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Exemplary Preschool Community Partnership Case Study #2: Inclusion Model



School District 622

NORTH ST. PAUL | MAPLEWOOD | OAKDALE

Ready for tomorrow

This case study was developed by the Early Care and Education Consortium (ECEC) and is based on discussions with the U.S. Department of Education Office of Early Learning. It is part of a series of case studies designed to highlight 10 exemplary public-private community preschool partnerships in states and communities around the country. Each case study will be available at www.ececonsortium.org.

Executive Summary

When presented with the opportunity to establish more inclusive early childhood programs to serve children with disabilities, the North St Paul/Maplewood/Oakdale School District (District 622) formed a partnership with the New Horizon Academy Maplewood Center. The District's Early Learning Supervisor, Ruth Paisley, collaborated with New Horizon Academy Maplewood Center Director Kari Schmitz to develop a plan for how the two organizations could work together: The District would fund six part-time spaces in the program's younger preschool rooms, and provide on-site supplemental support from district staff—including special education teachers and therapists—during the hours the participating children attended.

In September 2014, six children with disabilities began participating in this partnership by attending the New Horizon Academy Maplewood Center from 9:15 to 11:45 a.m., Monday through Thursday. With the support of both the New Horizon Academy Maplewood Center and District 622, the children have access to a broad range of high-quality learning and support opportunities that promote their cognitive, social, and behavioral growth and development. And, all children are benefiting from building relationships within a diverse learning environment. The partnership allows for shared professional development and collaborative leadership between the New Horizon Academy Maplewood Center and District 622. The success of this collaboration has prompted the District to expand the number of children participating for the 2015-2016 school year.



The partnership between the New Horizon Academy Maplewood Center and District 622 is exemplary in its design and implementation because it:

- Promotes an inclusion model that provides children with disabilities with high-quality opportunities for cognitive, social, and behavioral growth and development.
- Demonstrates quality through accreditation by a nationally/internationally recognized accrediting entity and high ratings on the state's QRIS.
- Operates through a model of shared leadership jointly coordinated by district and program leaders.
- Provides shared professional development to district and program staff.
- Offers all children participating in the program the opportunity to develop relationships within a diverse learning environment.
- Builds the capacity for the local school district to serve children through leveraging existing resources of high-quality community child care providers.

For more information on high-quality inclusion programs for young children, please see the [“Policy Statement on Inclusion of Children with Disabilities in Early Childhood Programs,”](#) released jointly by the Departments of Education (ED) and Health and Human Services (HHS) on September 14, 2015, which states that all young children with disabilities should have access to inclusive high-quality early childhood programs, where they are provided with individualized and appropriate support in meeting high expectations.

State and Local Early Childhood System Landscape

In 2011, Minnesota won a Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge Fund grant, allowing additional investment in many of the effective statewide initiatives underway, including their Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), called Parent Aware, and the Early Learning Scholarship program, which has helped fund low-income families access high-quality early care and education programs. Only programs that rate 4-stars in Parent Aware's 1-4 star system are eligible for scholarship participation. Scholarship amounts can range up to \$7500 and parents can access Parent Aware rated programs in the setting of their choice, including public schools, nonprofit and tax-paying community child care programs, family child care homes and Head Start. Proponents of the Minnesota Early Learning Scholarship program have emphasized its contribution to socio-economic diversity and program quality.



Program Background

The New Horizon Academy Maplewood Center is located just St. Paul, MN next to the 3M business district headquarters. Roughly 30% of enrolled children receive public support to attend the center through either CCDBG assistance or Minnesota Early Learning Scholarship funding. The center is accredited by both the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the National Early Childhood Program Accreditation (NECPA), nationally recognized accrediting entities, and has received a 4- star rating (the highest) from Parent Aware. Since The New Horizon Center Academy Maplewood Center opened in 2006 it has benefited from consistent leadership from the original program director. Lead teachers within the program meet NAEYC's required qualification by holding a BA in Early Childhood Education.

This partnership has allowed the program to meet the full range of children's needs by providing accommodations and individualized instruction to support all children's active and meaningful participation across learning activities. The partnership model allows children to learn new knowledge and skills while simultaneously benefiting their social-emotional development. Since numerous children in the New Horizon Academy Maplewood Center program are English Learners, the inclusion model has benefited the larger population of participating children by exposing them to developmental specialists who use strategies to promote all children's language development, as well as language modeling among their peers while participating in positive social interactions.

Program Integration and Coordination

The strength of this innovative partnership lies in its ability to leverage the existing capacity of a high-quality community child care program to meet the District's need for more classroom space to accommodate children with disabilities. The New Horizon Academy Maplewood Center was able to provide the needed program slots for children with disabilities to participate in an existing and inclusive program setting from 9:15 to 11:45 a.m., Monday through Thursday.

The contract partnership with the District 622 allows the New Horizon Academy Maplewood Center to provide additional staff beyond the licensing ratio requirement of 1:10. During the partnership hours, three teachers are in the classroom, significantly raising the adult to child instructional ratio. In addition, supplemental support service professionals employed by District 622 such as a Special Education Specialist or Speech-Language Pathologist partner with the New Horizon Academy Maplewood Center teachers in developing and implementing individualized education programs (IEPs) that support the children participating in the inclusion program.





