To What Extent Are At-Risk Preschoolers Effectively Prepared For Kindergarten?

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TO WHAT EXTENT ARE AT-RISK PRESCHOOLERS EFFECTIVELY PREPARED FOR KINDERGARTEN?

Eliza Santos Lopez

Educational Leadership Doctoral Program

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements of
Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

National College of Education
National Louis University

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Dissertation Hearing

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine to what extent Kinder Hearts School’s at-risk preschoolers are effectively prepared with readiness skills for kindergarten academic success. Based on schoolwide assessments, program mandates, and policy changes, an evaluation of this specific program in a Midwest school could determine whether the instructional model used was indeed effective. This study consisted of analyzing data from three student categories: children who attended private preschool programming, children who attended the school’s at-risk program, and children who had no schooling. The data collected was used to determine professional development needed, grant funding allocation, and program delivery model to use.

The results of the study showed an academic difference in kindergarten between children who attended this school’s state-funded, play-based preschool at-risk program and children who attended private programming. Results did not suggest that children who attended the school’s at-risk preschool program were behind in their kindergarten readiness skills in comparison to other subgroups but did suggest a difference between the groups. This study indicated that a play-based model developmentally targets the whole child, and also leads to the overall developmental growth of the child.
The program evaluation of this study sought to determine what academic kindergarten-readiness skill gaps, if any, could be identified in children who attended the school’s state-funded at-risk preschool program. As the principal of this school, one of my objectives was to determine what program changes, if any, were needed to strengthen kindergarten student performance. Another objective was to ensure student academic needs in preschool were being met in preparation for kindergarten. I wanted to be confident in the effectiveness of our state-funded, at-risk preschool program’s instructional, play-based delivery model. In comparing children enrolled in the program to children from other programs, staff professional development was geared to specific areas noted as the focus for improvement.

This program evaluation allowed me to dive deeper in understanding the state’s program specifications and requirements on how funding could be utilized. Through this study, I was able to provide stakeholders with essential information for guiding decisions to improve student achievement. The findings of this study could also be used in guiding district policy changes in relation to the hiring process and discussion on increasing staff support. Thus, we might make or address decisions in the best interest of students and their educational achievements.
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To my dad, who is the strongest person I know, my rock, and hero! I admire his strength and courage. He pushed me even when he couldn’t speak. He is the definition of a warrior! He not only beat Covid-19 but also beat the odds. I love you Daddy!
DEDICATION

To my daughter, Kayla Elise. I hope that through my journey you learned a thing or two.

Don’t let anything stop you from achieving your dreams!
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

As I stroll down the bright and colorful hallways of this lively organization, I hear the voices of young learners engaged in what can be considered conversations, or in some instances disagreements. There’s an echo of laughter in some of the areas and crying in others. As I continue to walk through, I recall hearing some of the comments made by the kindergarten teachers in this school regarding at-risk students in their classrooms who attended the school’s preschool program. Comments such as “Students, who attend our at-risk preschool program, lack kindergarten readiness skills when compared to the other children in the room.” As the leader of this delightful school, I began to reflect on whether this program was truly meeting the needs of its at-risk students. I began to ponder whether something was missing and if so, what that something was. I was not quite sure I know what the answer is as I began this inquiry but analyzing the school’s preschool program answered some of the key questions listed in this study. I hope that this study will lead to discovering any further areas of need and be used as a guide to strengthen this school’s preschool program.

Early childhood education is a critical investment in the overall development of our young learners. For many, it is the first school experience that can play a role in molding academic knowledge, social-emotional, and academic-readiness skills. Whether a child attends preschool or not, and the type of program attended, can have an impact on the level of skills and knowledge the child obtains in preparation for kindergarten. “Readiness [for kindergarten] is influenced by various environmental factors but can be
enhanced through effective preschool education” (Ackerman, 2014, p. 2). Effective preschool programs will enhance confidence in children while developing their social-emotional skills in preparation for kindergarten. These skills can increase pre-academic skills children acquire during their early years of development, especially when they have been identified as being at-risk of academic failure.

For the purpose of this study, I focused on a Midwest public school’s preschool program funded by the state. Children enrolled in this preschool program were screened by the school’s Early Childhood team using a formal assessment and formal parent surveys. The determination of program eligibility was based on a weighted scale, placing students with the highest points in the program. At-risk children in this program were found as at a disadvantage due to their home or community environment. This can include disadvantages due to language, economics, and culture that may impact the child’s exposure to educational opportunities. The screening criteria for identified at-risk categories for this specific preschool program consisted of the following: low-income families, families where English is not the primary language spoken in the home, parents or siblings who received or were currently receiving special education services, parenting or home environment concerns, abuse or neglect, health or medical issues, birth or prenatal factors, one year to kindergarten, delays or concerns in social-emotional, academic, or motor activities, and speech, language, or observed concerns by the screening team. For this group of children in the study, who were identified as at-risk, early intervention could play an important role in the developmental progression of skills. “Evidence indicates that high-quality early childhood education can have significant and positive impacts on the school readiness skills of children who are at risk for later
academic difficulties” (Lonigan, 2015, p. 1774). Early childhood educators focus and strive to provide early learners with the necessary tools for success, program funding, parenting, and social-economic status may influence the process.

As preschool children transition to kindergarten, I have questions on whether they are being effectively prepared for kindergarten by the programs they attended and whether achievement gaps present can be closed. As a child advocate and educator, it is important for me to address questions or concerns that may negatively impact student learning within my school. My preschool program is the starting point for educating children within the community and in ensuring we are meeting expected developmental targets, which will only enhance the growth for the children enrolled. My kindergarten teachers raised some concerns and disagreement on whether preschoolers in our at-risk program were effectively prepared for kindergarten with the program’s use of a play-based curriculum.

These questions sparked my curiosity and interest, especially, since I am not only dedicated to addressing such questions, but this overall challenge also forms part of my daily duties as an administrator in an early elementary building. Some duties include ensuring staff working with the school’s young learners are prepared, programmatic planning, resource development, being an advocate, and the communicator between stakeholders and staff. Our school mission states,

In partnership with parents and the community, our program will provide high quality education that encourages the physical, social/emotional, cognitive and language development of young children. The education will meet the diverse needs of all children and prepare them for a positive educational experience. ([District name withheld for confidentiality], n.d.)
Our mission is to ensure that our program, utilizing the necessary tools, will enrich student development to flourish successfully in kindergarten and in an elementary school setting. This mission requires that we appraise whether students are being prepared with the adequate skills necessary for success in kindergarten; hence this study.

The school chosen for this study is located in a southwest suburb of a large city in the Midwest. For confidentiality, the name of the school and district have been withheld, and I refer to this school as Kinder Hearts School. Kinder Hearts is one of four buildings within a school district established in 1928. Based on information from the 2017-18 Illinois Report Card (IRC, 2018), at the time of the study this preschool-kindergarten building had an enrollment of 166 students. However, enrollment rate fluctuates throughout the school year due to the number of preschool screenings conducted throughout the year and the number of students who qualify for the program.

The student–teacher ratio at Kinder Hearts is 20:1, with 11 full time teachers, two full-time paraprofessionals, and six part-time paraprofessionals. More than half of the staff has worked at this school for over 15 years and continue to work as advocates for the needs of their students. The Illinois Report Card reports the student composition is 48.2% White, 12% Black, 22.9% Hispanic, 13.9% Asian, 0% American Indian, 0% Pacific Islander, and 3% two or more races (IRC, 2018). The socio-economic status indicates that 48.8% of students are from low-income families, a percentage that increased by 10% over the past five years. Students considered to have limited English proficiency are 14.5% of the school student population. The school reports that 18% of its students have disabilities and less than 1% of students are homeless. The low percentage of homeless students in this district represents stability within the community. This
stability allows for students to have consistency in attendance, opportunities for appropriate health care, and a greater chance for academic achievement throughout their educational journey.

As a preschool-kindergarten building, Kinder Hearts School is unique in its delivery of services. We transition children from the Early Intervention program, those with special education needs, into a blended preschool model. The preschool program consists of six half-day sessions, which last two and a half hours and meet five days a week. One of these is an early childhood session specific to children with significant special education needs; the other five sessions are blended models that include at-risk children and children with special education individualized educational plans (IEPs). Our specialist team consists of a speech and language pathologist, social worker, occupational therapist, physical therapist, Bilingual/English as a Second Language teacher, and classroom teachers with special education endorsements. Both preschool and kindergarten programs share support staff that implement push-in and pull-out models for servicing the IEP students and children who fall into the need for interventions. The district is an inclusion district that integrates interventions within its instructional process.

This preschool program, an at-risk program, is funded by the state of Illinois Preschool for All Grant (PFA). The grant provides funds for 80 preschool-age children identified through an official screening process conducted at the school multiple times throughout the school year. During the 2018-19 school year, Kinder Hearts School had 94 preschool-age children and 114 kindergarten students enrolled. On a yearly basis, an average of 40 to 50 preschool students transition into the kindergarten program at Kinder
Hearts School. This is approximately 40% of the population of the children who attend the kindergarten program in the school.

In 2008, Kinder Hearts School became a 5-hour, extended-day kindergarten program, consisting of six classrooms with an average of 20 students in each classroom. During this shift, teachers worked to create a theme-based curriculum that would encompass all content areas, including art, gym, and (recently) technology. At the time of the study, we had adopted the Institute of Excellence in Writing Program as part of the Grades K-2 curriculum, and Wit & Wisdom for Grades 3-8. The math curriculum was moving away from Envisions Math to Math in Focus for the 2020-21 school year, and currently was piloted in kindergarten to 5th grades. Upon adopting Common Core State Standards (CCSS), the district moved to a more structured and rigorous curriculum. This move demonstrated a discrepancy between CCSS and the Illinois Early Learning Standards. This discrepancy could be seen within the preschool program model discussed in the study and the academic expectations for kindergarteners. In addition, preschoolers have fewer hours in the classroom setting compared to the amount of hours kindergarten students attended. The additional instructional hours traditionally include a more structured environment that focuses on the development of academic skills in preparation for success completing the first grade. Preschool play-based programs are centered on free choice, with many opportunities for students to navigate the classroom environment, while kindergarten classroom settings are structured with limited opportunities for breaks. This program difference and its effect is further discussed throughout this document as part of determining whether the programming plays a role on student academic performance in kindergarten.
Purpose of the Program Evaluation

The preschool curriculum model in Kinder Hearts incorporates academic skills, but not through the traditional model of structured academic approaches, which can often include teacher-scripted instructional deliveries. Instead, it implements Creative Curriculum, a thematic program that encourages investigating as a way of learning, to develop lifelong confidence, creativity, and critical thinking skills. The model followed consists of free choice for students during play while the teacher or staff encourages the play. Skills are targeted through the facilitation of the play, yet the student initiates the play. This model is one that state and grant guidelines approve, and that our program utilizes and implements.

As the administrator at Kinder Hearts School, my role is to ensure that our preschool program not only meets state policy and grant expectations, but also provides students the foundation for educational success as they transition into kindergarten; thus program quality can result in student success as they make this transition. “The quality of preschool experiences can predict children’s kindergarten readiness” (Winterbottom & Piasta, 2015, p. 61). When program models are effective in their methods and instructional approach, children carry over the skills acquired in their transitional phase to kindergarten. The performance demonstrated by the children in our program not only reflects on the administrator but also on the preschool team. My role as administrator was to ensure that students were accomplishing goals in their overall developmental progress and had acquired the necessary skills to be successful in kindergarten. Therefore, if our current program failed to meet these expectations, then our program model required review for modifications in programming.
The purpose of this evaluation was to review our current preschool program and curriculum to determine if at-risk preschool students were receiving the appropriate kindergarten readiness skills for success in their academic journey. If the results demonstrated that students in the preschool program were not successfully meeting or exceeding academic criteria, then program changes would need to occur to improve student performance scores. The evaluation may be used to identify the specific areas that need to be assessed further. It is also important to determine if current support services are positively affecting student social-emotional growth and parent education. Using the results from this evaluation will help the district, school, and teams involved explore and apply new practices to improve the program for successful results.

**Rationale**

Upon reviewing start-of-year student data, the kindergarten teachers at Kinder Hearts School perceived that students who have attended an at-risk preschool, play-based program demonstrated lower developmental and academic skills than their peers who attended a private, or other preschool programs. Outside programs may vary on the model they use in their educational delivery. “The primary focus of preschool education has shifted in recent years from experiential, play-based programs to a more academic model” (Hatcher et al., 2012, p. 2). I questioned whether this statement was accurate or if merely a coincidence that the data demonstrated a discrepancy based on the previous school experience. This sparked my interest leading to further research whether at-risk preschool students, specifically students at Kinder Hearts School, are obtaining the right amount of kindergarten-readiness skills through the play-based preschool model.
It is important for educational programs to be evaluated to improve the current practice and process of implementation. The evaluation of this specific preschool program, ideally, would strengthen the support systems in place and increase any areas where students failed to demonstrate the appropriate kindergarten-readiness skills needed for academic success in elementary school. The process also allows district stakeholders to better understand the importance of investing in early childhood education. When preschool programs provide opportunities for children to apply skills they learn, social-emotional and academic learning result.

As the person responsible for ensuring preschool and kindergarten students are meeting criteria in my school district, I must also ensure children are demonstrating developmental growth. By closing academic achievement gaps in the early years of a child’s education, the whole child is prepared for educational success in the later years of schooling. During the past few years, the numbers of students who qualify for at-risk preschool programming have increased in this school district. The students’ needs include attention to enrichment of a variety of developmental areas. Students are eligible for at-risk preschool programming based on certain targeted areas of concern. The at-risk preschool screening team conducts formal assessments that measure, in comparison to same-aged peers, student language, motor activities, and concepts skills.

