

Underenrollment in School-Based Early Learning Programs and Kindergarten

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Audience

Administrators of school-based early learning programs and elementary schools with programmatic (i.e., program design, service delivery, enrollment or supervising staff) or budgetary decision-making authority.

Purpose

This paper (1) documents the underenrollment in school-based early learning programs and kindergarten in school year 2020-21 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. (2) Outlines the impact that underenrollment may have on students, families, teachers, staff and schools. (3) Provides questions for consideration and programmatic options to consider to mitigate the risks and challenges of underenrollment facing districts and charter schools and their students and families in school year 2020-21.

Overview of Issue

Current Situation and Impact

Throughout the 2020-21 school year there have been numerous stories reporting a substantial and unparalleled drop in enrollment in schools due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This underenrollment is particularly pronounced

in early learning programs and kindergarten.¹ This could have an impact on cohorts of students for the next few years.

A review of enrollment data from school-based early learning programs and an analysis of Minnesota Department of Education kindergarten enrollment data confirms that Minnesota is experiencing a drop in enrollment. When thinking about the impact of families choosing not to enroll in a school-based early learning program or kindergarten, it is important to note that there are a variety of reasons that families may be choosing not to enroll their children. For many, these decisions are matters of health and safety.

Approaching underenrollment requires creative thinking and placing family and student concerns front and center. One notable finding from the First American School District Panel Survey includes, “Among a wide variety of school instructional and staffing matters, three widely shared concerns rose to the top for district leaders for the 2020–2021 school year: disparities in students’ opportunities to learn during the COVID-19 pandemic, students’ social and emotional learning needs, and insufficient funding to cover staff.”²

The early childhood years are an important time of rapid growth and learning. The question that school administrators and educational leaders face is how to support our youngest learners during a time filled with disruptions and uncertainty. Considerable evidence demonstrates that a child’s brain develops the most rapidly during their early years. During this pandemic, when children are not attending programs as they have in the past, our young learners may be missing important early childhood screening as well as learning and referral opportunities during this most critical period of development and learning.

While the threats and risks to opportunities for early intervention and learning are real, there are also opportunities for schools and community partners to identify and implement creative solutions for instruction and programming (i.e., inside and outside the classroom). Individualizing supports and programming for children and their families will be more important than ever.

Underenrollment Data and Findings

Below is (1) a summary of underenrollment that early learning programs are experiencing; (2) a summary of potential impacts of underenrollment on children and families, schools, classrooms and teaching staff; and (3) dilemmas being faced.

Early learning programs like Early Childhood Screening, Help Me Grow, Early Childhood Special Education programs (Part B 619 and Part C), School Readiness, Voluntary Prekindergarten and School Readiness Plus provide both learning and intervention opportunities for children and families from birth into kindergarten. All are experiencing a decrease in enrollment.

¹<https://www.npr.org/2020/10/09/920316481/enrollment-is-dropping-in-public-schools-around-the-country>

² https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA956-1.html

From school year 2019-20 to 2020-21:

- A 15 percent drop in statewide enrollment³ in Early Childhood Special Education programs which serve children from birth to age 5.
 - Early Childhood Special Education Part C (serving birth to three year olds) experienced a 20 percent drop in enrollment.
 - Early Childhood Special Education Part B 619 (serving three to five year olds) experienced a 12 percent drop in enrollment.
- A 12 percent drop in enrollment across Voluntary Prekindergarten and School Readiness Plus school-based prekindergarten programs.
- A 9 percent drop in statewide kindergarten enrollment overall. For Districts and Charters:
 - 31 percent had an increase in kindergarten enrollment
 - 5 percent had no change in kindergarten enrollment
 - 63 percent saw a decrease in kindergarten enrollment
 - Highest loss was 68 percent where the average loss was 17 percent⁴
- Anecdotal evidence indicates that School Readiness and Early Childhood Family Education have experienced a drop in enrollment
- A 26 percent drop in early childhood screenings occurred between school year 2018-2019 to 2019-2020.
- A 30-35 percent drop in referrals to school districts through the Help Me Grow.