Instructional, Professional Development and Leadership Models

This model collaborative partnership between a public school system and a community based child care program involves the integration of curriculum, environmental accommodations, and staffing coordination. Although the New Horizon Academy Maplewood Center utilizes the High Reach Curriculum and District 622 relies on Teaching Strategies' Creative Curriculum, alignment between these two research-based approaches has been seamless. In addition, the New Horizon Academy Maplewood Center utilizes the research-based SEEDS of Early Literacy and EZ Write curricula. (For a complete listing of approved curricula and assessment models recognized by the Minnesota Quality Rating Improvement System, Parent Aware, please visit the state [website](#).)

The learning environment in all New Horizon Academy programs is designed to support teaching and learning through a range of activities, including large and small group, individual, as well as indoor, outdoor, and reflective or quiet learning activities. Classroom materials are selected and arranged to foster involvement, independence, decision-making and responsibility. The New Horizon Academy Maplewood Center program's room arrangement and visual clues have been adapted slightly, to the benefit all children in the classroom, not only the children with disabilities. For example, larger print sizes are used in labeling manipulatives accessible to all students in the classroom. In addition, District 622's Special Education Specialists coach the New Horizon Academy Maplewood Center staff to deliver focused small group activities that support complex tasks and development, such as water table activities that reinforce mathematical concepts such as volume and size.

In addition to on-site coaching and mentoring, the New Horizon Academy Maplewood Center staff participate in year-round, collaborative professional development offered through the Minnesota State Department of Education and District 622 that includes behavior management, and training in assessment and IEP policies and processes. All of the teachers within the New Horizon Academy Maplewood Center meet the National Association for the Education of Young Children's suggested criteria for lead teachers, which is a bachelor's degree in early childhood education, child development, elementary education, or early childhood special education.

IN THE DISTRICT'S OWN WORDS:

"District ISD 622 strives to serve young children in high quality settings so the partnership with New Horizon Academy was a natural fit with our goals. Our Early Childhood Special Education services were looking for ways to connect families to the community early care and education settings that could provide wrap around daily care and avoid unnecessary daily transitions for children who often have difficulty with these transitions. We started small, with six children, and the new partnership in school year 2014-15 exceeded our expectations. The New Horizon Academy and District staff forged strong collaborative partnerships in serving children and learning through each other's expertise, wrap around services were provided for children who needed them, and in one situation we were able to serve a child who had not been successfully provided special education services in any other setting."

~ Ruth Paisley, ISD 622 Early Learning Supervisor



Both the District's Early Learning Supervisor, Ruth Paisley, and New Horizon Academy Maplewood Center Director, Kari Schmitz credit the success of this partnership to leadership skills, as well as a shared, deep commitment and enthusiasm for the work. Together, these leaders have seen these strengths translate into the partnership's ability to adapt quickly to meet the shared needs of both partner organizations, advocate for children, and build strong lines of communication between the New Horizon Academy Maplewood Center and District 622 staff and leaders. As part of their strong organizational commitment to program leadership, the New Horizon Academy has supported the partnership program director's professional development in an early childhood education master's degree program by providing tuition reimbursement and scholarship funds.

IN THE DIRECTORS' OWN WORDS:

(Excerpt from an email to District 622's Special Education Director)

"We look forward to continuing our relationship with ISD 622 next year and in the years ahead. Not only has this partnership provided a wonderful experience for our shared students, but our other enrolled children, our staff, and both of us have all benefitted from the resources ISD 622 was able to provide. We learned innovative strategies for working with children with special needs, additional methods for behavior management, and current information on the assessment and IEP process. It is obvious we all have the same passion for early learning and a desire to see children succeed. We feel we have really brightened the future for many children this year. We can't wait to re-evaluate our success next year at this time!"

~ Kari Schmitz, New Horizon Academy Center Director
and
Angie Arnett, New Horizon Academy Center Assistant Director

Community Outreach and Parent Engagement

Community outreach and parent engagement are integral parts of this partnership. All parents receive daily communications about their children's progress via Daily Connect, the center's electronic communication platform linking teachers and parents. In addition, the New Horizon Academy Maplewood Center has built strong community collaborations, which have included generous funding and volunteer support for toy and book drives.

For the parents with children receiving special education and related services through this partnership, all District 622 IEP meetings are held on site at New Horizon Academy Maplewood Center, allowing all of the staff working with each child to attend and provide input on the child's developmental growth based on classroom observations and current work samples via portfolios, photographs, and videos.



Program Success

Both partners have recognized and articulated the benefits of collaborating. Parents are also highly satisfied with the program. Of the students who came to the New Horizon Academy Maplewood Center site through this collaboration, several have been enrolled in the program full time, and parents have enrolled their siblings as well. Perhaps the strongest mark of overall program effectiveness is the New Horizon Academy Maplewood Center program partnership's high rating in the state's QRIS. Finally, the success of this collaboration has prompted District 622 to expand the number of children participating for the 2015-2016 school year. The continued expansion and sustainability of this partnership demonstrates its success in providing high-quality inclusive early care and learning experiences to District 622's youngest learners.