School mental health staff also conduct parent interviews to assess for needs reported by the parent, including medical, financial, and social-emotional needs, including student exposure to trauma. The building’s bilingual teacher assesses for student English proficiency using formal measuring tests. Gaps in learning or needs may put these children at risk of future educational deficiencies or failure. In finding ways to
enhance student skills and reduce the need for interventions, schools can decrease the gaps between prepared and deficient student populations attending the school’s kindergarten program.

Four critical issues led to conducting this program evaluation. First, teachers were concerned that lower-level academic skills taught to students participating in the at-risk preschool program at Kinder Hearts failed to meet or exceed standards, in comparison to students attending different programming. Second, the concern arose that interventions and support preschoolers receive in preschool may not be targeting the specific areas of need in preparing students with the appropriate kindergarten-readiness skills. Third, the level of parent support offered by the program was possibly insufficient in providing parents the education and skills needed to understand their child’s appropriate academic and social development. Lastly, administrator determination of what is developmentally appropriate for children in kindergarten may be different from the knowledge that kindergarten teachers attain. Higher expectations may be being set for kindergarteners, those above the skill levels that most kindergarteners have.

This program evaluation also informs stakeholders, the district, and the educational community at large about the district’s at-risk preschool educational programming. It was important to identify areas of weakness as a way to strengthen the quality of the program. The end goal was to improve the current service model that provides students the foundation for educational success. The data demonstrated to all invested parties where additional support is needed, whether it included additional staff, providing specific professional development to enhance the skills of the preschool team, or adding another classroom to reduce the number of children in each preschool session.
I am invested in making sure our young learners receive the best education that Kinder Hearts can give, but also that appropriate supports are in place to close gaps in the factors that hinder future academic success for preschool children. These children are at-risk for reasons that may negatively impact their education and my duty is to make sure I do not fail them. In determining that this program was missing educational components, steps to strengthen the current process, giving children exactly what they needed as successful young learners was part of the enhancement of the program.

**Goals**

Some factors must be considered before determining whether a play-based preschool program prepares students for kindergarten. The focus of at-risk preschool programs is to address areas of need demonstrated by young learners. The program approach is crucial when addressing these areas, while still assisting in ensuring developmental gaps are decreased. A child who demonstrates a delay in any area may not have been identified as at-risk. Children deserve the opportunity to expand their horizons through educational nurturing in a preschool program; thus our educational goals include not only creating a process for early success, but also a process that leads to long-term academic achievement.

When a child enters a preschool program grant-funded by the state of Illinois, the model consists of a curriculum that targets social and academic development through play. For the purpose of this research, I focused on two specific formal assessments conducted with students in preschool and kindergarten at Kinder Hearts School: Renaissance Star 360 and AimsWeb. The data collected was used to guide instructional practices, address curricular gaps, implement student academic interventions, and analyze
student growth. Star 360 Early Literacy data forms a predictor of how students will perform on state assessments in preparation for academic success in high school and college. The Star 360 Early Literacy assessment is a computer-adapted assessment administered with an electronic device, such as an iPad.

AimsWeb assesses early literacy and early numeracy skills. This assessment utilizes Curriculum Based Measures (CBMS). Students are assessed on quick, timed measures, one on one with a staff member. Both assessment systems are used to measure student growth and create academic intervention goals that can be measured on a frequent basis.

I compared the data from the two screeners used to evaluate student performance to ensure that our model prepares students for kindergarten, and as a way to answer this study’s research questions. Through this research concerns were identified using the current guidelines regarding the play-based model of the state of Illinois, leading to discussion with staff on how to proceed with recommendation at the state level for review. The goal was to improve programming for successful implementation and results. If students were not demonstrating the appropriate kindergarten readiness skills through their preschool learning experience, then should recommendations for change to the play-based preschool model be made? Through this evaluation, the current program implementation demonstrated no evidence was found on the effectiveness of having a full play-based curriculum when compared with a different program model. This study sought insight into the effectiveness of the current program design at Kinder Hearts School and to inform future planning and decisions. Lessons learned within the broader field of researchers was a goal for improving our current educational system.
Research Questions

Based on our current preschool program model, the primary research question of the study asked: To what extent does a play-based model effectively prepare at-risk preschoolers for kindergarten? As exploration of the program began, it became important to answer the following subquestions:

(2) Are kindergarten school readiness expectations at Kinder Hearts school developmentally appropriate for incoming students?

(3) Is Kinder Hearts preschool program, specifically, not preparing students with the appropriate amount of kindergarten-readiness skills needed for success in its kindergarten program?

(4) Is student growth influenced by a lack of understanding by stakeholders on what the program entails?

Conclusion

In conclusion, the researcher conducted the program evaluation to help improve the current preschool and kindergarten programming at Kinder Hearts School. These results on the effectiveness of play-based programming might allow a continued conversation regarding best practices, and also address any deficient areas. Assessment results can also guide the school and district to improve the delivery of instruction and support services in place for at-risk children.
CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

Schools often seek to explain why at-risk children in early childhood programs demonstrate a lack of appropriate readiness skills as they enter kindergarten. At Kinder Hearts School, scores on screener tools (such as Star 360) have demonstrated a difference between children who attend other preschool programming and at-risk children who attend this school. This topic has led educators to explore reasons for the gaps found in programming. The aim of Kinder Hearts preschool program of this study was to give as much support as possible to young identified at-risk learners. The goal of the program is to utilize staff and resources to increase the potential of students considered at-risk in meeting academic milestones as they transition into the school’s kindergarten program.

Achievement Gaps

In seeking ways to close achievement gaps found within student academic skills, it is important to consider the multiple factors that impact achievement gaps in student development. This is especially true for children identified as at-risk for academic failure. Differences in achievement gaps, kindergarten program-preparedness, and the socioeconomic status may impact the child’s readiness skills. These considerations often form a part of the criteria for qualifying for at-risk preschool program. Throughout this study I investigated research conducted on early childhood, preschool, kindergarten programs, and factors that researchers investigated as influential in kindergarten-preparedness skills.
Among factors that may play a role in achievement gaps and academic successes, the impact of behavioral skills in early years stands out as a significant influence on future academic performance. Hartman et al. (2017) compared teacher-reported behavior concerns with how children performed in kindergarten, revealing what can often be observed in classrooms across the nation in relation to student achievement and behaviors in kindergarten. “Behavior problems were as strongly, if not more strongly, related to their school readiness and kindergarten performance than family income to-needs ratio and parental educations” (Hartman et al., 2017, p. 268). Hatcher et al. (2006) found that classroom teachers viewed behavioral skills as necessary for kindergarten success. They labeled behavioral skills as follows: “paying attention, cooperation with the school routines, working in large groups, taking direction from a teacher, and staying on specific assigned tasks.” (Hatcher et al., 2006, p. 6).

Children demonstrate behavior problems in early childhood programs for various reasons, which makes these problems challenging for teachers to address. Goldstein et al. (2013, p. 515) revealed that poverty and language development are connected to younger children struggling in communicating their feelings and needs, resulting from lower levels of expressive vocabulary in their language skills. As children living in poverty continue on in school, achievement gaps may increase while their performance in school decreases. “Low-income children on average earn lower school grades than their peers from higher income families, with educational gaps between the two groups widening as children progress through school” (Hartman et al., 2017, p. 257). Hartman et al. (2017) also noted that students living in poverty, “identified as having severe or even mild behavior problems in kindergarten[,] exhibit lower reading achievement in kindergarten
than peers who exhibit no behavior problems” (p. 256). If this statement is accurate, behavior and its impact on kindergarten readiness skills will result not only in academic achievement gaps but also in developmental gaps.

Perceptions of ideal preschool education differ based on the demographic area served and the level of poverty a child might be exposed to. Economic disparities, and limited or lack of parent involvement can negatively impact the gains early learners attain during their preschool years. A study that focused on the education of children in Ohio found “poverty in childhood to be linked to brain development associated with school readiness, which was related to academic achievement” (Kenne et al., 2018). The language exposure and even the number of words children living in poverty attain, compared to children raised by parents with professional jobs, is approximately 19 million to 32 million words (Kenne et al., 2018, p. 1). This number gets higher when analyzing why academic achievement gaps exist early in a child’s education.

Programming can also vary based on the philosophy and model of the program or the state guidelines in place. In many districts, pre-school education has transformed from a play-based model to a more academic-centered implementation. These differing approaches can impact program effectiveness in a positive or negative manner, and can cause gaps in the educational approach taken. Hatcher et al. (2006) found that “Teachers and parents assume that a major outcome of preschool includes increased readiness of children for kindergarten in social/emotional and academic aspects” (p. 2). Achievement gaps often occur when one group of children outperforms another group. Slaby et al. (2005) found that achievement gaps were difficult to close due to external and internal factors in preschool programs, yet that offering a developmentally appropriate curriculum
and increasing parent involvement would assist in reducing any gaps in children who attended preschool.

**Parent Involvement**

Because preschool programs address behavioral concerns within their program models and approaches, a child’s transition into kindergarten can be successfully planned between home and school. This planning can result in accomplished goals around behavioral concerns when parent involvement is evident. Preschool programs emphasize their work toward creating relationships with parents in addressing concerns they have regarding behaviors, which is essential in creating a successful home and school environment. For children who live in impoverished urban communities, positive parent beliefs about kindergarten readiness can increase student academic knowledge and behaviors as they transition into kindergarten. Results from Puccioni (2018) demonstrated that parental involvement and practices at home during their child’s preschool experience positively impacted a child’s beginning reading and math achievement, as well as their behavior at the beginning of kindergarten. A preschool program that educates both parents and children can demonstrate that although low-SES status may negatively impact early learning, parent involvement throughout their child’s learning process can lead to the child’s success in attaining adequate knowledge and skills.

According to Jarrett and Coba-Rodriguez (2018), children living in impoverished urban neighborhoods are at heightened risk for ineffective kindergarten transitions. This is partly due to lack of knowledge on what the expectations are, lack of parental involvement, socioeconomic status, race, and residence. Poverty causes stress and
anxiety in families and can also play a role in early learning achievement gaps. Lack of parent education or knowledge on how to encourage learning in everyday activities, creates gaps for young learners. Puccioni (2018) found that “parents who placed more importance on behavior-oriented skills, demonstrated the understanding that parent-child interactions and free play will help children acquire the ability to sit still, follow directions, take turns, finish tasks, problem solve, and communicate” (Puccioni, 2018, p. 448). Parent involvement often leads to higher achievement when the child is in kindergarten. Research suggests that “Children who possess multiple skills, including academic and socio-emotional abilities are able to meet the demands of the kindergarten classroom” (Jarrett & Coba-Rodriguez, 2018, p. 435). This ability to meet the demands of kindergarten can assist in decreasing gaps in academic achievement, by providing parents and students the skills needed to achieve this goal. Parent educational opportunities, such as Illinois’ STAR NET trainings, and access to direct training from pre-school staff, may also increase parental knowledge of their child’s needs and decrease early-learning achievement gaps.

Kindergarten expectations and an explicit definition for kindergarten readiness differ between parents and teachers. Studies have found that parents perceive the importance of early social, behavioral, and academic skills as essential in preschool programs. Kenne et al. (2018) found that low-socioeconomic status (SES) children whose parents participated in an education parent program, which educated parents about being their child’s first teacher, resulted in this group of children performing better on kindergarten-readiness assessments measuring achievement, in comparison to students whose parents did not attend the program. Achievement gaps for at-risk preschoolers may
consist of gaps not only in academic skills but also in self-control and social-emotional
development. As we move to closing gaps among early learners, we need to consider the
levels of skills involved in developing the whole child and how preschool programs are
working to address readiness skills with increased parent involvement. Having a full team
approach increases the possibility of skill-gap decrease.

Family dynamics and school readiness demonstrates that children with established
at-home routines do well behaviorally, socially, and academically. Family routines in
Ferretti and Bub (2017) were defined as bedtime routines, reading routines, telling
stories, singing songs, dinner as a family, and dinner at a regular time (p. 60). Teachers
at Kinder Hearts have noticed that having consistency in routines can often result in
having an easier transition into kindergarten. When children attending preschool
programs have established routines at home, they often have a smoother transition into
kindergarten. Evidence indicates that although “routines create a secure, predictable, and
organized home environment that may have particular benefits for young children, little
is known about whether family routines prior to school entry are associated with school
readiness skills during the kindergarten year” (Ferretti & Bub, 2017, p. 62).

**Importance of Early Childhood Programming**

The early foundation of a child’s education begins in the home, yet some children
the home environment receive little exposure to the appropriate level of brain stimulation
and skills that lead to confident learners. “Much research has been done which supports
the idea that a quality early education can have tremendous impacts on students’
cognitive development in the area of literacy” (Finocchiaro, 2016, p. 102). Preschool
programs are a critical piece of development for children who have been identified by
specific at-risk criteria. This is especially true for children who live in poverty or are from lower socioeconomic status.

Study after study shows that children living in economically disadvantaged households exhibit cognitive, emotional, and academic achievement gaps early in life and this gap progressively widens as significant differences in home environment and resources available to children across the SES spectrum continue to persist. (Kenne, et al., 2018, p. 2).

Previous studies indicate that school readiness skills consist of not only pre-academic skills but also communication skills and social-emotional learning behaviors. Early childhood programs with programming that focuses on developing skills in areas viewed by specialists as necessary for early learning success also provide children the tools they need for school success. In order for program interventions to be effective, children need to attend school on a regular basis (Winsler et al., 2012, p. 1302). Children with no exposure and experiences to acquire these skills often struggle as they transition into formal school environments.