Referrals to school districts through Help Me Grow for children with developmental concerns significantly decreased from spring 2019 to spring 2020 (the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic). When comparing the data from fall 2019 to fall 2020, there was an average decrease of 22 percent for programs that received ten or more referrals in fall 2019 and a decrease of 16.2 percent for districts who received 100 or more referrals. Data collected over time, indicates that the number of referrals received through the Help Me Grow system has rebounded somewhat, but has not yet returned to pre-pandemic levels. It is important to note that this data does not reflect referrals made directly to schools districts outside the Help Me Grow system.

Statewide data also shows that first, second and third grades are experiencing drops in enrollment, though smaller than kindergarten. Enrollment in first grade dropped by 2.3 percent, second grade dropped by 3.3 percent and third grade by 2.5 percent.

This unparalleled drop in enrollment will be felt by children, families, teachers, educators, administrators, child care staff and community members in different ways.

Beyond supporting the educational development of children and adolescents, schools play a critical role in addressing racial and social inequity. As such, it is critical to reflect on the

³ Early Childhood Special Education enrollment data relies on MARSS enrollment status as of December 1, 2020.

⁴ Districts/charter schools with enrollment of less than 10 kindergartners were not included as enrollment loss disproportionately impacted the percent of kindergartners enrolled.

*differential impact the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated school closures have had on different racial and ethnic groups and populations facing inequities.*⁵

Prior to problem solving, it is important to consider why there was such a precipitous drop in enrollment. Qualitative data and anecdotal information was obtained through informal conversations with school-based early learning program administrators and other school and district-level staff. There is acknowledgment of the absence of a more formal way of collecting this information without an additional burden on staff. As mentioned earlier, there are a variety of reasons that families may be choosing not to enroll their children. Potential reasons for underenrollment include:

- Potential concerns of families:
 - Health, safety and well-being concerns
 - Placing their child or a family member at risk of exposure to COVID-19
 - Knowledge of a pre-existing health or medical condition that places them at greater risk from COVID-19
 - Concern that in-person learning will not be provided in accordance to departments of Education and Health guidance placing the well-being of children and their families at risk
 - Lack of trust in the safety or utility of a COVID-19 vaccine⁶
 - Concerns with learning model (not health and safety related)
 - Distance learning does not meet the needs of their child so chose not to enroll
 - Lack of or challenges using internet or technology
 - Challenges providing support for virtual learning due to other demands on family schedule
 - Not wanting to move back and forth between learning models or desire for a single consistent teacher
 - Families disliking their learning model(s) and choose to homeschool, enroll or remain in a non-public school, a child care program or stay at home
 - Lack of or limited school-aged care options

Potential Impacts

- On children and families
 - Reduced exposure to school, teachers, curriculum, peers and other services (e.g., special education)
 - Missed developmental and learning opportunities that increase inequities
 - Greater or reduced resiliency of child and family
 - Reduced screening opportunities and slower identification of needs

⁵ <https://services.aap.org/en/pages/2019-novel-coronavirus-covid-19-infections/clinical-guidance/covid-19-planning-considerations-return-to-in-person-education-in-schools/>

⁶ <https://www.nationalacademies.org/news/2021/01/informing-the-new-administration-ending-the-covid-19-pandemic-and-the-path-to-recovery?>

- o Families may request to enroll their child in school-based prekindergarten even though the child is age-eligible for kindergarten
- On schools and districts
 - o Families may request to enroll their child in school-based prekindergarten even though the child is age-eligible for kindergarten
 - o Families may request that their child skip kindergarten and enroll in first grade since kindergarten is not mandatory
 - o Funding decreases when funding is dependent on enrollment (federal and state)
 - o Staffing and caseloads may need to be adjusted depending on enrollment and student needs (for special educators and related service providers)
 - o Increased need for mental health supports
 - o Need for more physical space in hybrid learning model and to account for social distancing
 - o Reduced screening and identification processes could create a back log of appointments and children who are missed
 - o Students with potential disabilities who have not been referred or evaluated and potential backlog of those waiting for evaluation
 - o Cost and supply of personal protective equipment for staff as needed for in-person learning if pandemic continues
 - o Uncertainty about how and where to reach potential incoming students and families
 - o Potential increased demand for inclusive preschool placements for kindergarten-eligible children on Individualized Education Programs retained in prekindergarten programming by parents
- On classrooms and teaching staff
 - o Class sizes may increase or decrease
 - o There could be a broader age range of students in one grade
 - o There may be students with unidentified disabilities who have not received services or missed intervention
 - o Teachers may be assigned to a new grade level and need to learn a new curriculum
 - o There could be short timelines to implement new teaching practices
 - o Opportunities to learn outdoors could be needed or expanded
 - o Students may need social-emotional support in ways not seen before

