

EXPLORING THE EARLY LEARNING CENTER CONCEPT



Unit 5 Citizens Advisory Council

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Executive Summary

Project Charge

In an effort to provide centralized services for pre-kindergarten/at-risk and early childhood education students, a number of school districts have embraced the early learning center concept. By studying both the efficiencies and challenges that may be created by educating the district's youngest students at a single location, the members of the *Exploring the Early Learning Center Concept* committee will help to gauge the feasibility of pursuing this alternative educational structure in Unit 5.

Critical components of this study topic include:

- Studying the content of the CAC's February 2002 Creating Early Learning Opportunities report
- Gathering information pertaining to early learning centers that includes, but is not limited to:
 - Potential/suggested physical and academic structures of early learning centers
 - The relative success (citing both research based and anecdotal evidence) of existing early learning center programs
 - The correspondence between early learning center "best practices" and existing district facilities and resources
- Assessing the impact of the creation of early learning centers upon student transportation, available classroom space, and families served
- Exploring the benefits and pitfalls of the early learning center concept
- Developing a formal report that includes recommendations pertaining to the district's future consideration of the early learning concept

Summary of Recommendations:

- A. Unit 5 should centralize services for pre-kindergarten/at-risk and early childhood education students sooner rather than later.
- B. Given the current restraints on classroom space and financial resources in the context of continued enrollment growth in the district, Unit 5 should convert the current Brigham Elementary School building into a centralized early learning center if a referendum in 2008 passes and if a new elementary school is built at the Cedar Ridge site east of Brigham Elementary School.
- C. If the district does not begin building a new school at the Cedar Ridge site by summer of 2008, Unit 5 should seek external funding from government and foundation sources in order to build an early learning center or convert an existing structure into a centralized early learning center.

- D.** Once an early learning center opens, any excess space in the building should be utilized to provide, in cooperation with local public and social service agencies, services targeted toward the families of those children served by the early learning center, specifically families of children identified as at-risk and families of children with developmental disabilities. Integration of students with peers who are not eligible for ECE or at-risk programs must also be accomplished as mandated by "No Child Left Behind."

- E.** Unit 5 should begin in the 2007-2008 school year to more fully track the progress of students served by pre-kindergarten/at-risk and early childhood education programs. The technology to do so is already present in the district but is currently underutilized. Tracking prior to establishment of an early learning center will allow for assessment of some educational outcomes in both decentralized and centralized service delivery models for early learners.

Definitions:

At-risk/ Pre-K: 3-4 year old children identified through screenings to be at-risk for failure in kindergarten due to family environment; must meet the federally mandated at-risk qualifications such as low-income, single parent household, early childhood trauma, etc.

Early Childhood Education (ECE): 3-4 year old children identified through screenings and referrals that are in need of special interventions due to developmental delays including speech/language, motor skills, Pervasive Developmental Disorder identification, etc.

Recommendation A:

Unit 5 should centralize services for pre-kindergarten/at-risk and early childhood education students sooner rather than later.

Rationale:

The 2002 CAC subcommittee report, *Creating Early Childhood Learning Opportunities*, recommended that within five years Unit 5:

"Continue to plan for a district based child development center housing ECE/At-risk classrooms, childcare and community-based services. The administrator would have specific training to support the needs of the students, staff, and community."

That subcommittee cited the rationale of increasing access to services and providing a coordinated approach for assuring that student and family needs are met. They based their recommendation in part on site visits to Sarah Raymond school in Bloomington and to Valeska Hinton Early Childhood Education Center in Peoria along with discussions with Early Learning Center Directors from seven other Illinois school districts.

Growing population of early learners

This age group is a growing population and with state initiatives pushing earlier identification and intervention, the growth trend will continue for both at-risk and special education (ECE) populations in the district. This is consistent with district enrollment projections, which project annual growth in excess of 15% in special education at the elementary level according to the *Unit 5 Preparing for Growth Progress Report* presented in January, 2007..

As of May 1, 2006, enrollment in the Pre-K and ECE programs was as follows. May statistics were used because as children become eligible by turning three years old, they are added to existing classes throughout the school year so excess capacity exists at the beginning of the school year.