Early academic skills for a child in kindergarten create the foundation for acquiring skills that can lead to success in their later education. For a child to acquire these skills, she will need a structured early childhood program and have no attendance issues. This may be challenging for children of lower socio-economic status or who live in poverty, the latter often suffering from “sleep deprivation due to housing instability, crowded sleeping conditions, or a number of other reasons,” which impacts strong network connections to the brain (Finocchiaro, 2016, p. 102). This specific group of children also has limited exposure to necessary experiences that will enhance their ability to acquire specific skills needed for academic success. When a child doesn’t attend preschool, at-risk factors are greater than their peers who do attend a preschool program.
Early childhood preschool programs incorporate interventions and strategies that help decrease developmental gaps at-risk children may demonstrate. The differences in academic achievement between a child who has attended preschool and one who has not has been amply demonstrated through research. “Studies of young children’s success in the early months of kindergarten provide evidence that children who had previously attended preschool were more successful than their peers who had not” (Robinson & Diamond, 2014, p. 78). The emphasis on academic achievement is important piece to the educational process, and parents seek this out when they enroll their children in a program. It is also essential for children enrolled in childcare or state preschool programs to receive sufficient and appropriate developmental attention to successfully transition into kindergarten. It is also important for both parents and education stakeholders to understand how these programs play a role in developing the fundamental skills crucial in kindergarten programming for children.

**Kindergarten Expectations**

Specific research that identifies standard kindergarten expectations revealed limited studies on whether the expectations set in kindergarten are above the developmental ability for children in this age group. According to Robinson and Diamond (2014, p. 82), children who demonstrated significant transition difficulties in kindergarten were also children who in preschool demonstrated lower receptive language skills and social competence. Programs traditionally target skills in literacy, writing, and math, but often invest less time focusing on communication and social-emotional skills. When early childhood programs lack the knowledge or structure needed for children to develop and attain the necessary skills for growth, children will likely struggle in their
kindergarten transition. Winterbottom and Piasta (2015) have demonstrated that children in preschool are not receiving the quality early educational experiences needed for critical foundation that leads to developmental success (p. 60). Their research also discussed the overall impact of accredited versus non-accredited early childhood programming in Florida, and whether children in either program received less of one skill or another. The study found that experiences, interactions with teachers, activities, materials, and the adoption of early learning standards more directly related to school readiness than whether the program was accredited (Winterbottom & Piasta, 2015).

In general, preschool programs not only address academic skills but also address the social-emotional skills that help children transition into kindergarten. Children in preschool work on adapting to a new school environment, learning routines and what it means to be a student, following directions, sharing, how to get along with others, being responsible for their actions, and learning what it means to make positive choices, among many other social-emotional skills. Children who do not attend preschool may struggle to understand what is expected on a daily basis. Robinson and Diamond (2014) found that children who attended preschool programs demonstrated a more positive adjustment in the transition to their new academic environment in kindergarten than those who did not attend. Preschool programs that address social skills prior to elementary school assist children in learning how to successfully approach social problems with their peers.

Attending preschool also aids at-risk children by providing more opportunities to follow directions, learn how to work independently, and work together with their peers in preparation for kindergarten. Children are guided and taught appropriate play and relationship-building. Wang et al. (2019) noted in their findings that “stable peer
relationships are a key to creating a participatory culture to guarantee children’s psychological and social welfare in kindergarten education and care as well as in their school adjustment and transition” (p. 179).

Expectations for children in preschool and in kindergarten classrooms have changed over time. Historically, approaches have been child-centered and play-based, yet efforts in reform have led to instructional changes in practices (Hustedt et al., 2018, p. 53). The beliefs of parents and educators vary in the perceptions of what programs should do and what goals early education should have. The one concept that has remained consistent is the belief that children who successfully transition into kindergarten will be more apt to succeed in their later years of education.

The assumption that “kindergarten is the new 1st grade” has been widely circulated by researchers, professional organizations, and the media (Hustedt et al., 2018, p. 52), and with good reason. When a child attends preschool, her rate of developmental success increases in comparison to a child not attending an early childhood program. Existing research suggests that early childhood learning, and outcomes meaningfully impact young children’s learning (Bassok et al., 2016). Moreover, an increase in the number of opportunities during the day enriches children’s problem-solving knowledge and academic skills through play with peers. These skills also allow children to demonstrate their knowledge, and show their familiarity to the classroom environment, expectations, and routines.

Previous research done by Bassok et al. (2016) found focusing heavily on academic content in kindergarten as developmentally inappropriate. This research shows that public school kindergarten teachers believed focusing on social-emotional
development and school-based work habits, in addition to academics, are also crucial and should be incorporated into programming prior to kindergarten. Staff at Kinder Hearts have noted this to be accurate as teachers view differences among children who have attended preschool to those with no prior schooling. These differences can include being able to follow classroom routines easily, increased vocabulary, ability to self-regulate behavior, and increased academic skills.

Teacher beliefs and teacher reforms play a role in the delivery of instructional practices. Studies such as Hustedt et al. (2018) discuss the implications of federal and state policies on the educational system, specifically when addressing academic and nonacademic skills. These implications can lead to funding reductions in early childhood education that can negatively impact the availability of programming for children who are at risk of academic failure. Teacher definition of what readiness means, and how programs implement the appropriate level of skills to fulfill the definition of readiness, can impact student outcomes in transitioning into kindergarten. Hustedt et al. (2018) demonstrated that kindergarten teacher expectations are now more likely to include children reading in kindergarten. Teacher-held beliefs of kindergarten readiness, that I have observed, imply that a 5-year-old student should not only enter kindergarten reading words, but that these students should also have had sufficient access to social-emotional learning. Such expectations are particularly true for classrooms where teachers follow an inclusion model and focus on closing the gaps before children transition into kindergarten. The instructional process taken for kindergarten can vary depending on the child’s skills creating differentiation in instruction.
Best Practices in the Educational Setting

State guidelines and district expectations can often influence the instructional practices and delivery model early childhood programs utilize in classroom settings. The instructional practices can impact the readiness skills preschoolers attain before entering kindergarten. Kindergarten programs have moved from a traditional developmental model to one more focused on academics. In fact,

The National Association for Educators of Young Children (NAEYC, 2014) expressed concerns that K-12 teaching practices are not aligning practices to the developmental domains and are instead stressing use of developmentally inappropriate instructional strategies like worksheets and seatwork. (Baron et al., 2016, p. 104)

Meanwhile preschool program administrators that maintain the play-based approach have noticed an increase in the child’s ability to develop skills not necessarily developed in kindergarten. High quality preschool programs incorporate a variety of components that assist in increasing student achievement. Wechsler et al. (2016) demonstrate that important elements include the following:

- early learning standards and curricula that address the whole child, are developmentally appropriate, and are effectively implemented. Includes support for English learners and students with special needs, meaningful family engagement, sufficient time learning, small class sizes with low student-teacher ratios, a well-implemented state quality rating and improvement systems as well as assessments that consider children’s academic, social-emotional, and physical progress. (p. 1)

When a school team has a vision and understands the scaffolding of child development, there is a greater possibility for incorporating intensive interventions, increasing parent participation, and providing parent education in a preschool program.

Play has been influential in a child’s early educational accomplishments. Understanding the purpose of play and how to appropriately implement it early in
education can begin the process of providing children with the supports they need to transition to kindergarten. Researchers have debated a misunderstanding of what play involves and the pressures to replace it with more academic activities, thus leading to a misunderstanding of the difference in the types of play (Baron et al., 2016, p. 106). The most beneficial and successful play-based strategies for young learners have been those that include a variety of activities to increase the skill levels of all developmental stages in early childhood. When educators’ target specific areas of deficits, children unconsciously acquire skills that may have been underdeveloped or lagging. The focus on decreasing developmental gaps allows educators to personalize specific goals in decreasing student deficits and increasing their skills. This may contradict the observations of some educators in classrooms settings, comparing children enrolled in their public school’s preschool program to those who attended private programs.

School-readiness skills are best developed in educational settings that address the learning of skills that create a foundation for advanced learning later in life. “Research find that high levels of family engagement often result from strong program family partnerships characterized by trust, shared values, ongoing communication, mutual respect, and attention to the child’s wellbeing” (Wechsler et al., 2016, p.1).

Research has also demonstrated that school policies and practices influence the variety of stages in development, as well as the importance of family and community support in the early stages of a child’s education. Parent involvement in early education helps parents to become partners in the educational process. Studies have shown parent involvement demonstrates that parents feel empowered when they understand the processes used in their child’s education (Ferretti & Bub, 2017).
Parents need to be acknowledged and empowered as partners in the education of their children and to be able to engage with teachers over barriers to learning and to be involved in finding solutions. (Pitt et al. 2013, p. 10)

This support will help children during their school years.

Many state-funded preschool programs incorporate support staff, such as social workers, occupational therapists, and speech pathologists, to ensure focus on the whole child. State-funded programs are designed to prepare young children for academic success by focusing on cognitive and behavioral skills, yet if the delivery of the program is weak, I can assume as the administrator that the purpose of the program becomes ineffective. An operational educational setting can include therapists who develop relationships with preschool parents to establish a home-school partnership. It can also include educators creating an environment that contains “classroom-based opportunities to practice approaches to learning skills” (Johnson et al., 2019, p. 633). Interventions implemented in early childhood programs have a greater impact on the early development of children in preschool programs. Keys et al. (2013) demonstrated that the quality of a childcare program impacts the outcomes of children’s school readiness. Children who are at risk because of low skills are apt to find greater benefits from high-quality early education programming. Early childhood programs that entail high-quality characteristics end in children transitioning into kindergarten with the appropriate readiness skills for success.

Children entering kindergarten vary not only in age but also in all skills. Younger kindergarten age children may be at a higher risk due to their developmental milestones and attainment of skills. Parents of younger kindergarten-age children worry about whether their children will be able to maintain and keep the pace of their peers due to
differences in maturity levels. In the classroom setting, teachers differentiate their classroom small group centers based on skill levels, not necessarily on the age of the child. Researchers have conducted studies to demonstrate whether age plays a role in children’s literacy and academic achievement in kindergarten. Results of Huang and Invernizzi (2012) demonstrated that, upon entry, children who were “the youngest students have consistently lower scores than the oldest students” (p. 436). This study also found that younger students developed literacy skills at a faster rate than the oldest students, yet never caught up during the two years in this study.

Some school districts approach closing gaps in literacy attainment before children transition into kindergarten by creating effective programming in preschool. My educational background has brought me to understand that addressing gaps in preschool helps to increase the possibility of a child developing developmental skills appropriately. In understanding each child’s strengths and weaknesses in preschool, educators are able to individualize student instruction and develop programming that will create consistency in skill building.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, studies have shown that differences in preschool and kindergarten achievement gaps, kindergarten program preparedness, and the school’s support of its young learners all have an impact on a child’s kindergarten-readiness skills. Implementation of interventions and differentiation in classroom settings both play a role in decreasing gaps in skills. Parent participation in early education helps to build their understanding of their child’s educational journey. The school’s support system, that
includes language, social emotional, and resource personnel, play a role in shaping the overall program and student results.
CHAPTER 3

Methodology

Research Design Overview

Using a play-based program model, this program evaluation focused on whether a district preschool program effectively prepares identified at-risk preschool children for kindergarten. As stated by Patton (2008), “programs, like airplanes, need all their parts to do what they’re designed to do and accomplish what they’re supposed to accomplish” (p. 308). In exploring the parts this preschool program contains, we might attain a better understanding of the missing elements that enhance the instruction and delivery.

As exploration and evaluation of this program began, I sought to answer the following additional research subquestions:

(2) Are kindergarten school-readiness expectations at Kinder Hearts school developmentally appropriate for incoming students?

(3) Is it Kinder Hearts preschool program, specifically, not preparing students with the appropriate amount of kindergarten-readiness skills needed for success in its kindergarten program?

(4) Is student growth influenced by a lack of understanding by stakeholders on what the program entails?

Answering these questions led to further investigating areas of deficiency that would need to be modified to improve meeting student needs. As a leader, I must identify any missing parts or those ineffective in allowing increased opportunities for change.

I used a quantitative approach to answer the primary and secondary research questions in this study. This approach allowed me to examine the relationship between preschool programming and kindergarten expectations. It also helped to determine
whether the current program model being implemented needed modifications in order to address areas that affect the developmental growth demonstrated by preschoolers entering kindergarten. The data collected through this model allowed me to analyze further and make predictions throughout the process. Analyzing student data also allowed me to define what (if any) changes were needed in the school’s programming as the process for answering the research questions was uncovered.

A few critical issues led to this program evaluation. First, the school’s kindergarten teachers were concerned with the level of academic skills of students who participated in the school’s at-risk preschool program. Teachers believed that students performed lower both academically and behaviorally when compared to their peers who attended other programming. Their perceptions were based on observations and were centered on start of the school year student performance and skills in transitioning. My clinical observations found that children needed to be taught or retaught school expectations at the start of the school year. This is due to the differences in home versus school structure during the summer months when children are away from school expectations.

Second, I questioned whether the interventions and support preschoolers received were targeting the specific areas of need in preparing students with appropriate kindergarten-readiness skills. This was due to the limited amount of time support staff were able to provide interventions to at-risk preschoolers due to their responsibilities to students with IEPs (individualized education plan). Students who needed additional help received assistance but in a whole group setting. The support, unfortunately, was not able to be given frequently and on an individualized basis due to the limited time that
support staff had in their schedules. What I did notice was the preschool teacher working with the support staff member in creating lesson plans that incorporated the skills that needed enrichment.

Lastly, what is developmentally appropriate for children in kindergarten may be different from the knowledge that kindergarten teachers expect them to acquire. From my experience in working with this school’s kindergarten team, I found that there was a gap in understanding developmental scaffolding and appropriate expectations. Thus, higher expectations could be set for kindergarteners above the skill levels that average kindergarteners possess. In determining and understanding the appropriate academic levels for this age group, a teacher may be able to plan for the next steps in increasing skills at the correct pace. The evaluation of the program sought to determine the answers to these critical questions.