Impact

The First Dilemma of Kindergarten in the time of COVID-19: Delaying Kindergarten and Preschool

Districts and charter schools are confronted with the reality of families choosing to delay the start of kindergarten for a variety of reasons. People are often concerned about social and emotional development and the general maturity of children. Sometimes families may choose to delay a year as a way to ensure their child's success in either sports or academics. The decisions made by families provide districts and charter schools with challenges including decreased revenue, space and capacity issues, and appropriate staffing assignments. State funding for prekindergarten is targeted to children with risk factors and is not available to children once they are

age eligible for kindergarten. Voluntary Prekindergarten and School Readiness Plus provide general education funding to children one year prior to kindergarten eligibility. School readiness and Early Learning Scholarship funding is available to children who are 3- and 4-years old, but is not available to children once they become age eligible for kindergarten. To address these challenges, there are key questions for consideration by schools and others to pose to families.

1. How will families pay for an additional year of preschool for children who are age-eligible for kindergarten as there are no public funding sources available?
2. How do districts and charters prevent unfunded prekindergarten from becoming an equity issue for families who are unable to pay tuition for their kindergarten-aged children?
3. How will the child be spending their time during that year if not in kindergarten? Will it be in a play-based environment with other children, where the child will be building self-regulation skills and learning the foundational skills for reading? What are they missing by not attending the kindergarten class? Making new friends? New interests and skills?
4. While delaying entrance may seem like an appropriate decision in the spring, how much will the child develop and learn between spring when the kindergarten decision is made and the following fall? Most children develop rapidly during this time and in the first few months of kindergarten.
5. Are the parents hoping that by delaying a year their child will be more successful in later grades? The research is unclear that there is a uniform or long-term benefit to delaying a year. The research is clear that delaying kindergarten entrance is not an option for families living in or above poverty due to the financial family burden of child care.
6. Will this child struggle as a result of not being with their age cohort since children who are delayed in entering kindergarten mature, they may develop more rapidly than their peers?
7. How will the child be provided a predictable environment like kindergarten (that also prepares them for the structure of school)?
8. How will delaying a year impact a child's career costs since it reduces opportunities for that year to accrue increased salary or benefits?
9. How will data be used to make a decision on delaying kindergarten?

The Second Dilemma of Kindergarten in the Time of COVID-19: Retention

Retaining students in kindergarten may seem like a logical way to address learning challenges that many, especially young students like kindergarteners, have experienced this year. The assumption with retention is the gaps in learning will automatically be filled simply by the opportunity to be exposed to the information again. Growth in self-regulation and emotional development is also attributed to retention. There is no definitive benefit to retention in kindergarten. In fact, many research studies show that retention creates greater challenges for kindergarteners who are retained.

- Kindergarteners who are retained because of math and literacy scores did not show gains; in fact, the study shows students would have learned more in literacy and math had they been promoted⁷.
- Negative academic effects on students retained in kindergarten were identified, while at the same time no negative effects were identified on their promoted peers. It is estimated that children who were retained would have shown greater growth had they been promoted⁷.
- Children’s developmental outcomes were negatively affected by grade retention in kindergarten. This was true no matter their characteristics and the expected developmental trajectory. These consequences were often long lasting⁸.
- Any academic advantage gained by repeating kindergarten diminishes over time and eventually disappears⁹.

Given the costs and negative effects of retention, making available additional supports for kindergarten teachers and students, as well as ensuring time is given to supporting students’ social and emotional needs may be a good alternative to retention. An emphasis on differentiated instruction will go a long way to ensuring each student learns what they need to learn (this topic is more specifically addressed later in this document).