Pre-K (at-risk)

Brigham: 40 students (1 classroom)
Fairview: 80 students (2 classrooms)
Pepper Ridge: 40 students (1 classroom) Program now located at Fox Creek.

ECE

Fox Creek ECE: 40 students (2 classrooms)
Hoose ECE: 80 students (4 classrooms)
Pepper Ridge: 20 students (1 classroom) Program discontinued for 2006-07 year.

Early Speech

Oakdale: 32 students (1 classroom) Program now located at Sugar Creek.

Totals 332 students and 12 classrooms

We assume that if a centralized early learning center is established, the classrooms currently used for these programs at various elementary schools will be freed up to handle elementary enrollment growth. In addition, speech and occupational therapy space would also be freed up.

Current issues

Currently, very little excess classroom capacity exists in Unit 5. Historically, ECE and Pre-K classes have been frequently moved to whichever buildings have enough space to handle them. This leads to the teachers of these classes never getting integrated well into the faculty of the elementary school in which they are housed because they are only there for a few years before being moved again.

Limited space is also an issue for special services such as speech and occupational therapy.

The vast majority of students in elementary schools are K-5, leaving a limited amount of time available for elementary principals to focus on the unique needs of early learning students. In addition, many of the children in the ECE and at-risk classes will transition to other schools for kindergarten. The classes and teachers tend to be moved to different buildings every few years and building based assessments such as standardized test score averages and school report cards focus on the elementary grades.

Integration with peers who do not qualify for ECE or Pre-K will be necessary in either a centralized or decentralized model as mandated by "No Child Left Behind."

Advantages of centralization (in no particular order) based on feedback from Unit 5 administrators, teachers, and speech and occupational therapists:

- Centralization of services- more effective use of staff such as social workers and speech therapists. Reduced staff travel time allows more time for working directly with students.
- Curriculum oriented to age group along with increased collaboration among teachers
- Potential opportunity to integrate or blend ECE, At-Risk & Head Start
- Transportation would be more centralized
- Opportunity to provide parent programming
- Environment could be tailored to the needs of the 3-5 age group
- Better enables a common philosophy of approach in teaching this age group
- Activities and the calendar could be tailored to this age group, avoiding interruptions such as assemblies and daily announcements that do not impact this age group
- The school's physical environment could be tailored to the specific needs of this age group, including playgrounds and physical education equipment
- Support staff including music, physical education, and IMC could focus on a developmental curriculum
- Teachers could stay in the same building indefinitely, without being moved every few years due to space considerations
- A full-time administrator could focus specifically on the unique needs of this age range
- Currently, pre-K programs often don't "fit" well in elementary buildings. Staff members are not included in curriculum issues and have separate specialists. Even starting & ending times are different.
- Better collaboration among teachers
- Centralization appears to be broadly supported by teachers, staff, and administrators involved with the ECE and Pre-K programs
- Would allow screenings for eligibility for these programs to occur at school. All Pre-K screenings are done at the Heartland Community Church, requiring that equipment and staff relocate in order to conduct screenings. Pre-K at risk does 60 screenings in August, ECE does 30-a-day twice a year plus periodic referral screenings.
- Speech and occupational therapists are currently crowded into inadequate space. Additional space would improve learning in these therapies.
- Many ECE students face sensory difficulties but a sensory room for occupational therapy cannot be justified in the current decentralized environment. It may be cost effective in a centralized model.
- Efficiencies in sharing specialized equipment (such as assisted communication devices) among ECE students.
- A central location and building identity is likely to increase awareness of these programs. Now they are somewhat hidden away within various elementary schools.
- In a visit to Indian Prairie Preschool in Naperville (District 204), cost savings due to centralization in 1998 were seen in the following areas: staffing costs including custodial staff and administrative, travel time for support staff, interpreters, substitutes, supplies, screening staff, utilities and rent.
- Indian Prairie Preschool's 1998 centralization has resulted in a large PTA organization resulting from the convenience of having all the students and staff under one roof.