When comparing the three groups of children in this program evaluation, differences in each of the critical issues were detected. I found that children who attended another program demonstrated less difficulty in transitioning at the start of the school year. I believe this can be attributed to the continuation in their programming during the summer months before the start of their kindergarten year. This increased the amount of time students were exposed to routines, consistency in daily expectations, and academic skills. This exposure to uninterrupted academic teaching during the summer months may have contributed to the ability to transition with ease. This may have aided in teacher perceptions that the preschoolers who attended Kinder Hearts performed lower than their peers.
The next group, at-risk preschoolers, demonstrated being comfortable in the school setting, yet had difficulty with following directions and routines. At the start of the school year, many needed reminders and reteaching of skills they learned in preschool. This can possibly be linked to the gaps that were noted and reasons for being identified as being at-risk and difficulties in their ability to apply what they had previously learned. The difference in program structure also impacted the transition to kindergarten. The play model they were used to was not the same model that was implemented in kindergarten therefore leading to students being perceived by kindergarten teachers as delayed in skills when compared to their peers.

Finally, my clinical observations noted during the time of this study that children with no prior schooling demonstrated difficulty with following routines and in the function of school readiness skills. For example, raising of their hands to ask or answer questions, walking in a straight line, not interrupting when others were speaking, and at times appropriate peer relationships. The lack of school exposure impacted the level of readiness this group of students attained at the start of kindergarten. It was noted that children who didn’t have prior schooling were very quiet when compared to their peers. Lack of exposure to peers in a structure and unstructured setting result in lower social emotional skills.

Participants

Key participants in this study consisted of children who qualified and were enrolled in the school’s at-risk preschool program, and children who attended private preschool programming, or those with no prior schooling. Data collection included the
child’s age, gender, ethnicity, years in preschool, English Language Learner (ELL) status, risk factors that qualified them for the program, whether the child came from an Early Intervention program, and whether the child had an individualized education plan (IEP). The participants in the study were students with whom I had no direct interactions. I reviewed and analyzed preschool and kindergarten student data throughout this process to help answer the research questions listed above. The school had approximately 200 students assigned to six kindergarten classrooms, and three preschool classrooms with five classes. Participant student ages ranged from three to six years of age and participants also represented various economic and diverse backgrounds. Classroom age composition was determined for the at-risk preschoolers starting at age three and for those who attended at age four. Students at the school attend five days a week. Preschoolers attend a two-and-a-half-hour program, while kindergarten students attend for five hours. The preschool at-risk program has an approximate 20% of students identified as low-income, 25% identified as ELLs, and 34% identified as having a variety of disabilities. Approximately 40% of students who attend the school’s at-risk preschool program attend the school’s kindergarten program, while 60% come from other preschool programs or have no previous schooling.

**Data Gathering Techniques**

In evaluating the at-risk preschool program at Kinder Hearts School, I utilized data from the screening tools used in kindergarten. It is important to note that during this study, our nation was battling the Covid-19 pandemic. This unexpected and distressing situation not only impacted our educational system in the classrooms, but also how parents involved themselves in their child’s education. During this time, schools were
closed, leading to an unexpected shift in the instructional delivery model used. This included for preschool children unfamiliar with technology as a direct form of instructional delivery.

To determine whether preschool preparedness for kindergarten, I used data from AIMSweb and Star 360 (as outlined in Chapter 1). AIMSweb, the literacy and math screener, provides information regarding a student’s performance and skills. Literacy assessments for kindergarteners consists of letter-naming fluency (LNF), letter-sound fluency (LWSF), nonsense-word fluency (NWF), and phoneme-segmentation fluency (PSF). The math test of early numeracy consists of an oral counting measure (OCM), a number-identification measure (NIM), quantity discrimination (QD), and missing number (MN). For the purpose of this study, data from LNF, LWSF, and OCM were used to compare student subgroup growth. The screening tool Star 360 measures early literacy and early numeracy skills. It provides reliable data and targets students’ phonological awareness, phonics, word recognition, fluency, and vocabulary, as well as early number recognition and counting. Both AIMSweb and Star 360 were administered three times (Fall, Winter, and Spring). Due to the pandemic, I was unable to collect Spring data; therefore, Fall and Winter data were analyzed and compared.

This evaluation will provide additional information regarding developmentally appropriate kindergarten-readiness skills and kindergarten teacher-curricular expectations on what skills preschoolers should attain during their preschool years. Using this data, the collection allowed for analysis to determine any misinterpretations in program expectations. The data collection was also important in answering the research questions as accurately as possible. The data provided information on strengths and weaknesses in
Kinder Hearts School’s preschool and kindergarten programs, in seeking to improve the school’s program and better understand age-appropriate skill expectations. The results of the evaluation will help determine areas where teachers need additional support or professional development to build on their current knowledge.

I also chose a quantitative method as the research design in an effort to use data that was available and could be used to guide in answering the research questions. Through this method I focused on using numbers to classify features and explain what is occurring within the program. Using this method helps not only to answer questions, but also guides in answering the research questions, hypothesizing reasons for what the data is demonstrating, and making conclusions from the data collected. Thus, in this study using this method created a way for the staff working with the program to use the data in a collaborative method to implement program changes.

**Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations for this research consisted of ensuring student identities were withheld, thus no personal identification was used. Classroom and teacher names were also removed to keep identities confidential. The real name of the school and district were also withheld to secure the identity of all connected to the district and school. Approval from the school district and National Louis University Institutional Review Board (IRB) were attained before this study was conducted. To reduce the possibility of identifiable data being accessed by unauthorized users, data was password-protected, encrypted, and stored securely.
Limitations

Limitations in this program evaluation included the possibility of missing student data due to changes in teaching staff or in retrieving data from the computer database, which stored the data. Another limitation included teacher expectations differing from classroom to classroom and from program to program: preschool programming differs from kindergarten programming in its instructional delivery model. The preschool model is play-based while kindergarten is structured, not play-based. The last limitation concerned the absence of direct observation of the children’s behavior in preschool and in kindergarten. These observations could have given additional information regarding student social interactions with peers, a part of the developmental process for a child’s learning.

Conclusion

The goal of this research was to determine whether the school’s preschool program is preparing students for kindergarten with the appropriate amount of readiness skills needed for academic success. If through this research concerns were found with the current guidelines regarding the play-based model, used throughout the state of Illinois, then further action would be recommended at the state level. The goal was to improve programming for successful implementation and results. The findings from this evaluation indicated whether children participating in an at-risk, play-based program are receiving adequate kindergarten-readiness skills for success in kindergarten. Using the results from this evaluation will help the district, school, and teams involved explore and apply new practices to improve the program, yielding successful results.
CHAPTER 4
As-Is Framework

In assessing and addressing the extent to which Kinder Hearts School at-risk preschool program is effectively preparing students with the pre-academic kindergarten readiness skills, I used Wagner’s 4C’s Framework of the context, culture, conditions, and competencies (Wagner et al., 2006) to better understand current methods and how they drive necessary changes for improvement of a program. The goal of this study was to evaluate and provide insight into the effectiveness of the school’s existing program design, and to inform future planning and decisions. Through this evaluation, the school’s program implementation might demonstrate the effectiveness of having a full play-based curriculum, as compared to using a different program model.

Wagner’s 4 C’s are identified as context, culture, conditions, and competencies. Context refers to the skill demands placed on all members of an organization, which according to Wagner, “means knowing more about the worlds from which students come and those for which they must be prepared” (Wagner et al., 2006, p. 104). Culture is described as shared values, beliefs, assumptions, and expectations, as well as the quality of the relationships within and beyond the organization. Competencies refers to the repertoire of skills and knowledge that influence our work, and conditions refer to the composition of time, space, and resources, that include funding within the schools. To assess the effectiveness of the program in this study, it was vital to understand the student population, school environment, the staff involved in the implementation of the program, and the community.
**Context**

In my 4 C’s As-Is diagram (Appendix A), context is defined as the outside factors beyond our control, but which can deeply influence the impact of the work the organization does. Wagner views context as “the ‘skills demand’ all students must meet to succeed as providers, learners, and citizens” (Wagner et al., 2006, p. 104). Context also refers to the larger organizational systems within which we work, and their demands and expectations, formal and informal (p. 104).

This program assessment involved one school within a small district, located in a Midwest city in Illinois, which serves preschool- and kindergarten-age children. The district is grade-centered, allowing for programming to be specific to age development. The school has nine classrooms, three of them designated as preschool classrooms and the other six designated for children of kindergarten age. Each preschool classroom has the following personnel: a highly qualified early-childhood teacher with a special education endorsement, a paraprofessional assigned to assist with the preschool program implementation, and support staff who push in to provide the school’s Tier 2 and Tier 3 therapeutic interventions. Five of the program sessions are two and a half hours long, meet five days a week, and follow a blended model. The sixth session is a special education classroom of students with higher needs and individualized educational plans.

For the purpose of this evaluation, I focused on the five classrooms with no children from the self-contained special education classrooms. The building administrator was also the district’s Multilingual Department Director, which impacted the amount of time dedicated to ensuring the preschool program meets state guidelines, while still providing students the necessary education to prepare them for higher level learning.
During this study the Kinder Hearts at-risk preschool program was funded by the State’s Preschool for All Grant (PFA), for children who have been identified as at-risk for academic failure, using the state’s program eligibility criteria. This funding specifically outlines the implementation of the program, the children served, and the utilization of a play-based curriculum. The grant guidelines require 65 minutes of choice play, 30 minutes of gross-motor activities, leaving 55 minutes for student arrival, small groups, whole group, and dismissal.

Preschool teachers at Kinder Hearts implement the creative curriculum model, which refrains from using pre-made worksheets and otherwise also follows the state grant guidelines. In utilizing Creative Curriculum, a natural focus in language development helps increase students’ social language skills. According to Gullickson et al. (2018), this curriculum advocates intentional and responsive planning and facilitating of the curriculum (p. 4). This program also includes “objectives that scaffold in a developmental scale, so teachers are provided information for scaffolding children’s thinking over time from the simple towards the complex and from the concrete to the abstract” (Gullickson et al., 2018, p. 4).

In comparing the preschool and kindergarten curriculum, one can note that the program used in kindergarten, Wit and Wisdom from Great Minds, was a newer curriculum the district adopted during the time of this study. It provides a structured delivery model for teachers to utilize as well as one that is skill driven. This program is a content-based design meant to challenge students at a higher level than what is expected at their grade level. Creative Curriculum utilizes a productive and active teaching approach that focuses on the whole child. For children who transition from the school’s
at-risk preschool program to kindergarten, noted differences in the curriculum, delivery, and expectations are encountered at times lead to difficulties adjusting by some. This difference in programming indicates a need for discussion between both preschool and kindergarten team members. These discussions are important to increasing student supports, decreasing student stress and difficulties as they begin their kindergarten year.

Due to grant funding and lack of local funds, intense language support service personnel were limited at Kinder Hearts School during this evaluation. Funding guidelines used to pay for the school’s speech pathologist and occupational therapist also determine how servicing is provided to students identified as having language or sensory deficits. This limits the therapist’s ability to service children not identified as needing special education. In providing additional in-class interventions, non-identified students would benefit from the additional therapeutic language models necessary to increase academic language skills that young learners thrive from. They would also provide support for children who experience sensory or motor delays at a young age. In strengthening these foundational skills our qualifying at-risk preschool students may demonstrate a decrease in the achievement gap. Decreases in achievement gaps reveal that the therapeutic services provided by staff hired through grant funds do impact student achievement.

The district’s hiring practices limit program staff’s involvement in selecting candidate(s) who could enhance the program with their knowledge and skills. In incorporating staff from both preschool and kindergarten as a part of the process, candidates viewed as able to meet the needs of the program have a greater opportunity to be selected. The program staff have a better understanding of the population of students
served and their needs; thus candidates with a strong understanding for culturally responsive teaching are likely to be hired, as a goal of strengthening the program in meeting student needs.

**Culture**

The building culture at Kinder Hearts School consists of staff who can generally be characterized as being positive and caring. The focus consists of ensuring that students meet expectations set as part of the school environment and that they demonstrate appropriate levels of developmental growth. According to Wagner et al. (2006, p. 102), the mindsets and meanings held individually and collectively throughout a system can influence or impede the progression of change in conditions. Culture is defined as “the invisible but powerful meanings and mindsets held individually and collectively throughout the system” (Wagner et al., 2006, p. 102). Within this program, some certified staff members could be viewed as “too involved” in their student’s lives, yet they perceive their role as being helpful and supportive. There is willingness to volunteer and dedicate personal time and resources to support students and families, as well as to connect families to outside agencies. This work can often shift the focus and purpose of working with students and families on a more personal and intimate level, leading to crossing of personal boundaries.

As a part of the school’s goal to increase parent education, and to decrease the areas their child was identified as being at-risk, certified staff create in-house workshops. The frequency of these educational programs or workshops—which specifically target the areas in which children demonstrate needing additional support—is limited; they are not held as often as they should, especially for our preschool families. This can be viewed
as a lost opportunity of the way to increase parent participation in the education of their child. Some inconsistency of parent volunteers within the school from the preschool program has been noted by the preschool teachers when reviewing parent sign in sheets. Through the state grant, parents are expected to volunteer and participate within their child’s program and educational opportunities, yet parent participation remains low. Teachers are creative in incorporating opportunities for parents to participate within their classroom settings. Language barriers or parent work schedules negatively impact the prospect of parents volunteering or learning educational strategies and skills to help support their children while learning at home.