Questions to Ask

1. Will parents want their age-eligible child who was not in kindergarten in a prekindergarten program? (No public prekindergarten funding is available for children who are age-eligible for kindergarten.)
2. Is there a process in place for districts or charter schools to determine grade placement? Does the district have capacity to do this using the current process? Will the process need to be revised?
3. Will there be increased demand for inclusive preschool spots for kindergarten-eligible children on Individualized Education Programs retained in prekindergarten programming by parents?
4. Will districts and charters have the capacity to complete early childhood screening for the growing number of kindergartners or first graders who missed it at an earlier age?
5. Has there been a dialogue or conversation with families where they can express their concerns and the school can respond?

⁷ Hong, G., & Raudenbush, S. W. (2005) *Effects of kindergarten retention policy on children’s cognitive growth in reading and mathematics*. Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis Fall 2005, Vol. 27, No. 3, pp. 205–224. Also cited in ASCD Research Brief, November 28, 2005, Vol. 3, No. 18.

⁸ Pagani, L., Tremblay, R. E., Vitaro, F., Boulerice, B. & McDuff, P. (2001) Effects of grade retention on academic performance and behavioral development. *Development and Psychopathology*, 13 (2001), 297–315.

⁹ Vandecandelaere, M., Vansteelandt, S., De Fraine, B., & Van Damme, J. (2015). The effects of early grade retention: Effect modification by prior achievement and age. *Journal of School Psychology*.

6. What supports can the school or district provide to support a student's growth and development, especially over the summer?
7. How is the child's learning and development being monitored and assessed, and how is instruction and supports informed by that information?

Prenatal through Grade Three as a Framework for Community Solutions

Prenatal to Third Grade (P3)¹⁰ is a systems approach that focuses on the alignment and coherence of local practices inside and outside of early learning settings. When communities form relationships between early learning programs located within school and community settings, this collaboration helps form a strong foundation from which communities can find solutions that support children and families throughout the early years of development.

Strategies

1. Make 0-4 Census a foundational element. Rather than collecting census numbers for state reporting, use census data to develop a comprehensive source of all of the young children in the community. Use this to learn not only who lives in the community, but also their needs and access to resources. (Data-Driven Improvement)
2. Utilize Early Childhood Family Education programs for family engagement. Early Childhood Family Education parenting educators can conduct outreach and build relationships with families. They can connect families with community resources and support families in making decisions that align with their needs. (Family Engagement)
3. Create maps that identify all organizations and services that work with children and families in the community. Work with all adults who affect the learning and development of children (e.g., parents, relatives, health care providers, child care providers and teachers). Reach out and build relationships with partners and potential partners. (Cross-Sector Work)
4. Ask important questions. Are children in the community participating in high-quality learning opportunities? Do they have access? What was implemented, or may be implemented, that can improve the learning experiences for children and their families, especially those who may have been impacted disproportionately by the pandemic? (Learning Environments)

¹⁰ <https://nationalp-3center.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/P-3-Framework.pdf>

5. Take time to carefully identify all children who will be entering kindergarten. Reach out to families who may not have enrolled. Identify children who may benefit from high-quality summer programming and services. To align programming for each child, look back by review incoming students' information (e.g., files, assessments, portfolios) prior to start of school year and provide support going forward by meeting with students' next-year teachers to discuss and plan. (Continuity and Pathways)

Maintaining and Building Relationships with Families and Children

Students' success heavily depends upon the depth of relationships and supports provided by their families, schools and communities. With the current uncertainties created by the pandemic, families of young children and schools are struggling with questions as they think about enrollment for the next school year. These uncertainties and concerns present an opportunity for home, school and community partners to build deeper, more meaningful and long-lasting relationships that help meet the needs of all children and families. Use community data to better understand who the residents are and what their needs might be. Then use multiple strategies to being the relationship building needed to effectively build the relationships on which enrollment can be built.

