support and ensure adequate staff ratios for the remaining students in the classroom. Another significant challenge is the significant time delay in getting PreK students evaluated, IEPs in place, and services started. Parents face obstacles in traveling to more distant locations to have their children tested for evaluation, and statewide staffing shortages may also delay or reduce access to special services. Schools expressed frustration with the complexity of state regulations, lack of clear criteria for referrals, poor communication from CDS, and a divided system that prevents schools from using special education teachers and specialists working within the district to support teachers and students in PreK. Ensuring that staff specialists have the necessary credentials and background checks is also a concern. More broadly, schools worry that CDS is not able to directly supervise personnel who provide instruction and support to students in schools.

Based on the interviews for this study, we describe some potential implications for state and local education policy and for practice, and areas that may need to be addressed to overcome the challenges described in this report.

Implications for Policy and Practice:

The challenges identified in this research lead to the following connections to Maine education policy. If a task force to study provision of early childhood special education is created through enactment of the pending L.D. 512, some of these issues may warrant inclusion in its scope of work.

- More program slots are needed to meet the demand statewide for PreK. Demand exists for both half-day and full-day options; some parents who work may require full-time programs or half-time programs with wraparound child care services, and other parents prefer half-day programs based on their child's developmental readiness for school.
- Staff shortages are a factor affecting programs and services in both pK-12 and CDS systems. Salary inequities are reported to exist between PreK teachers and other grades in public schools, and between providers hired by CDS versus public schools. Various incentives may

need to be implemented to encourage people to pursue these careers to build the state's capacity in early childhood, special education, and specialist services.

- Continued professional development, access to specialists, and/or coaching is needed to provide PreK staff with tools to support students with special needs and students with challenging behaviors. This includes the use of inclusion practices in PreK classrooms, providing appropriate learning environments and supports to students, and managing challenging student behaviors. Professional learning networks or communities can be an effective way to share ideas and develop a shared vision for PreK education, as demonstrated through the MDOE inclusion training.
- The fragmented policy and regulatory system governing the provision of special services creates inequities in the provision of services between PreK and other grades, and prevents schools from utilizing the special education and other expertise they have in K and other grades.
- Some schools may require funding and space to create appropriate resource rooms for young students to receive special services, or to update facilities to increase students' access to buildings and to comply with the federal ADA.
- Clearer guidelines and criteria for eligibility for special services is needed to inform the referral of students to CDS for special education evaluation. Criteria for providing support for students with intensive behavioral needs appear to differ between CDS and K-12 systems, possibly due to differences in applicable regulations.
- Clear and specific guidance will be needed from the state if the responsibility for PreK special education identification and provision of services shifts from CDS to school districts. This transition would ideally be phased in over time to allow districts to gradually troubleshoot problems and find solutions.
- Regional collaboratives have been shown in prior MEPRI studies to provide an effective way to share specialists and services across districts, and these could be further encouraged through policy and funding incentives.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Questions for the Study

Appendix A: Interview Protocol

MEPRI Study PreK Special Education Inclusion

Current PreK SPED Inclusion Practices:

1. Please describe what inclusion of PreK children with disabilities and/or challenging behaviors looks like currently at your school.

2. How many students with IEPs do you have at the PreK level?

3. How are student behavior issues or disruptions from students handled?

Challenges:

4. What challenges do PreK teachers in your school experience related to serving children with disabilities and/or challenging behaviors?

Resources:

5. Do PreK classrooms have educational technicians available to assist students with special needs?

Impacts from program this spring:

6. What kinds of materials did your school purchase with the mini-grants this year? Which of these were specifically obtained to address needs of children with disabilities and/ or challenging behaviors?

7. Please describe any changes in the physical set up or classroom environment within PreK classrooms to better serve children through Universal Design for Learning (UDL).

8. What were the specific goals for these changes? (e.g., addressing mobility issues? cognitive learning needs? social/ emotional needs? other?)

9. What do you perceive as positive impacts if any from the mini grant?

10. What do you feel are the positive outcomes of the professional development this past spring that focused on classroom environment issues?

Additional Needs:

11. What additional resources or technical assistance (beyond the fall course) does your school need to support inclusion of children with disabilities and/ or challenging behaviors in their PreK programs?