Kindergarten teacher perception at the school, generally, includes that preschoolers are unprepared and lacking the appropriate readiness skills when they begin kindergarten. This finding is based on teacher discussions regarding the differences in classroom environments. Even though the PFA Grant has specific guidelines for program implementation, inconsistency in program structures, and implementation within the three classrooms has been noted during informal observations I have conducted. This can make it difficult for children when they transition into a more structured kindergarten classroom. Preschool classrooms are play-based, using a free-choice approach, while kindergarten classrooms are more defined in their instructional delivery. The kindergarten team uses worksheets to reinforce kindergarten skills, such as letter and number formations, while preschool teachers use foam, sand, and cookie sheets for children to demonstrate their knowledge. Observation of the kindergarten classrooms shows that students are expected to follow the teacher’s schedule and classroom expectations, while preschool classrooms are free-choice and structure is limited.
throughout the day. These differences in structure are not only programmatic, but also specific to the culture of the school, where kindergarten, the “new first grade”, is viewed nowadays as appropriate for teaching first-grade skills such as reading and writing.

In the current kindergarten curriculum, compared to a decade ago, the expectations of what students should know and demonstrate more closely resemble the academic expectations of a first-grader. In 2010, this Midwest state adopted the Common Core standards, moving away from a model that focused on the developmental growth of students through gross-motor and social activities. In 2013, state guidelines brought to school districts by the state’s board of education, required the new model to be fully implemented within kindergarten classrooms. With this new rigorous approach, lessons primarily focused on preschoolers acquiring academic skills in literacy and math, through teacher-guided structured activities. This led to teachers finding ways to close the developmental gaps students had not acquired in their programming before attending kindergarten.

The school’s multi-tiered system of support is a process that assists the school team in ensuring that children who struggle within the classroom setting receive the appropriate support in all developmental areas. When children in the school demonstrate difficulties with their developmental milestones, the school support staff will collaborate with the classroom teacher to create specific plans to decrease the areas of concerns. Students are placed in a tier level through a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) that falls into the following categories: Tier 1 consists of all students, Tier 2 consists of students who need additional support and interventions, and Tier 3 is a more individualized system of support, with intensive and frequent intervention.
In preschool, the educator team provides support within the classroom setting. This target of intervention allows for a more specific way to provide small-group instruction for children, but also support for teachers who are unsure exactly what to do or may not perceive a decrease of their preschoolers’ success with the strategies they use. This support process allows for documentation and results to be reviewed and discussed; it also includes parents in specific area(s) of the school team’s concerns. The implementation of interventions by support staff, such as the speech pathologist or occupational therapist, due to special education caseload requirements, leaves little time for these individuals to be directly involved in guiding the interventions.

In looking to minimize gaps of at-risk preschoolers, changing the hiring process and including preschool staff as a part of the interviews allows staff to ask specific questions that might enhance the program. Staff value and trust the opportunity for participating on the hiring team, and this also gives staff an open platform to build the preschool program’s current model and strengthening it.

**Conditions**

Wagner et al. (2006) states that “conditions represent the visible arrangements and allocations of time, space, and money” (p. 102). In the Midwest district of this study current district funding was limited and gave the program no opportunity for a dedicated speech pathologist or occupational therapist to serve its preschool students. The staff in these positions have the responsibility to provide services to IEP children in preschool, kindergarten, or to those who come in for itinerant services. When time permits, support is then offered to children in the preschool setting. In this school, some conditions influence the implementation of the support process within the program. The district’s
Director of Special Education influences the procedures used in decision-making and scheduling for special education staff, which ultimately impacts the servicing of at-risk children. Defined roles and responsibilities for contractual staff is ideally geared to the specific needs of the age group the team works with to avoid misunderstandings, and in working toward closing any achievement gaps. Any lack of district leadership knowledge regarding program specifics and understanding of the school’s culture, negatively impacts the process and team recommendations to provide additional support to students of concern. Increase of support staff can decrease gaps for children at an early age making it easier for them to attain skills for success in kindergarten.

Additionally, these tools for developing the preschool and kindergarten programs, allow teachers to collaborate and address the specific developmental stages of growth for children between ages three and six. Building staff have knowledge of child development yet need additional professional development to increase their knowledge on how to support preschoolers in language and motor skills. Due to PFA grant restrictions on how funding must be applied, professional development is limited for preschool team staff. Even though this staff is supported with options for professional development, the type of development is limited to the cost, rather than quality. Thus funding allocated to professional development specific to developmental practices of young learners is needed. In increasing quality professional development, a greater understanding of teaching diverse learners can enhance language and application for children learning English as a second language. The district does not require preschool teachers to have an ESL or special education endorsement prior to being hired, thus detrimental effects on the program can result.
Because the district uses a grade-centered approach, collaboration among schools and district-wide grade levels remains limited. Grade-centered programs can be a disadvantage for elementary schools in that they bypass an understanding of the developmental and academic progress of children in preschool and kindergarten before transitioning to the next grade level. Teacher lack of early childhood knowledge can stunt the focus of the development of the whole child to teacher perceptions of what should have been taught in the previous grade. Grade centers can also be viewed as emphasizing age specific fundamentals needed for developmental enrichment. As Wagner et al. (2006) states, conditions are “explicit expectations around roles and responsibilities, student outcomes tied to assessments, laws and policies contract” (p. 101). In analyzing the conditions at Kinder Hearts School, I had limited ability to drive changes because of barriers in the progression of these changes.

**Competencies**

Competencies, according to Wagner et al. (2006), “are most effectively built when professional development is focused, job-embedded, continuous, constructed, and collaborative” (p. 99). In analyzing Kinder Hearts School and its school district I observed that the district leadership team and staff lacked a deep understanding of the focus and development of preschool programs and the impact of early intervention on young learners. This limited knowledge creates barriers among staff members who assume that play-based learning cannot teach students the necessary readiness skills for transitioning to elementary grades. The limited knowledge also prevents additional support or personnel to decrease gaps early on. Opportunities to create cohesive observations and collaborations elude district leadership, as time constraints move the
focus to other areas of district concerns. The implementation of professional development specific to young learners would allow for more awareness of the program and possible effects of the minimal speech and motor support in place.

At Kinder Hearts School, understanding the developmental and social-emotional knowledge of at-risk children enrolled in the preschool program is key in asking questions that positively influence programming, such as What programming model is currently in place? How can the current model be improved using teacher skills learned at the professional development training? What other professional development is needed and how can staff attending share with others to more broadly improve current practices? Part of creating a learning environment that contributes to the development of young learners is implementing collegial conversations that guide stronger practices, and an understanding of what is in place, and then to enhance these. In analyzing and reflecting on kindergarten-readiness data, language and motor development may demonstrate whether skills indicate appropriate growth for children of this age group, or whether they need additional support staff. It is imperative that the school not only support teachers with additional professional development, but also use that development within the practice and determine whether it improves the program.

Staff at Kinder Hearts school is knowledgeable in using creative approaches to reach young learners, yet can benefit from increasing their knowledge in the application of culturally responsive teaching within their practices. There is a need for understanding the importance of including students’ cultural references in all aspects of early learning. Such understanding creates opportunities for student social-emotional connections and confidence-building as they navigate their learning environments. Teachers also use state
criteria to enhance lessons and increase student understanding via technology as needed, when appropriate, and in supporting specific language needs. Lesson modifications are made to certify that students with special needs or preferred learning styles are given appropriate assistance in skills development.

The preschool team struggles with the in-depth understanding of the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS 3). They specifically struggle with how to implement some of the more particular indicators related to free play and how not only to implement teacher-led activities, but to creatively encourage conversations while monitoring and collecting student data. Incorporating specific professional development to address the purpose for ECERS, and how it can be used within instructional practices as a method of connecting the application of techniques and skills for student growth, enriches staff knowledge.

By applying Wagner’s 4 C’s to Kinder Hearts at-risk preschool program, we might create more possibilities for achieving success, especially in implementing program changes focused on student learning. Professional development can positively influence the delivery of instruction and adult learning, as well as increase district leadership knowledge regarding preschool programming.

**Results**

The purpose of this study was to determine to what extent a play-based model effectively prepares at-risk preschoolers for kindergarten. To better understand the data collected, I organized the discussion into three parts: Interpretations, Judgments, and Recommendations. Interpretations compares the academic progress for kindergarten students who attended the Kinder Hearts preschool program to students who attended or
did not attend another program. Judgments discusses whether the district’s preschool program has prepared students with an adequate amount of academic readiness skills using a play-based model.

It was important to define kindergarten-readiness skills for a better understanding of the data as results were reviewed. For the purpose of this study, kindergarten-readiness skills for Fall included any student testing within the 26th percentile range in AimsWeb and testing within the 40th percentile in Star 360. These percentile ranges were selected by the school district’s administrative team working closely with the district’s psychologist. These percentile ranges place children at the Average range, according to both assessment systems. These ranges form a baseline for teachers to use when reviewing data and determining areas of academic need.

This study includes data from 184 kindergarten students enrolled at Kinder Hearts School. Of these 111 were males and 73 females, for their kindergarten years 2018-2019.
or 2019-2020. Student demographic information included race, income status, ELL status, and if the child qualified for special education, or had an individualized educational plan (IEP). Student race in this study divided into 41.8% white, 19% Hispanic, 13% African American, 9.2% other/multiple races, 8.2% Indian, 6.5% Arabic, and 2.2% Asian (Figure 1). A review of income status (Figure 2) indicated that 37.5% of the students qualified for free lunches and 3.8% qualified for reduced lunches. Figure 3 illustrates that 17.9% qualified for English Language support in kindergarten (ELL services), while Figure 4 shows 5.4% have an IEP, and 8.2% received early intervention (EI) services before the age of three yet were dismissed before entering Kinder Hearts. These findings demonstrate that student participants in this study met their goals and no longer qualified for special education services.

The student population served by the program points to a better understanding of student needs that must be addressed through the program delivery. To answer the research questions for this study, I analyzed AimsWeb and Star 360 screening assessments administered to kindergarten students three times a year. I utilized national percentile ranking on Fall and Winter kindergarten screening data to determine if any difference appeared in mean scores for students in the following three groups: students who attended Kinder Hearts preschool, students who attended no preschool programming, and students who attended private preschool programming.

An analysis of the Star 360 Early Literacy Fall Data (Table 1) demonstrated no statistically significant difference between groups as determined by the one-way ANOVA (F = .823, p = .441). The significance value was above 0.05 and, therefore, no statistically
significant differences appeared in the Star 360 Fall Early Literacy mean scores of these three categories of students.

Table 1

*Anova Tests of Between-group Effects with Star 360 Data for Different Preschool Exposure Categories*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sum of Squares</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>STAR360 Early Literacy</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall PR</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between Groups</td>
<td>1348.139</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>674.069</td>
<td>0.823</td>
<td>0.441</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>148275.69</td>
<td>181</td>
<td>819.203</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>149623.83</td>
<td>183</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>STAR360 Early Literacy</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winter PR</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between Groups</td>
<td>1546.866</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>773.433</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td>0.412</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>157244.61</td>
<td>181</td>
<td>868.755</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>158791.48</td>
<td>183</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In further analysis of the data, I found that Star 360 Early Literacy Winter data also demonstrated no statistically significant difference among groups as determined by the one-way ANOVA ($F = .890, p = .412$). The significance value was above 0.05, meaning no statistically significant differences appeared in the Star 360 Winter Early Literacy mean square of these three categories of students.

The mean scores shown in Table 2 revealed that each category of students demonstrated growth when comparing Star 360 Fall-to-Winter percentile ranks. Students who attended no preschool program had a mean score of 41.7 in Fall and 47.78 in Winter. Students who attended the district’s preschool program had a mean score of 39.71 in Fall and 47.24 in Winter. Students who attended private programming had a mean score of...
45.55 in Fall and 53.19 in Winter. Thus, students who attended private preschool performed better than those who attended Kinder Hearts or had no preschool exposure.

**Table 2**

*Star 360 Mean Scores*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preschool Program</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>STAR 360 Early Literacy Fall PR</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Didn't attend any</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>41.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District Program</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>39.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private Program</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>45.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>STAR 360 Early Literacy Winter PR</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Didn't attend any</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>47.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District Program</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>47.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private Program</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>53.19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An analysis of AimsWeb Fall Letter Naming Fluency (LNF; Table 3) data revealed a statistically significant difference among groups as determined by the one-way ANOVA (F = 3.983, p = .020). The significance value was below 0.05 and therefore, statistically significant differences appeared in the AimsWeb Fall LNF mean square of these three categories of students. AimsWeb LNF Winter Data (Table 3) demonstrated no statistically significant difference between groups as determined by the one-way ANOVA (F = 1.080, p = .342). The significance value was above 0.05 and therefore, no statistically significant differences appeared in the LNF mean scores of these three categories of students for Winter. An analysis of the AimsWeb Letter Sound Fluency (LWSF) Fall Data (Table 3) demonstrated no statistically significant difference between groups as determined by the one-way ANOVA (F = 1.188, p = .307). The significance value was above 0.05 and therefore not statistically significant in the LWSF mean squares of these three categories of students.
An analysis of the AimsWeb Number Identification Measure (NIM) Fall Data (Table 3) demonstrated no statistically significant difference between groups as determined by the one-way ANOVA ($F = .391, p = .677$). The significance value was above 0.05, meaning no statistically significant differences in the NIM mean scores of these three categories of students. An analysis of the AimsWeb NIM Winter data demonstrated no statistically significant difference between groups as determined by the one-way ANOVA ($F = .382, p = .683$). The significance value was above 0.05, meaning no statistically significant differences in the NIM mean scores of these three categories of students.