In *A Marketing Plan for Effectively Communicating with Parents*¹¹ outreach is considered, "outmoded as an effective marketing strategy for diverse parents. Emanating from outside communities, outreach can be perceived as deficit-based and judgmental." The article suggests instead that in-reach is used as an alternative as it implies relationship building and community organizing from the inside, with and by community members. Trust, two-way communication and technology were the key ingredients Minnesota parents identified to effectively market or "in-reach" with parents.

Questions to Ask

How to Use Data to Inform Enrollment Efforts

1. How are districts and charters using the annual Early Childhood Family Education Community Needs Assessment, Voluntary Prekindergarten or School Readiness Plus Measuring Impact data to inform outreach and enrollment efforts? How could districts and charters use the needs assessment process to gather useful data?
2. Have data collection methods (e.g., interviews, surveys, focus groups) accurately captured a representative sample of family voice within the community? If not, how might districts and charters learn more? Who else in the community might have knowledge that would provide useful information?
3. Have survey and/or focus group information suggested certain methods or timelines that can shape communication and relationship-building practices with families?

¹¹ https://www.wilder.org/sites/default/files/imports/ChildCareAware_MarketingPlan_8-19.pdf

4. Have districts and charters collaborated with key community early childhood partners (e.g., Head Start, family and center-based childcare) and other stakeholders (e.g., public library, ethnic, multicultural or faith- and interest-based organizations) to share data and strategies for reaching all families with young children?

Build Relationships with Families on Trust and Two-Way Communication

1. How has reliable communication been established so families are able to receive and send information?
2. Have communication efforts focused on building two-way relationships? How could efforts be enhanced?
3. Have districts and charters developed a two-tiered communication system that increases interaction between the family and individual teachers as well as between families and district-level supports?
4. How are districts and charters connecting with and accommodating families with limited access to technology?
5. Has staff capacity been developed and family communication seen as a priority?
6. How will communication networks be established over the school year and maintained or increased throughout the summer?

Trust

- “Effective marketing strategies require time to overcome or prevent linguistic, racial, cultural, and geographic barriers and inequities many parents experience accessing needed information.”¹¹
- Trust and respectful relationships are the basis of effective communication. Districts and charters need to support and take sufficient time to develop trust and relationships with parents, intermediary organizations and communities.
- Integrate messages that are consistent and reinforce each other across all programs and systems to provide common information to parents.
- “Be aware that language about ‘quality’ can be off-putting and can taint the whole message as culturally biased information.”¹¹
- Connect with county agencies to have them promote programs with families they are working with directly.
- Connect with city councils and chambers of commerce to provide information at local activities offered throughout the spring and summer that are run by the city.
- Partner with local ethnic and multicultural organizations who already have relationships with families.

Two-Way Communication:

- “Two-way conversation involves delivering and discussing information as well as answering questions and seeking feedback.”¹¹
- An approach that allows interaction in order to clarify concepts and answer questions is the most effective. During the COVID-19 pandemic, this may mean offering virtual interactions in addition to phone if it is not possible to meet in-person.
- Meeting families in the community is more comfortable for families.
- Being present at community events is another way to connect with parents.
- Efforts should be coordinated by working with service organizations and other trusted sources of information such as teachers, child care providers, physicians, family support staff, houses of worship and others.

Technology

- Although cell phones are a primary or preferred way many parents access information, some parents are limited by the lack of internet services due to geographic or financial inaccessibility.
- Information sent by phone, email or text must be clear, short and to the point.
- “Immigrant parents and families whose home language is not English often stick within their own communities for information and may not use or trust social media or the internet.”¹¹
- Include communicating with parents through language-specific radio and television stations.

Coordinating with Enrollment Staff

As trust and relationships with families and communities are built, enrollment efforts become easier. Families, early childhood programs and E-12 enrollment staff should work together to ensure age-eligible children are enrolled. While the role early childhood programs play may vary from district to district, it should be clearly articulated and understood. For example, since Early Childhood Family Education is a program to provide parenting education to support children’s learning and development, staff can help families work through the concerns and questions they may have.

Enrollment efforts should focus on:

- Working with and supporting families so they have the knowledge and information to make the best learning decisions for their children and families. This includes helping families with transitions and developing partnerships throughout the community.
- Working within the E-12 system to ensure consistency throughout the enrollment process.