Disadvantages of centralization (in no particular order) based on feedback from Unit 5 administrators, teachers, and speech and occupational therapists:

- Depending on the location of the center, long bus rides may be an issue
- Fewer opportunities to integrate early learning students with kindergarten age students
- Area staff (music, physical education, IMC) would need to be hired
- It may be difficult to financially justify all specialists (such as school nurse)
- A full-time administrator would be needed for the center
- Aligning the curriculum with the kindergarten curriculum is easier in a decentralized model
- In many districts early-childhood and elementary educators lack common ground on how to teach young children. By housing Pre-K into the K-5 schools, there is a potential to create a unified vision and strategy.
- Cramped space currently is mostly a disadvantage but it does allow speech and occupational therapists to observe each other and pick up helpful techniques

Impact of centralization on transportation:

Greater than 98% of ECE and Pre-K students take advantage of bus transportation. The district is required to provide bus transportation to this age group regardless of the distance from home to school. As of May 1, 2006, sixty-six bus trips were required for these students. No matter where an early learning center would be located, it would be unlikely to have a major impact on transportation costs. However, it would have an impact of length of bus ride depending the location of the student's home. Currently the district sets a limit of a 40 minute-maximum bus ride for 3-4 year olds. The grant that funds the at-risk program mandates student transportation.

Current Student Enrollment:

Type	Enrollment
Pre-K	185-200
Early Childhood	115
Total	304*

*Transportation number 11/15/06

Special Bus Routes as of 11/15/06:

School	AM	Noon	PM
Brigham	2	3	1
Colene Hoose	11	9	10
Fairview	2	4	2
Fox Creek	4	6	2
Oakdale	2	3	2
Sugar Creek	1	2	0
Total	22	27	17

Type of Classes by School:

School	Pre-K At Risk 4-day (AM/PM)	Pre-K At Risk 5-day (AM/PM)	Early Childhood # of sections	# of Dedicated Classrooms	# of Dedicated Staff*
Brigham		1/1		1	3
Hoose			8	4	17
Fairview	2/2			2	4
Fox Creek	1/1		4	3	12
Oakdale	1/1			1	4
Sugar Creek			4	1	4
Total				12	44

*Includes Teachers, TA, Social Workers, School Psychologists, Dedicated Speech

Summary of research on benefits of pre-K programs:

National Institute for Early Education Research study, 2005.

Children who attend high quality state preschool programs with well-trained teachers make significant academic gains, regardless of their families' economic status.

Gains for 4-year-olds in the five pre-K programs studied were far higher than those produced by the federal Head Start program. The difference in outcomes points to the likely effects of higher qualifications and higher compensation of teachers in pre-K programs integrated into school districts. Each of the five programs studied required all pre-K teachers to have a teaching certificate and a bachelor's degree.

National Institute of Child Health and Human Development's Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development

Benefits children experience by being exposed to high-quality preschool programs, such as higher math, vocabulary, and memory skills, appear to remain at least through 3rd grade.

However, the benefits of center-based care apparently don't extend to social development. Behavior problems, such as mother-child conflicts and some poor conduct in school, were still detected in 3rd grade among children who had spent more, rather than less, time in center-based programs.

National Center for Education Statistics' Early Childhood Longitudinal Study

Cognitive gains evident among children, particularly those from the poorest families, who attended a center-based preschool program the year before kindergarten.

Also found poor social behavior, such as bullying and aggression, and a lack of motivation to take part in classroom activities.

Georgia:

Children who attended pre-K made statistically significant gains on four tests of cognitive development, reaching or exceeding national norms on three. A direct

comparison of pre-K and Head Start found that pre-K students experienced larger gains in cognitive development, possibly because their teachers are better educated.

Oklahoma

All types of children improved their pre-reading, pre-writing, and pre-math skills. Children who attended a pre-K program experienced test score gains of seven months for letter/word identification, six months for spelling, and four months for applied problems. The strong results may reflect the fact that all pre-K teachers in Oklahoma must have a college degree, must be early-childhood certified, and must be paid at public school wage levels.