**Table 3**

*Anova Tests of Between-group Effects with AimsWeb Data for Different Preschool Exposure Categories*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent Variable</th>
<th>Grouping</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>K AimsWeb Fall LNF PR</td>
<td>Between Groups</td>
<td>2951.552</td>
<td>3.983</td>
<td>.020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>741.016</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K AimsWeb Winter LNF PR</td>
<td>Between Groups</td>
<td>796.430</td>
<td>1.080</td>
<td>.342</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>737.168</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K AimsWeb Fall LWSF PR</td>
<td>Between Groups</td>
<td>897.696</td>
<td>1.188</td>
<td>.307</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>755.500</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K AimsWeb Winter LWSF PR</td>
<td>Between Groups</td>
<td>1818.999</td>
<td>3.215</td>
<td>.042</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>565.716</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K AimsWeb Fall NIM PR</td>
<td>Between Groups</td>
<td>307.909</td>
<td>.391</td>
<td>.677</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>786.614</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K AimsWeb Winter NIM PR</td>
<td>Between Groups</td>
<td>251.799</td>
<td>.382</td>
<td>.683</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>658.369</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The mean scores, as noted in Figure 5, revealed that each category of students demonstrated growth in comparison to AimsWeb Fall to Winter percentile ranks. Students who did not attend the district’s preschool program had a mean score of 32.3 in
Fall and 44.15 in Winter. Students who attended the district’s preschool program had a mean score of 42.79 in Fall and 48.62 in Winter. Students who attended private programming had a mean score of 48.82 in Fall and 52.45 in Winter.

*Figure 5. AimsWeb LNF Mean Scores.*

![AimsWeb LNF Mean Scores](image)

The mean score (Figure 6) revealed that not every category of student demonstrated growth in comparison to the AimsWeb Fall-to-Winter percentile. Students who did not attend preschool had a mean score of 46.44 in Fall and 45.37 in Winter. Students who attended preschool had a mean score of 55.14 in Fall and 52.83 in Winter. The only group of students who demonstrated growth were students who attended private programming. This group had a mean score of 55.36 in Fall and 58.14 in Winter. This data demonstrated that students who attended private preschool increased their skills, while students who didn’t attend preschool, or students who attended Kinder Hearts, demonstrated no growth.
In the Fall, as shown in Figure 7, students who attended the Kinder Hearts program had a NIM score of 51.35; students who attended no preschool programs had a mean score of 45.85, and students enrolled in other or private programs had a mean score of 50.65. Winter data showed that the students who attended the district’s preschool program, when compared to their peers, had a mean score of 53.76; students who attended no preschool school programs had a mean score of 57.78, and students who attended another or private program had a mean score of 56.98. The difference in scores shows that, although students who attended the district preschool program demonstrated growth, they performed lower in the Winter in comparison to the other two categories of peers, and not in the Fall. Students who attended no programming demonstrated greater growth, compared to the other two groups: students who attended the at-risk program and students who attended private preschool.
A Bonferroni post-hoc test (Table 4) revealed that the mean scores on the Fall AimsWeb LNF was statistically significantly higher for students in the category of attending private programming compared to the groups that did not attend a program (p = 0.019). There was no statistically significant difference between children who attended Kinder Hearts Preschool Program in comparison to children who attended another program (p = .516) or did not attend preschool (p = .280). Table 4 also revealed that the mean scores on the Fall AimsWeb LSWF were not significantly higher statistically for students in the category of attending another or private program, compared to the groups not attending a program (p = 0.421). There was also no statistically significant difference between children who attended Kinder Hearts Preschool Program in comparison to children who attended another program (p = 1) or not attending preschool (p = .504).

The LWSF test data demonstrated a statistically significant difference between groups as determined by the one-way ANOVA test (F = 3.215, p = .042). The
significance value was below 0.05 and therefore showed statistically significant differences in the AimsWeb Winter LWSF mean squares of these three categories of students.

**Table 4**

*AimsWeb Post-hoc Comparisons Using Bonferroni Mean Differences.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent Variable</th>
<th>(I) PreSchool Program</th>
<th>(J) PreSchool Program</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean Difference (I-J)</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>District Program</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>-10.492</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Private Program</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>-16.528*</td>
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<td>10.492</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>0.516</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Private Program</td>
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<td>27</td>
<td>16.528*</td>
<td>0.019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>K AimsWeb Winter LNF PR</td>
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<td>District Program</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>4.473</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
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<td></td>
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<td>District Program</td>
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<td>-8.692</td>
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<tr>
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<td>8.692</td>
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<td>K AimsWeb Winter LWSF PR</td>
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In reviewing the findings, additional questions arose regarding the differences in scores comparing Kinder Hearts students to the other two student groups. For example, why did the school’s preschool students decrease in math Winter skills on AimsWeb in comparison to their peers? Was it the math curriculum being used in kindergarten? Are teacher expectations more than what is developmentally appropriate? Is there a lack of differentiation in the kindergarten classroom setting that will help decrease gaps? In looking to answer these questions the first step included incorporating professional development that targets building teacher knowledge to understand how to increase appropriate developmental math skills using a play-based model for preschool age children. I also reviewed the math curriculum used to determine whether it meets the needs of all students. Other questions I pondered included: Why did student scores not increase in the Winter since these students had a small advantage in scores when assessed in the Fall? Was this due to the structure of the kindergarten program? Was it the curriculum? Was it the fact that these students were previously identified as having at-risk factors that could potentially impact their academic achievement?

Interpretations

The data demonstrated that the children who attended the school’s preschool program are entering kindergarten at the same level of readiness as their peers who had no preschool experience or attended other programs. The data also showed a definite pattern in the Fall, even though not statistically significant. Children who attended no programming had a lower mean score than students who attended Kinder Hearts preschool program. Kinder Hearts preschoolers had lower mean scores on these benchmarking assessments compared to children who attended private preschool
programs. Even though a difference appeared, the play-based model still resulted in a higher mean score for basic academic skills compared to no preschool instruction. The data might have been more statistically significant if these students were not at-risk as defined by the school’s screening criteria: at least 10% delay in concepts, communication, or motor or social-emotional factors.

In this study, children with no preschool experience were at home with their parent, grandmother, or family member during the day, where activities were not structured or directed toward academic enrichment. The play-based model had no significant impact on student academic performance in comparison to their kindergarten peers. Another difference noted was that, when assessed with AimsWeb LNF, children who attended no preschool programs had statistically significantly lower skills in letter-naming fluency in comparison to students who attended other private preschool programs. This finding may be due to the differences in the type of curriculum (or lack of) or the differences in the levels of exposure to pre-academic concepts.

Winter letter-word sound fluency (LWSF) data demonstrated that children who attended private preschool programs performed statistically significantly higher than children who attended no preschool programs. This difference may result because children who attend private preschool programs have more opportunities for early and frequent exposure with peers, leading to increasing their vocabulary and early literacy skills. These students may also have a better foundation and early start with their pre-academic skills in a systematic and structured way, which could have increased their developmental readiness for academic concepts.
Interestingly, students from all three categories entered kindergarten with similar levels of number-identification skills, regardless of their preschool experiences. The data showed that students who attended the district preschool lost the slight advantage they had in math skills at the start of the school year, compared to their peers who attended another program. This loss may be attributed to the district preschool students not receiving as much individualized instruction in the area of math concepts. This preschool program is language-based, with literacy as the focus of targets for developing academic skills within the play-based model implemented. It is possible that private preschool programs also focus on using a play-based model as their instructional framework, while staff are also free to use worksheets and other means in their instructional approaches. As a society, we often place an emphasis on literacy skills that include letter names, sounds, word-reading, and phonics, whereas mathematics is often not an instructional priority within home and preschool settings. This finding could be followed up by investigating how the Kinder Hearts Preschool Program can increase and include more opportunities for enrichment of math skills through play.

**Judgments**

The effectiveness of at-risk preschool programming on kindergarten-readiness skills was the focus of this study. The main research question posed was whether the programming itself prepared students with kindergarten-readiness skills. If play-based programming is ineffective in preparing students with the appropriate readiness skills, then children in this study would have shown a lack of necessary academic-readiness skills to successfully transition into kindergarten, resulting in students not attaining expected academic achievement.
The first research question’s primary focus was to measure the extent to which a play-based model effectively prepared at-risk preschoolers for kindergarten. The data demonstrated that although a difference appeared between the groups assessed, it was not statistically significant. Students who attended other placements demonstrated higher scores than the other subgroups, yet the difference fell nowhere near a point to raise concerns or change the instructional delivery of these students beyond classroom differentiation. These scores need not have demonstrated the overall developmental growth of the children, whose data was used in all developing areas. Academic achievement was only one component of focus in this study, and students who attended the school’s preschool program had learning gains in other developmental areas, such as social-emotional, motor, and language skills. These gains consisted of decreasing or closing of gaps determined as noted during the program’s eligibility screening process.

The second research question was whether kindergarten school readiness expectations at Kinder Hearts school developmentally appropriate for incoming students. When reviewing at the classroom expectations, I observed that teacher expectations for kindergarteners was comparable to that of children in the 1st grade. Teachers expressed concerns regarding student pre-academic knowledge when discussing children who attended the school’s at-risk preschool program, stating that children who attended other programming were performing better than the school’s preschoolers. It was important to note that children who attended the school’s preschool program were identified as at-risk for academic failure. Through the school’s preschool screening process, gaps were noted in their development, which led to their acceptance into the school’s state-funded at-risk preschool program. Teacher perceptions were based on their current knowledge of the
student and not on understanding and knowing the student when they entered the program.

This piece is essential for addressing whether the play-based program addresses kindergarten-readiness skills, leading to the third research question in the study: whether it was Kinder Heart’s play-based preschool program, specifically, that did not prepare students with the appropriate amount of kindergarten-readiness skills needed for success in its kindergarten program. The data appears to show that, even though children enrolled the school’s preschool program performed better than children who attended no program and—in some academic screening—areas lower or similar, growth was made in the pre-academic skills measured. Even though children who attended private programming performed a bit better than children who attended the school’s preschool program, they performed at a rate of no statistical difference. Also, 27% of students who attended private programming, 52% of students who attended no programming, and 67% of students who attended Kinder Hearts School were on free or reduced lunch. It was interesting to see this program’s language focus noted in math data, which held similar results. This finding demonstrates that the school should increase math-play activities in preschool to increase student skills in mathematics.

The final research question asked whether student growth was influenced by a lack of understanding by stakeholders on what the program entailed. Parents are essential in their child’s education. This preschool program incorporated parent involvement with at-home activities that bridged both environments. It also incorporated parents in student in-school activities, as well as field trips connecting teachers to educating parents in how to best help their children. The data showed that the addition of a parent educator to the
preschool program increased parent awareness of kindergarten expectations. The goal of this additional staff member was to help support families with student pre-academic expectations over the summer before their kindergarten school year began. Whether parent involvement played a role in student kindergarten-readiness skills was not directly defined or determined yet the role of the parent educator did demonstrate effectiveness in creating opportunities for parents to be connected to their child’s school and education.

At Kinder Hearts school, the parent educator created monthly newsletters that targeted specific developmental milestones. The goal was to find ways to educate parents on school readiness skills and provide strategies for play at home. This method of communication provided parents an opportunity to ask questions, be offered resources, and feel supported. In addition, electronic and paper parent surveys were sent home with follow up discussions among the school staff regarding parent concerns and/or input. This led to the implementation of parent workshops focus on behavioral strategies, language development, and motor enrichment activities as one way to support parent concerns. These workshops were offered virtually to assist in removing any barriers that may have negatively impacted a parent’s ability to participate. The role and addition of the parent educator provided support to both parents and staff leading to increased communication.

**Recommendations**

In analyzing the results of the study on whether preschool children at Kinder Hearts School were prepared with effective kindergarten readiness skills, I noticed a lack of understanding of the benefits of a preschool play-based model. First, I would recommend that kindergarten teachers attend training with specific focus on a preschool
play-based model and the developmental target this program model addresses. Teaching staff would also benefit from receiving training that increases their understanding of at-risk gaps and the impact such gaps have on academic achievement. In addressing staff understanding and interpretation of programming, thoughtful changes can then occur in approaching student needs and growth. Staff might also gain a better knowledge of the differences in the preschool and kindergarten models, which would help the preschool team to better understand the curricular expectations of students in kindergarten, and increase chances of students’ smooth transition to 1st grade. The increase in such knowledge also allows collegial conversations between both grade levels.

Second, I would recommend in-depth discussion with the board of education regarding allocation of funds to support additional staff in the preschool program, specifically in the area of speech and language. In hiring an additional speech pathologist, the program would boost student language skills, which tie into academic understanding of sounds, comprehension, and application of academic language. This would also allow discussion on how to develop ways of using current staff to fill gaps for student achievement if funding allocation isn’t possible. The incorporation of whole-group activities given by the speech pathologist in kindergarten classrooms would provide teachers skills to incorporate within their instructional delivery. This improvement would also apply to increasing support from the occupational therapist from an agency. In the district funding for their own specialist, the program might give more direct in-person support to students and staff. Teachers could then apply given strategies followed by support from the specialist in the area. A review of outsource cost to salary would entail the benefits of having the district’s own therapist.
The final recommendation would be for teachers to collaborate with the new school principal as a goal of discussing and analyzing this study’s results. This would allow for partnering in advocating for additional support staff and collaborating on reforms that positively impact student performance. A cohesive discussion could lead to increases in strengthening kindergarten-readiness skills as preschoolers prepare to transition to kindergarten. In working together to continue targeting program goals, we improve student achievement in all developmental areas.