Strategies that help with enrollment efforts:

- Working with those in charge of monitoring and tracking enrollment within districts and charters.
- Expanding the role of the 0-4 Census to include communication to all families to inform and learn about enrollment options.
- Documenting future enrollment plans of those participating in early childhood programs.
- Developing relationships with other programs in the community to help families experience positive transitions.

Additional Screening Options

Early Childhood Screening is often the first experience parents have with a school district or charter and often leads to enrollment into prekindergarten, Early Childhood Family Education, Early Childhood Special Education, kindergarten and other programs. Early Childhood Screening plays a key role in identifying young children who may be at risk for potential health, developmental or social-emotional concerns. During the COVID-19 pandemic, face-to-face screenings were paused and created a backlog of needed screenings at this time.

Questions to Ask

1. How will districts and charters scale up screening in order to meet the increased demand not completed in school years 2019-2020 or 2020-2021?
2. Districts and charters may work with their administration to determine if CARES Act Funding: Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief¹² funding is available.
3. Districts and charters are encouraged to plan additional summer screening dates (including evenings and weekends) to offer more opportunities for children to complete their Early Childhood Screening requirement.
4. Districts and charters may explore ways to expand equitable communication and marketing to all families in their community. For example, partnering with ethnic and language specific radio or television stations.
5. Districts and charters may assure an up-to-date website, early childhood screening appointment information and census.
6. Districts and charters may collaborate with local Women, Infant and Children (WIC) who, with a release of information, may share information about new families moving into the community.

¹² <https://education.mn.gov/MDE/dse/health/covid19/cares/>

7. Further examples of equitable screening communication, marketing and outreach are recorded in trainings and webinars are on the Minnesota Department of Education Screening Professional Learning webpage¹³.

Summer Programming: Collaborations that Leverage Learning Opportunities

Summer is important for enrollment because it can offer opportunities and experiences for children that will help families become confident that their age-eligible child can begin prekindergarten or kindergarten as scheduled with their peers. Opportunities may exist within district- or charter-sponsored programs, or within other planned community programs and events.

Summer is an opportunity to collaborate with key community early childhood partners (e.g., Head Start, family- and center-based childcare) and other stakeholders (e.g., park and recreation activities, public library, faith- and interest-based organizations). Helping address loss of instructional time or missed learning opportunities and prepare children for success in school is a community effort.

Some children have spent the past year at home and may not have had much opportunity for social interaction with peers or experience a group setting. Surveying the program opportunities available within your community and sharing instructional resources or strategies that fit with the program type (e.g., sports, art, nature or recreation) and audience will strengthen each district's or charter's ability to improve the outcomes for children.

Questions to Ask

1. Who are the children in the community who would benefit the most from high-quality summer programming?
2. What programming and services can be provided that will ensure children are best prepared to be successful in kindergarten?
3. What type of support needs to be done by early childhood and kindergarten teachers to ensure schools are creating the best environment and structures to help students experience success?
4. How can the district or charter support families during the summer and leading into the school year?
5. What community partners should be involved?

When considering or planning summer programming opportunities, leaders should remember that students on Individualized Education Programs must have equal access. Appropriate supports should be provided to ensure that these children are able to participate in programs offered to early learners. In addition, children with

¹³ <https://education.mn.gov/MDE/dse/early/elprog/scr/ProfLearn>

disabilities who are determined to be eligible for Extended School Year by their Individualized Education Programs team may receive those services while participating in a general education preschool program, which could include summer programming.

Transition to Kindergarten

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected transition activities too since children and families may not be participating in early childhood programs as in previous years. It is critical for programs, districts, charters and families to work together to create smooth, successful transition opportunities.

The Minnesota Department of Education Kindergarten Transitions webpage¹⁴ has resources designed to support the development of comprehensive prekindergarten-to-kindergarten transition practices. These multi-dimensional materials provide guidance for bringing school and community partners together so that they can examine their current practices and formulate new transition strategies focused on building pathways and continuity for children and families. Relationships and opportunities created by strong programs that support families and their children's success in school is key.