National Center for Early Development and Learning, 2001

Studied 240 state-funded pre-K programs in six states. Discusses classroom quality as a combination of structural quality and process quality. Structural quality refers to factors such as class size, teacher and administrator training, length of the day and year, use of a standard curriculum, and availability of supplementary services. Process quality looks at the actual opportunities and experiences children have on a day-to-day basis in the classroom. While many programs in the study had good structural quality, they lagged in process quality.

The study's findings supported full-day programs. In part-day programs, routine activities (arrival/departure, snacks/meals) can quickly absorb much time, leaving less for activities in learning centers or small-group teaching activities.

Physical environment of pre-K centers and classrooms

We recognize that financial and classroom space resources are scarce in Unit 5. Here we present a research-based summary of the ideal physical environment for early learners, recognizing that resource constraints will limit achievement of this ideal.

Pre-K centers and classrooms should be designed to meet the special needs of 3-5 year olds. Due to the unique demands of this age group, it is often easier to construct an Early-Childhood Education Center specifically devoted to these students than to retro-fit current spaces to accommodate them. Among the specific concerns are:

Classroom sizes should be larger than those for older children - generally 1,250 square feet compared with 900 square feet - to allow more space for larger materials, educational play and greater movement. Instead of 25 to 35 chairs and desks with perimeter storage, an early-education room is likely to contain chairs, tables and modular storage, as well as a toy kitchen, puppet theater, Lego table, painting easels and an area for manipulatives such as puzzles or blocks. Each classroom should have toilets accessed from within the classroom and sinks for art cleanup as well as for handwashing.

Generally, Early-Childhood Education Centers would not have specialized classrooms for subjects such as art or science, so each classroom must be designed to accommodate varied activities. A classroom may have two teachers or a teacher and a full-time aide for every 20 (at-risk) or 10 (ECE) children. The room's flexibility allows the teachers to arrange their rooms to meet their specific goals and to change the layout of the room periodically..

Early-education centers do not need gymnasiums; instead, there should be gross-motor rooms, which are smaller and more welcoming than a standard gym. These rooms should include game lines on the floor for relay races and other games appropriate to the age group.

Moving 20 three-year-olds from place to place is not always easy. Circulation throughout the building should be kept simple and each new area should be clearly marked. Although children should never be left to navigate the building on their own, clear organization of spaces increases their comfort with building transitions and clearly signals a change in activities.

Surveillance is an important factor for Early-Childhood centers, which should have the ability to monitor anyone entering or leaving the building.

Outdoor play is essential to a preschool curriculum. All outdoor play areas should have convenient access to toilets and drinking water.

Traffic control is critical. Pickup and drop-off areas must be safely situated and sufficiently large. Although children should never be permitted to go to this area by themselves, the drop-off area should allow them to reach the building without crossing a street.

Resources:

- Jacobson, L. (2005). Report details benefits of pre-k programs. *Education Week*. 25(15). 19.
- Jacobson, L. (2005). Studies find payoff, drawbacks persist for pupils in preschool and child care. *Education Week*. 25(10). 12.
- Gormley, W. (2005). The Universal pre-k bandwagon. *Phi Delta Kappan*. 87(3). 246-249.
- Clifford, R., Bryant, D. & Early, D. (2005). A pre-k programs status report. *The Education Digest*. 71(2). 50-53.
- Gilliam, W. & Zigler, E. (2004). State efforts to evaluate the effects of pre-k: 1977 to 2003. Child Study Center, Yale University. New Haven, Conn.
- Henry, G. Gordeon, C. & Rickman, D. (2004). Comparing universal and targeted policies: The quality and outcomes of alternative early education policies. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management, Atlanta, 29 October.
- Ladders of Learning: Fighting Fade-Out by Advancing PK-3 Alignment. Available at http://www.newamerica.net/events/2006/fighting_fade_out_in_education
- Principals Lead the Way for PK-3: Early Investment, Strong Alignment, Better Results. Foundation for Child Development, New York, N.Y. Available at http://www.naesp.org/client_files/PK3/framing.pdf
- National Institute for Early Education Research, New Brunswick, N.J. <http://nieer.org/>
- National Association of Elementary School Principals, Alexandria, VA. <http://www.naesp.org/search/Search.do?query=pre-kindergarten>
- New School Foundation, Seattle, WA <http://www.newschoolfoundation.org/index.html>
- Allision, N. (1999). Pre-K possibilities. *American School & University*. 71(12). 106-110.