**Conclusion**

Although the topic was whether preschoolers in this specific program were prepared with effective kindergarten readiness skills, the importance of understanding the definition of readiness and how at-risk factors can impact student achievement increased the interpretation of results. In comparing measurements of students in Fall and Winter semesters, the data review showed that students in the Kinder Hearts preschool program demonstrated growth in pre-academic skills. I stress the importance of the different delivery model used in preschool from that of the kindergarten model, as well as student at-risk factors in qualifying for this state-funded preschool program to exhibit the differences in programming and results.
CHAPTER 5

To-Be Framework

The purpose of this evaluation was to determine whether the preschool program housed at Kinder Heart’s School effectively prepares preschoolers with appropriate kindergarten-readiness skills while following the state model and guided by the grant that funds the program. Kindergarten-readiness target skills are traditionally established by the assessments administered or by district criteria. Main findings from this study demonstrated statistically significantly higher differences in AIMSweb Fall scores in LNF and LWSF for students who attended another preschool program, compared to peers who attended no such programs. No significant differences appeared in the data between children who attended Kinder Hearts Preschool Program and children who attended another program. On the AIMSweb NIM, however, the data showed that although the mean score differences between students who attended the school’s preschool program were not significantly different than the other two categories, Winter scores of students who attended the Kinder Hearts Preschool were lower than those of the other two categories of their peers.

In developing the To-Be diagram (Appendix B), which refers to the district’s board of education, district leadership team, and staff, new visions were realized. Whereas attention to the As-Is diagram (Appendix A) contexts, conditions, competencies, and culture (Wagner’s 4 C’s) enhance the current program model, strengthening the program delivery. Addressing, enhancing, and modifying areas of concern may well enrich the program delivery while meeting state requirements. If this To Be framework is
successfully applied, then the areas of contexts, conditions, competencies, and culture should strengthen the program, resulting in reinforcement of kindergarten readiness skills for children enrolled in the program.

**Envisioning the Success of To-Be Framework**

**To-Be Context**

The program evaluation focused on just the Kinder Hearts School, which has three preschool classrooms with three certified teachers, and three paraprofessionals. Each preschool session was two and half hours in length. A total of five sessions are funded by the Preschool for All Grant for children at risk of academic failure. Funding specifically outlines the implementation of the program, the children served, and the utilization of a play-based curriculum. Grant guidelines require 65 minutes of choice play, 30 minutes of gross-motor activities, leaving 55 minutes for arrival, small groups, whole group, and dismissal. The grant restricts the application of pre-made worksheets for students as an approach to ensuring student creativity.

Staff salaries paid by the grant limit who can be paid using grant funding. The grant funds certified teachers, but not the salaries of support service personnel, such as the ELL teacher, special education resource teacher, speech pathologist, social worker, occupational therapist, or physical therapist. This exclusion for paying salaries for these providers can hinder the goal of decreasing the achievement gap for our qualifying at-risk preschool students. In modifying the allocation of grant dollars to fund additional program personnel, I contend that children will receive direct servicing if a need for skill strengthening occurs. A discussion of this issue with our district board of education and
the chief officer of business finance, may result in the addition of support staff members specific to the preschool program.

The program operates with the assistance of support service personnel not funded by the grant yet falling under guidelines of what the district deems best for children. This allows a focus on the whole child, especially when addressing areas of weakness. Within this context, the study shows a need for improvement in teacher knowledge of the Illinois Early Learning Standards, and the Illinois Common Core Kindergarten Learning Standards. Teacher application of knowledge in understanding the correlation of between the standards will increase their efficacy in building a strong foundation, while also maintaining a developmentally appropriate curriculum. In providing support and increasing professional development specific to the areas of need we allow for continued growth and enrichment within the program context and model.

Grant funding limits (by amount and certain restrictions on the percentage of funds utilized) the school’s ability to service all children who qualify for placement in the program. Kinder Hearts preschool program includes children in the community who have been screened for at-risk developmental factors and thus qualified for placement in the program. To use grant funding to add another classroom teacher for preschool, for example, would provide academic and social support to students transitioning into kindergarten, and the opportunity to service more children on the wait list. The more children provided services in the program, the higher the likelihood for decreasing gaps in developmental skills and increasing the success in attaining kindergarten readiness skills.
To-Be Culture

There is a perception by kindergarten teachers at Kinder Hearts that preschoolers are not prepared with the appropriate kindergarten readiness skills. The lack of understanding of what the preschool program entails causes teachers misperceptions of what the program approach should consist of. This lack of knowledge also creates misunderstandings and misdirection on the delivery of instruction and development of program goals. Supporting teachers with professional development for better understanding age development, in relation to skills children attain, can create opportunities for conversations to occur. This support entails adjusting expectations as students begin kindergarten. As the administrator of this program, informal classroom observations led to discussions on how to increase the incorporation of support staff in the classroom to provide small-group instruction to not only support teachers but to also increase student skills. The incorporation of additional support staff also increases the collaboration and intervention implementation for students who need intensified support by early childhood specialists. Increasing the support and education of staff can enhance the delivery of instruction to students enrolled in the program.

To-Be Conditions

In the analysis of this program, I noted opportunities to enrich the instructional delivery to students, families, and staff. These opportunities include the addition of support staff to decrease gaps and provide specific dedication to the developmental milestones that lead to success in preschool and kindergarten settings. The district allocates no funds for supporting the salaries of a dedicated speech pathologist or occupational therapist who serve only preschool students. Expanding these roles with the
addition of personnel directly contributes to the increase of preschool children’s understanding of language and in creating specific opportunities for skill development within the classroom setting for children of an early age. Kinder Hearts School currently provides opportunities for teachers to increase their knowledge of child development and better understand how to support areas of concern through professional development, but the addition of a dedicated speech pathologist and occupational therapist to the program would allow greater understanding and implementation of direct services to students. Teachers could then attain improved insight on how to include specific strategies within their instructional delivery.

Educating the district’s board of education and leadership team would increase their understanding of the dynamics of the preschool environment and the needs of the program. More collaboration among program staff and the leadership team can provide greater awareness of how to best apply grant or district funds to ensure the program receives needed tools for enriching the delivery model. This would include the incorporation of frequent times built into a calendar, with specific goals to target discussion of program needs and professional development opportunities. When incorporating a unified policymaking model to address enriching the delivery of instructional practices these goals can benefit teachers, service providers, the leadership team, and families. The one-size-fits-all concept of the current practice would thus be replaced with a custom-fitted planning and design. Changing the systems in place to include time for the director of special education to meet and examine individual children transitioning from early intervention, would increase staff input in the decision-making process for program placement.
To-Be Competencies

According to Wagner et al. (2006), one can solve problems creatively without competencies. In its building capacity, the Kinder Hearts School administrator’s use of a coaching model would increase the district’s administrative staff’s understanding of Kinder Hearts preschool program through trainings specific to preschoolers. Ideally administrators would meet the goal of volunteering to assist in preschool classrooms at least once a month, as a method to building a better understanding of the developmental ages the program serves. This volunteer contribution would increase the connection between district administration and staff. As part of the process, staff would continue to attend workshops that provide strategies and in-depth knowledge regarding early childhood development. The preschool team would be given expectations of the roles they would play after attending trainings, which themselves would include incorporating in-house professional development by the preschool team. In sharing their knowledge with building staff, open collegial conversations could occur among various district groups. With this model, kindergarten teachers can improve their understanding of the play-based model and program requirements. The in-depth comprehension of the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS 3) unlocks opportunities for instructional creativity that teachers need to review or receive reassurance for as they seek to modify and build on current practices.

Conclusion

My vision for the To-Be framework focuses on the allocation of grant funds that allow for hiring additional personnel to support students and decrease at-risk student achievement gaps. The application of specific professional development necessary to
create effective goals for student skill attainment would provide opportunities for enhanced collaboration between all stakeholders. Ensuring that a continuous program review and discussion occur regarding student performance is essential in maintaining the vision and goals of the program.
CHAPTER 6
Strategies and Actions

The purpose of this program evaluation was to determine whether the current preschool program housed at Kinder Heart School effectively prepares preschoolers with appropriate kindergarten readiness skills. In employing Wagner’s 4 C’s in the previous As-Is section (Appendix A), I noted organizational systems that, if ideally changed as proposed in the To-Be framework, would systematically transform the culture, conditions, context, and competencies of the program to improve the educational performance of students in kindergarten. To effectively apply the To-Be framework (Appendix B), I have devised five strategies to assist in enhancing their performance. I outline these in the list of Strategies and Actions (Appendix C).

**Strategy 1: Increase Instructional Services That Influence Student Achievement in Kindergarten**

Specific grant guidelines impact the allocation of funds and how these funds are utilized within this program. In gaining funding to hire another teacher, specifically to target language skills, more children will have the opportunity to meet acceptance criteria and at least be on the waitlist to begin the program without further delays. This is highly important when gaps noted through their preschool screening are present in the child’s development, because “Too many children in high-needs schools not only start behind their peers in more affluent schools, but also begin a negative and immutable trajectory in mathematics with damaging long-term effects” (Spelman et al., 2016, p. 40).

A large percentage of such children remain in the district and transition to the school’s kindergarten program when they turn of age. The additional funds for a teacher
helps the program to increase student membership with a focus on supporting and providing pre-academic readiness skills in preparation for kindergarten. Increasing the staff, specifically the addition of a preschool classroom teacher, a speech and language pathologist, and full-time occupational therapist, would allow enrollment acceptance and instructional service to children as a preventive measure, closing gaps in their developmental skills.

Communicating and including the board of education in the conversation on the benefits of distributing funds from other grant sources can also serve as a tool in supporting the request for additional staff. Funding from other grant sources, such as IDEA, would provide a precise level of support services to children at an early age, directly serving their needs without first identifying a disability. The staff can thus create and provide detailed individual student goals while providing service in a tiered model to decrease the possibility of developmental gaps in student achievement. In increasing the staff that provides language support, for example, children with access to therapy might not only decrease their errors in speech, but also increase their understanding and application of language in preparation for meeting the academic expectations in kindergarten. Sawyer et al. (2017) found that if caregivers were given the right speech training, they could increase the articulation rate of their charges (p. 804).

In working toward the school’s goal to increase parent participation, education, and school connection through teacher modeling and in school workshops, we might first hire a parent educator who bridges the gap between children’s home and school experiences. To increase parent knowledge, one focus would be on preparing families for what to expect during their child’s kindergarten year, so as to ensure that parents better
understand the role preschool plays in their child’s development. We might thus demonstrate to the board the benefits of hiring a parent educator who not only informs parents on how to best support their children during their entire education, but also effectively connects the child to both home and school. This strategy bridges the connection between both environments, allowing parents to be true partners in their child’s education. This partnership between parents and staff also forms an asset in the relational trust-building that leads to effective communication and leadership.

**Strategy 2: Policy – Creating the Intentional Decision-making Mindset**

“Policymakers, researchers, and educators agree that high-quality early education is essential for all children” (Yeager Pelatti et al., 2016, p. 830). During the time of this current study, the district process promoted trust within the district leadership team, designating the director of special education as the sole interviewer and decision-maker in the hiring of support staff, contractual staff, and preschool teachers. Trust in this scenario is viewed as a negative approach in leading and guiding the vision of the district when it is in the hands of one person. One person hiring creates a divide between the implementation of the district’s vision. The strategy of creating an intentional decision-making mindset involves demonstrating and presenting to the district’s board of education the ineffectiveness of the current process, which allows no collegial conversation or hiring committee approach.

In presenting research-based approaches and models to the board and district superintendent, these stakeholders might view the advantages of changing how the process currently works. Focusing on creating a district hiring policy would involve garnering input from other district leadership team-members and staff who represent a
wider spectrum of the educational arena in the process. The process will also need to incorporate specific criteria for the candidates, for example, that they possess or be in the process of attaining specific endorsements, such as ESL or special education. In a change from the current policy, building administrators will have the opportunity to discuss, review expectations, and create schedules with new staff members, rather than these members receiving the directive from the special education director.

**Strategy 3: PLC – Making Space for Innovation**

Innovative classroom environments create openness and flexibility conducive to student learning. To maintain the focus of developing and increasing staff knowledge in student development, learning opportunities must be provided and made accessible by teachers in a variety of contexts. One way for administrators to collaborate is for them to develop a common plan time once a month, thus increasing teacher collaboration among each other across the district. Killion (2015) noted that “Teachers’ rate of improvement increases more rapidly if they work in a school with higher-quality collaboration than they would if they worked in a school with lower-quality collaboration” (p. 63).

Establishing specific objectives that lead conversations and create understanding between grade centers on appropriate student development, targets achievement gaps by developing ways to encourage students to communicate using their reasoning skills, thus exploring their learning environments, and increasing their ability to problem-solve. These skills contribute to the acquired characteristics students need to become life-long learners.

In the current process for placing at-risk children or children with IEPs, the director states which children need to be placed in the program, thus bypassing the
screening process. There aren’t any guidelines or a process being following. In a monthly collaboration meeting between the special education director and school screening team, to review the eligibility and profiles of children transitioning from early intervention to preschool, the team will better understand the issues from the perspective of the whole child. In implementing specific steps and procedures, for example, with a flow chart, the team might first determine whether the child needs to be screened, and if the documentation submitted by the Early Intervention providers gives appropriate information for placement decisions to be made. The decision on placement would then be a part of the screening team’s process, not solely the decision of one person. When one person makes the decision, there’s bias and a lack of different people gauging the candidate to find the right fit for the program.

When preschoolers demonstrate difficulties with their developmental milestones, support staff continuously work to create an individualized plan for additional support. Their goal is to increase the student’s knowledge in preparation for kindergarten. In this process collaboration among staff members needs consistency and flow in the intervention. The flow needs to have a sequential order that will continuously build upon student knowledge and skills. Through targeting and improving teacher depth of knowledge and understanding of the ECERS 3, the staff develops a better understanding of the creative approaches that reach young learners in preparation for kindergarten. For example, teachers might do collaborative walk-throughs following the ECERS checklist to better understand the expectations and criteria for children’s’ meeting classroom environment goals. Reaching out to neighboring districts and community organizations will assist in increasing collaboration through the implementation of high-quality
practices. Preschool staff at Kinder Hearts School can expand their expertise as they formulate and modify their process to better the experience for the children they serve.