Questions to Ask

1. What transition practices are currently in place to welcome all age eligible children and their families?
2. How will districts and charters actively build relationships this spring, summer and fall? How will information be sent, received and used by both teachers and families?
3. How will districts and charters establish connections between children's current settings (child care, home) and kindergarten in order to share information and create pathways as they transition to kindergarten?
4. How should transition practices be similar or different for families of children with identified disabilities?
5. Are there situations in which written consent from families is needed to include community partners in conversations to support transitions?
6. How do districts and charters develop a meaningful relationship and build trust with families during a vulnerable time for them and their child? How are the voices of families embedded in current transition planning?
7. How are districts and charters building communication and instructional frameworks that will interactively partner teachers and families? How will these strategies be implemented by teachers and benefit the students? The families?

¹⁴ <https://education.mn.gov/MDE/dse/early/highqualel/ktransi/index.htm>

8. What information about a child (interests, assessment data, attendance, or other information) can be shared with receiving kindergarten teachers?

Preparing Teachers

Children enrolling in prekindergarten or kindergarten in fall 2021 will arrive with a greater diversity of experiences from the past year: homelessness, hunger, changes in family composition and routine, grief, isolation, abuse, a lack of adult and/or peer interaction, fewer opportunities for play, a general sense of unpredictability and relentless stress. These experiences can interrupt physical development (including brain development) as well as learning. If a district or charter is offering a summer program, children who attend may have the same diversity of experiences.

Student Needs

While kindergarten and prekindergarten classrooms have always included students with differing developmental levels and experiences, 2021 may see much more diversity and many more students who have been challenged in the past year. Communicating with teachers who have previously worked with students or using professional learning community structures will be useful as teachers identify, refine and fine tune learning experiences to meet the needs of the students in their classrooms.

Teachers, who have also experienced challenges, must make every effort to create a predictable, safe space where students can learn and thrive. Attention to physical needs as well as emotional, social and psychological needs will require special efforts on the part of the teacher. Building relationships with students will be essential so that every student feels safe and becomes ready to engage in learning. Ways to build more predictability and a sense of safety in the classroom include:

- The classroom functions more slowly with fewer transitions
- The needs of each student are met (more sleep, more snacks or more spending the entire morning at the easel)
- Play is in abundance (with lots of dramatic play)
- Ample time outside

As relationships build, teachers can observe and assess the needs of students to understand their current developmental and learning level.

Planning for Each Student

Teachers can use formative authentic assessments and their knowledge of child development and learning will be key to meeting each student's needs. Identifying the building blocks, using learning progressions, setting learning goals, and observing and monitoring the learning trajectory will enable teachers to efficiently and effectively scaffold learning.

By using available information, differentiated teaching will ensure teachers can meet the needs of all students as well as of each student individually. Differentiated teaching creates the opportunity to plan for each student, then review the plans and identify the similarities and to create small groups with similar learning goals.

The Early Childhood Indicators of Progress: Minnesota's Early Learning Standards¹⁵ are a place to start with identifying learning goals. Since the standards display in an age/stage-based continuum, teachers can look to indicators in earlier ages/stages and begin to develop the knowledge and skill building blocks. Kindergarten teachers may also want to use the indicators to identify learning gaps in the three and four years that have precursor skills to kindergarten expectations.

Questions to Ask

1. Do teachers or teacher teams use assessment results to identify the learning goal/objective for each student?
2. Do teachers identify the key knowledge and skills that a student needs to acquire in order to reach that goal?
3. What are the instructional strategies for the classroom layout and large and small groups that will scaffold that knowledge and skills for each student?
4. Do the activities planned for each day use the instructional strategies already chosen to scaffold learning?

Classroom Models and Supports

As schools and their instructional teams plan for the upcoming school year, they may need to rethink and redesign learning opportunities and instructional models since enrollment, screening and referral data all showed a significant decrease in participation last year. This need is magnified since some parents decide to retain their age-eligible children for another year while others send their age-eligible child to school. Districts and charters will need to be prepared for both scenarios.