Resources for best practices in Early Learning Centers:

The FirstSchool Initiative: Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute,
Chapel Hill, N.C. <http://www.fpg.unc.edu/~firstschool/>
Child and Learning Centers, Independence, MO. <http://www.indep.k12.mo.us/>
Mattapan Early Education Center, Boston, MA
<http://boston.k12.ma.us/schools/RC209.pdf>
Perry Preschool Project
<http://www.highscope.org/Research/PerryProject/perrymain.htm>
Abecedarian Project
<http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/programsthatwork/18abecedarian.htm>

Recommendation B:

Given the current restraints on classroom space and financial resources in the context of continued enrollment growth in the district, Unit 5 should convert the current Brigham Elementary School building into a centralized early learning center if a referendum in 2008 passes and if a new elementary school is built at the Cedar Ridge site east of Brigham Elementary School.

Rationale:

Currently, no single school building has the excess classroom capacity to adequately meet the needs of the ECE and Pre-K programs and their support services (such as speech and occupational therapy and social workers).

The Eugene Field school building has been rejected by the district as a possible site for an Early Learning Center for two primary reasons. First, the building has only 10 classrooms available. At least 12 classrooms are necessary to meet current enrollments in the ECE and Pre-K programs. Secondly, according to Town of Normal building codes, the district would only be allowed to have students on the main floor. To meet minimum ADA standards, the building would require an elevator. According to initial assessments, an elevator would need to be installed on the outside of the building.

Another possibility considered by the committee was to convert Glenn Elementary School into an Early Learning Center by dispersing the current Glenn attendance area among Fairview, Oakdale, and Colene Hoose Elementary Schools. Glenn was considered due to its central location and proximity to other elementary schools. This possibility was rejected for several reasons. Glenn has only 14 classrooms available and 12 classrooms are currently needed for early learner programs so there would be almost no room for growth. Also, many Glenn students walk to school and would have to ride a bus to other schools. Further, closing a school always brings resistance from parents.

Building a new facility dedicated to early learners was also considered. An advantage of building a new facility would be that space could be customized to meet the unique needs of the

Early Learning Center. However, the cost of a new building is estimated at \$10-18 million and since such a center would serve only about 400 students each year, a referendum to build a new facility would be unlikely to gain broad support from the community.

With the projected growth in enrollment of Brigham Elementary School as the Cedar Ridge subdivision begins to fill with families, the Brigham building will not be able to house all the students within a few years. Due to the steep terrain behind Brigham, expansion is not feasible. The district has made public the need for new elementary schools at the Grove at Kickapoo Creek and Cedar Ridge sites in the *Preparing for Growth Progress Report* in January, 2007. All three referendum scenarios presented include these two elementary schools. Because the Cedar Ridge site is less than a mile east of Brigham School, a new elementary school at that site will leave an empty building at Brigham. By consolidating at-risk pre-K and ECE programs into an Early Learning Center at Brigham, additional classrooms at other elementary schools would be freed up to absorb growing enrollments in other areas of the district.

Brigham has 20 classrooms available, enough to handle current needs and provide room for further growth. In the years until all that classroom space is needed for instruction, community outreach services could be integrated within the building as suggested in **Recommendation D** below. Converting Brigham to an Early Learning Center would not displace any students.

The Brigham option is not perfect, however. The far south location is less ideal than a more centralized location and could lead to longer bus rides than some students currently have. Some renovations would be required to the building to make it suitable for the early learner age group. Estimates for light remodeling of the classrooms, such as installing bathrooms and sinks, are about \$15 - \$25 per square foot. Little major remodeling is expected to be needed for tasks such as moving walls at an estimated cost of \$50 per square foot. By comparison, building a new facility would cost an estimated \$125 per square foot.

Recommendation C:

If the district does not begin building a new school at the Cedar Ridge site by summer of 2008, Unit 5 should seek external funding from government and foundation sources in order to build an early learning center or convert an existing structure into a centralized early learning center.

