

## **Community Options Program Green Bay Area Public Schools**

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The Community Options Program is currently operating in its 4<sup>th</sup> year in the Green Bay Area Public Schools. It is rooted in proven developmentally appropriate practices that benefit children in their natural environments (childcare, preschool, community groups, home)

As Early Childhood Special Education teachers, we are certified to work with children from birth through age seven. The children in our programs must meet state criteria for entrance through one of eleven disability areas. These areas are: Cognitive Disability, Learning Disability, Emotional and Behavioral Disability, Traumatic Brain Injury, Visual Impairment, Deaf and Hard of Hearing, Orthopedic Impairment, Significant Developmental Delay, Speech and Language Disability, Autism and/or Other Health Impairment.

The Green Bay Public Schools provide an educational component for children with disabilities beginning at age three. Several service delivery models are used to meet the needs of our children.

1. Self contained early childhood classrooms where children receive services in a school setting with the staff of an Early Childhood Special Education teacher and a paraprofessional.
2. Collaborative early child programs where children with disabilities receive preschool services with other typically developing children. This currently takes place in Head Start classrooms housed in our elementary schools or in daycare settings. This model is team taught with the Head Start teacher and the Early Childhood Teacher along with a paraprofessional(s).
3. Collaborative Kindergarten. This model is team taught between two regular education kindergarten classroom teachers, an early childhood special education teacher and two paraprofessionals.

In November of 1998, the Department of Public Instruction formed a committee to develop recommendations for Wisconsin implementation of the natural environment requirements under Part C of the **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)**.

**The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)** is the federal law that supports special education. It is based on **Public Law 94-142 (The Education for All Handicapped Children Act)** which was enacted in 1975 to provide grants to states for the education of children with disabilities. The law was amended numerous times including a 1990 revision when the name of the legislation was changed to **IDEA**. The newest amendments to this law are the **Individuals With Disabilities Education Act Amendments of 1997 (IDEA-97)**.

One of the goals of the amended law ensures that children with disabilities have access to the general education curriculum that is provided for typically developing peers in daycares, preschools and the home setting (natural environments). We are required at **Individual Education Plan (IEP) Meetings** to ask the question, "Can this child's goals and objectives be met in the natural environment?" Only unusual circumstances should necessitate services in a segregated special education early childhood classroom. Reauthorization of this federal law is anticipated in 2004 with an expected reinforcement of mandated services in natural environments.

In the fall of 2000, Green Bay Public Schools received a DPI Discretionary Grant providing financial support to begin the delivery of service in natural environments. The program was officially named **EC/SL (Early Childhood/Speech/Language) Community Options**. After many years as an Early Childhood Program Support teacher for Green Bay Public Schools, Kay Zastrow changed her role to 50% **Birth to Three Years Old Transition Coordinator** and 50% **Community Options Facilitator**.

As our early childhood evaluation teams identified more children with disabilities who were also enrolled in area day care or preschool settings, the **Community Options Program** began to grow. In fall of 2001, Kay began to work full time in the **Community Options Program** and in fall of 2002, a second full time position was allocated and Peggy Simonis accepted the position to join the **Community Options Staff**.

At this point in time, we are providing services to young children with disabilities in twenty-two different day care and preschool sites. We have the opportunity to have a huge impact on early childhood development and student learning as we work with area daycare and preschool directors and care providers. With our opportunity to increase delivery of early childhood services in natural environments, comes the responsibility for significant planning. We work collaboratively with speech pathologists, occupational and physical therapists as well as vision and hearing consultants. Our plans need to have clear, observable goals and reflect the principles of effective instructional practice.

As this preschool natural environment service delivery model is new to our district and expected to grow considerably, it is critical that our Early Childhood/Speech & Language **Community Options** team fully collaborate in an effort to grow in their knowledge and understanding of this service delivery option. The efforts of Green Bay Public School staff will bear a direct correlation to the successful learning experiences of our preschoolers with disabilities.