While parents choose what they consider the best option for their children, funding supports for children in Minnesota are largely based on established age-eligibility requirements for grade levels. On or by September 1, Voluntary Prekindergarten and School Readiness Plus students must be 4 years old. Kindergarten students must be 5 years old.

¹⁵ <https://education.mn.gov/MDE/dse/early/highqualel/ind/>

Strategies

1. Develop a stronger classroom support system through additional staffing or qualified volunteers. Consider using preschool staffing ratios in kindergarten classrooms (1:10 with a capped group size of 20).
2. Explore a partnership with a local 2- or 4-year institution of higher education with early childhood teacher preparation, nursing or social work programs who may have interest in developing clinical practice and opportunities for students.
3. Form co-teaching partnerships between early childhood special education and general education teachers. This practice encourages the use of a variety of teaching strategies that helps refine teaching methods and support student learning. Resources on co-teaching practices can be found at Virginia Department of Education's Training And Technical Assistance Center website¹⁶ and California State University-Chico School of Education's "Six Co-Teaching Strategies" document¹⁷.
4. Encourage team teaching between grade-level staff members. This approach can tap staff strengths and encourage the development and sharing of resources that increases the responsiveness of the classroom for student learning. Team teaching is also a way to build community between students and their families as the classroom climate is built around trust and relationships.
5. Consider having the current teacher lead their students into the next school year. This practice is called "looping" and offers many possibilities when considering that many teacher-student relationships have been formed remotely during a year of distance learning. Using looping, these two-dimensional relationships can be leveraged and act as a warm hand off for children as they enter unfamiliar classrooms and grade levels.
6. Explore mixed-age groupings in the early learning classrooms. Mixed-age groups can offer the opportunity for increased social and emotional engagement as both collaborative and independent learning is offered for students in this setting. In a mixed-age setting children can grow across multiple years in the same classroom, allowing for continuity in relationships with teachers and allowing the mastery of the content across time while removing focus on or fear of retention.
7. Consider continued distance learning or hybrid options for families that choose this type of learning model. This allows for families to remain enrolled in the district and engaged with the school community, while at the same time following instructional practices that have benefits to their family. Before making decisions related to online learning, consult Minnesota Department of Education guidance¹⁸ stipulating general

¹⁶ <https://ttac.odu.edu/early-childhood/co-teaching-in-early-childhood/>

¹⁷ https://www.csuchico.edu/soe/_assets/documents/six-co-teaching-strategies1.pdf

¹⁸ <https://education.mn.gov/MDE/dse/online/>

education funding reimbursement restrictions and current Executive Orders related to online or distance learning models for young children.

8. Increase the use of outdoor learning opportunities in terms of curriculum, space and building relationships. Outdoor learning spaces can be improved or redesigned to include not only gross motor, but also dramatic, constructive and creative play opportunities. A thoughtfully designed play-based outdoor learning space encourages using it as part of curriculum planning. Outdoor learning is enhanced through partnerships with the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, local parks and recreation staff, and locally trained master naturalists. Visit the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources' natural resources education¹⁹ website for information about resources and organizations that support outdoor learning.
9. Initiate project-based learning as a way to take learning outside and use the interests of students to develop meaningful and captivating topics for study. Students' natural curiosities lead them to questions about changing seasons, habitat and animals. Using a project-based integrated curriculum approach offers teachers a way to build skills, create relationships and include families.
10. Offer ongoing professional development activities and form Communities of Practice that will support the implementation of new or refined strategies. Embedded within all professional learning opportunities should be a focus on equity and knowledge about trauma-informed and Adverse Childhood Experiences Study²⁰ practices.

Conclusion

The ideas presented above have the possibility of emotionally supporting children as they move from lives influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic into learning settings in an expanded world. Educators facing short timelines for implementation of new ideas can find it stressful, but creating collaborations between staff and community members will leverage expertise and experience that is instrumental in creating learning spaces and opportunities that will welcome students and their families.

Resources that support this work can be found on the Minnesota Department of Education Supporting Students and Families COVID-19 Resources webpage²¹.

¹⁹ <https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/education/index.html>

²⁰ <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/index.html>

²¹ <https://education.mn.gov/MDE/dse/health/covid19/supstucovid19/MDE034167>