Rationale:

As noted in **Recommendation A**, the benefits of centralizing services into an Early Learning Center are significant enough that even if a referendum would fail the district should try to create such a center. The political and funding climate for pre-K education appears to be favorable at this time. In fact, the district should explore state funding to help offset some of the cost of an Early Learning Center whether or not the referendum passes.

Illinois began the Pre-kindergarten (Pre-k) program for children at-risk for academic failure in 1985. This program was designed to help three and four year olds prepare to be successful in school. The Early Childhood Block Grant was enacted in 1997 to serve children in the first

three years of life. This grant recognized that learning begins at birth.

In the Illinois Fiscal budget for 2007, a \$45 million increase has been allocated for the Childhood Block Grant. The Governor has proposed another 45 million over the next three to five years. There is also a \$3 million increase in the Early Intervention program for children under age three with significant developmental delays or disabilities.

Public Act 094-1054 (Preschool for All) ensures access to voluntary pre-school for all three and four year olds. This bill follows the lines of Illinois Pre-K and at-risk program. The bill amends the school codes to authorize the use of state funds for pre-kindergarten services for children who are not defined as “at-risk.” Children who are at risk of school failure are the first priority, followed by middle-income children and, finally, all other children whose parents want them to participate. When the program is fully implemented, it is estimated that 190,000 children in Illinois will have access to voluntary, high-quality pre-school.

Adele Simmons, Vice Chair and Senior Executive of Chicago Metropolitan 2020 states “ This expansion of early learning will bring rewards very soon as more and more children enter kindergarten to learn, a significant benefit to students and teachers in all grades... There also are long-term benefits to society. Every dollar invested today in early learning will save \$7 that future taxpayers otherwise would have to spend on remedial education, social programs and even corrections, and early learning will give future Illinois businesses the advantage of more skilled workers.”

Recommendation D:

Once an early learning center opens, any excess space in the building should be utilized to provide, in cooperation with local public and social service agencies, services targeted toward the families of those children served by the early learning center, specifically families of children identified as at-risk and families of children with developmental disabilities. Integration of students with peers who are not eligible for ECE or at-risk programs must also be accomplished as mandated by "No Child Left Behind."

Rationale:

Aside from having a large number of families targeted by community agencies located in one place at an Early Learning Center, many additional services geared towards families of the at-risk students can build the foundation for success at future grade levels. Services could include but are not limited to:

- Developmental, educational, and health (dental, vision, etc.) screenings
- Immunization clinics
- Information and assistance in applying for the state’s All Kids Health Insurance program
- Illinois State Department of Family and Consumer Sciences
- McLean County Extension
- Parenting classes

- Classes (or game nights) focused on how to play or interact with children
- Counseling
- GED
- Referral services to other governmental services such as. the Crisis Nursery
- Nutrition classes
- Tutors and interpreters to assist parents who do not read or speak English
- Teacher conferences/meetings in the evenings when these parents might be better able to attend
- Resource Library for parents including information for ECE parents
- Private day care on-site, potentially reducing mid-day busing needs

The visit to Indian Prairie Preschool in Naperville (District 204) revealed a method of integrating students with peers who are not eligible for ECE or at-risk programs by opening classrooms to 3-5 year olds in the community for a fee. That school has over half of its students coming from outside the ECE and at-risk programs providing for an inclusive educational experience at the pre-K level.

Recommendation E:

Unit 5 should begin in the 2007-2008 school year to more fully track over time the progress of students served by pre-K/at-risk and ECE programs. The technology to do so is already present in the district but is currently underutilized. Tracking prior to establishment of an Early Learning Center will allow for assessment of some educational outcomes in both decentralized and centralized service delivery models for early learners.

Rationale:

Per discussion with Loren Baele, Unit 5's Director of Technology, the Skyward system can meet most tracking requirements. In fact, student tracking related to No Child Left Behind is required. Our committee simply recommends increasing the type of information currently being monitored and increasing the analysis of that data as one outcome measure of these programs for early learners. Skyward has a specific module for special education that could be utilized if the district determines that information needs warrant the module.