**Strategy 4: Professional Development – Targeted Professional Development to Increase Overall Competencies**

Program development is often dependent on staff attending professional development workshops, especially those specific to the developmental age group. However, “Studies examining teacher change have suggested that traditional in-service training carries risks of superficiality and fragmentation” (Spelman et al., 2016, p. 30). In any program, some areas of emphasis lead to reinforcement of the importance of early childhood development and the benefits and strengths of learning through play. Thus, the program administrator might review the needs of the program and generate areas of improvement for each preschool teacher. Using a coaching model, the administrator could increase administrative and staff understanding of early child development, and their awareness of the district’s preschool program. Currently this is an area of weakness for many of the district’s administration team. Through staff meeting presentations preschool teachers can share the knowledge attained from trainings and workshops with kindergarten teachers, which also generates knowledge enhancement and partnership between both preschool and kindergarten. Thus, on a monthly basis, the preschool team might choose a specific developmental skill to present and demonstrate, including classroom recordings of hands-on activities with students that reinforce the play-based model and effective techniques. Teachers can then discuss differences in how preschool
and kindergarten approach teaching similar skills, reminding teachers of the differences in program models.

**Strategy 5: Program Model – Providing Parents Explicit Guidance for Program Expectations**

Implementing a parent-education program increases parent participation and knowledge of early education. The district can thus improve its current program model, building communication through monthly parent newsletters, which include informational resources and strategies for parents to apply in the home with their children, and increasing educational knowledge for both parent and child. The goal is to understand the needs of each family and provide supports that will carry over to kindergarten.

Thus, the parent educator would develop an outreach plan, consisting of calling and interviewing each family enrolled in the program. As families increase their connection with the school, the parent educator would make volunteer opportunities available, so as to connect families to the school environment, in particular by bringing them into the classroom setting. Parents would be able to view the approaches used by the classroom teacher and also themselves apply teaching skills with the teacher’s assistance and support. Once parents understand the role they play as their child’s primary educator, their confidence in this role and partnership is likely to increase, and in turn increase the student’s skills.

Children enrolled in at-risk preschool program have developmental gaps, which if not addressed, increase and carry over to kindergarten, negatively impacting the level of
pre-academic readiness skills the child will attain. Another strategy involves the program goal to decrease noted gaps and increase student developmental knowledge by increasing the time support staff provides small-group instruction for Tier 2 and Tier 3 category students. This increase can occur by having the classroom teacher give more time to lessons that allow support staff members to include specific targets that address deficient or weak student skills. In improving classroom consistency, the teacher also might utilize instructional technology to enrich lessons and increase student understanding.

**Conclusion**

The above strategies may be implemented within the Kinder Hearts and other preschool program models, with the support of stakeholders, to increase the effectiveness of programs focused on the child’s education in preschool and beyond. In collaborating, educating, and connecting all key players to develop and implement plans for addressing the needs of these early learners, we can decrease developmental gaps as they enter the world of kindergarten. These strategies have greater probability of success when members of the school community work together and, moreover, are open to policy changes that lead to further growth.
CHAPTER 7

Implications and Policy Recommendations

Early childhood education (ECE) has been at the forefront of increasing inclusivity, addressing the needs of young children at risk of academic failure. As education evolves, so does the role of those who teach and provide therapeutic services to our young learners. These specific roles lead district hiring teams or committees to create detailed criteria for these positions, as part of their program vision, to find candidates that are the right fit for the position. At Kinder Hearts School the hiring process for the preschool program teaching staff, and for personnel providing therapeutic services, has been the purview of the special education director, rather than the school administrator responsible for the program. Thus, the process has gaps in roles and responsibilities of the support staff, and in communication with staff.

The school district’s policy permits directors or building administrators to hire staff without including a hiring team as part of the process for hiring contractual staff, support staff, and preschool teachers. These positions (school nurse, occupational or physical therapists, speech pathologists, special education resource teachers, and preschool teachers), not only deliver the preschool program, but are essential in following grant guidelines and in implementing the at-risk preschool program at Kinder Hearts School. In the current hiring process the special education program director interviews and hires all preschool program team members without the input or participation of fellow administrative colleagues. This disconnect in leading and guiding the vision of the
district crucially also overlooks an opportunity of partnership in the process, where we might promote engagement, motivation and hope in staff.

When one person is the sole decision-maker in a process, an understanding of program needs and in ensuring those needs are accomplished can become lost in the process. As Kemp et al. (2014) noted, a hiring committee seeks to find the right person to fill specific needs or gaps of the existing team. In the hiring process, the opportunity to collaborate and discuss is critical in selecting the right person. What one person believes is the right decision may not include many other issues that staff interacting with students and the program experience on a daily basis. Beyond the consensus among those directly involved in the program delivery, this impacts the team connection and performance.

Within this school and district, collaboration, inconsistent, and at times lacking, is key. Moreover, critical for the instructional and therapeutic delivery model used to provide support to students, is shared responsibility and collegial conversations regarding developing staff expertise to avoid program gaps. Using the staff experience to go beyond the current limited process of contractual staff hiring, would address deficiencies in understanding the roles and expectations in positions being filled.

Hiring staff members is a task that should be done by more than one person in a committee or team. With increased variety of experience on the hiring team, we might also discover more about candidates, so as to enrich the program’s staff. A hiring team will have a better understanding of program needs and will be able to match the candidate to the community of students being served. The broader experience of a hiring team can bring specific questions and details of the job requirements as part of the discussion. A hiring team will allow for there to be a focus on what the specific program needs are and
what candidate has the skills to accomplish the program fulfillment. The team would ensure that candidates interviewed and eventually hired understand the pitfalls and particular struggles of the socio-economic status and cultural backgrounds of the children they will be working closely with, thus ensure that candidates meet the needs of the children enrolled in this preschool program.

Policy Statement for Hiring

The purpose of this policy is to establish uniformity, efficiency, and cohesiveness within the district’s mission and vision in hiring of external candidates for the district’s preschool program, using a collegial model.

I recommend changing the current district’s hiring policy from an individual decision-making model to a committee-hiring model. This team would provide input from members of the district’s leadership team and staff. In this process the incorporation of specific criteria focus on requirements the candidates should fulfill and experience they should possess. By incorporating this model, the team could analyze the characteristics of each candidate to establish uniformity in the selection process, thus remove negative bias that impacts the decisions made. Specifically, each hiring team member could use a rubric to issue points toward each candidate for a total score. The candidate with the highest points would thus be first to receive the job offer. In the event of a tie or close call in the top two candidates, the team would then review the rubric for each candidate, discussing the issuing of points to ensure accuracy and that it remains reflective of the responses given.

In changing the current policy, the district would increase their collegial conversations to ensure that any candidate chosen will possess the criteria that best fits
the district’s preschool program vision, mission, philosophy, and beliefs. And, as Kimbrel (2019) notes:

Hiring effective teachers can be a challenging task that is made even more difficult by the fact that most principals do not have human resources training and often create different hiring processes even in very similar schools. (p. 12)

Having a team approach that includes current preschool and kindergarten staff increases the probability of hiring candidates who enrich student skills attainment, by contributing developmental skills associated to student goals.

Creating a hiring team will also promote a system of partnership among district leadership administrators, leading to staff morale that will be fortified through this process. Program staff selected to take part in the hiring process ideally will invest their time and energy in choosing a candidate to represent the high quality of educational know-how each team member requires. They would also likely feel more valued and empowered with a voice in the program decision-making process. Any candidate selected as part of the hiring team would reflect or represent the team’s education philosophy, values, and mindset, thus contribute to the program’s success. Moreover, candidates can then enjoy a cohesive system within the school and district that leads to longevity in the new positions, minimizing disruptions in educational delivery.

**Analysis of Needs**

In this section I analyze the policy statement recommendations, addressing six disciplinary areas of the following: (1) educational analysis, (2) economic analysis, (3) social analysis, (4) political analysis, (5) legal analysis, and (6) moral and ethical analysis. The policy recommendations provide a unified message to stakeholders and give staff input and expertise that builds trust in the process. By recruiting high quality
teachers, this preschool program and its students’ needs will be supported with the new policy implementation. “High quality teachers are of critical importance when it comes to improving student achievement” (Egalite et al., 2014, p. 134). In conjunction with these six disciplinary areas considered together, the policy change will enrich the preschool program instructional delivery to its students.

**Educational Analysis**

Staff can positively or negatively impact the instructional delivery and meeting of educational targets when preparing preschoolers in achieving kindergarten readiness skills. When a highly qualified person is selected for the job, the student learning environment is enriched with knowledge and creative opportunities for enhanced student development. The hiring policy change would increase opportunities in the selection of candidates who have experience in differentiating among the range of at-risk learners enrolled in the program. The current policy limits the opportunity for collaboration and diverse viewpoints from individuals knowledgeable, skilled, and invested in the success of the program and students. It restricts the possibilities for staff interaction with the candidate during the interview process, creating a divide between the principal and the special education director who does the hiring.

The intent of this policy change is to strengthen the school and district’s hiring process that restricts the input of individuals directly involved in the preschool program. In doing such, the staff will gain ownership of the process, allowing for supporting and mentoring of the new staff member in their new role. This will also build relationships between staff, which can transfer to the classroom instructional delivery to students. The
building culture would also demonstrate trust in the school and district leadership teams as the partnership strengthened in a more collaborative hiring process.

**Economic Analysis**

The economic analysis of this policy problem points to using local dollars to pay for professional development, substitute teachers, and any materials needed for training purposes. Professional development specific to appropriate interviewing techniques and understanding the characteristics of a highly qualified teacher would help to increase the hiring team’s knowledge on selecting candidates that meet the program and student needs. “The need for the department chair to ensure the search committee is well-trained and clear in the needs of the department is also crucial if a department desires to hire diverse faculty” (Kemp et al., 2014, p. 23). With professional development investment, teachers on the team are more likely to feel supported and confident, and it would also demonstrate that the district is fully invested in the process. Moreover, interviewers experienced in applying the skills acquired from professional development, are more likely to make hires that lead to teacher retention. This may be partly due to consistency in the team. Programming ultimately could result in an increase in student academic gains for kindergarten-readiness and overall student developmental growth.

In addition to the professional development cost, a cost would be incurred for substitutes to cover classrooms when teachers attend training, or participate in mock interviews for the hiring team as they work on practicing what they have learned. This expense will allow teachers to participate in all parts of the new hiring team process.
**Social Analysis**

The implications of the problem in a social analysis of this policy concern changing the current process to a cohesive model and including more than one stakeholder. Thus team members with training in hiring will hold collaborative discussions and apply the skills attained in selecting a highly qualified candidate. The hiring team will work together to agree on hiring decisions that continue to build program and student capacity. In this process, administrators and staff would learn the purpose and reason for the policy change as the new policy is executed. The policy will allow for the implementation of a system that removes the one-person hiring and decision-making process, which also fails to allow for different perspectives in the procedure.

The policy change implementation also comes at a time in the school district’s development of new departments, and change in leadership due to retirement; thus a smoother transition could occur in the formation and execution of the new policy.

**Political Analysis**

The policy problem should be addressed specifically by district leadership and stakeholders who have issue with using local dollars to train staff on the newly developed hiring team. In moving forward with the policy change, I would solicit the support of the board of education, the superintendent, and assistant superintendent to allocate funds to support professional development, staff coverage, and computer programs or materials needed for the trainings or the implementation process. In rolling out the new policy, time must be invested for an effective process. Justifying the selection of the hiring team and how members are chosen is also needed so as to avoid misconceptions of the hiring team.
Prior to conducting interviews, the hiring team would hold collegial conversations regarding the experience they hope the candidate possess. “The first step of an effective hiring process involves the identification of the key qualifications and prior experience necessary for success” (Kimbrel, 2019, p. 14). In creating a rubric, the conversation should focus on identifying team expectations for each interviewee, so as to hire the most highly qualified candidate.

This process may, however, delay the selection of the candidate due to lack of team consensus. The hiring committee should focus on ensuring that the candidates meet the requirements as closely as possible. The hiring team can land more diverse candidates in offering the district opportunity to better improve its understanding of students. The hiring committee helps to lower the risk of hiring impulsively, rather than hiring from a clearer view of the talent and skills of the candidates.

**Legal Analysis**

The legal analysis of this program and process involves the modification of the current district policy to include a hiring team. The hiring policy may need to align with the full district process, rather than applying simply to one department or school. When modifying the policy, the specifics of the policy must be considered and accounted for to make appropriate changes within it. The current policy specifies nothing about who conducts interviews or completes the hiring. The creation of a hiring policy manual would generate cohesiveness within the process and in applying the process consistently during interviews and hiring of candidates. “Non-diverse hiring practices is a trend that has persisted” (Abawi & Eizadirad, 2018, p. 18), by creating a hiring team we would be able to remove some of the bias and increase the diverse hiring of the candidate.
**Moral and Ethical Analysis**

The policy proposal will impact student learning by providing quality instruction from highly qualified staff members. It will also allow district staff and administration to work together in selecting candidates to enrich student learning and the program delivery. This policy will also allow students to learn from their teachers or therapists who specialize in early childhood education. In creating this policy, teacher, and administrators, with an understanding of the program and student needs, promotes the opportunity to select candidates who specialize and can complement the program. This policy proposal meets the moral and ethical responsibilities of both district and school, as indicated in the Department of Education Code of Ethics (Illinois State Board of Education, n.d).

**Implications for Staff and Community Relations**

When policies changed or new policies created, some implications result concerning the relationships, whether of staff, community, and stakeholders, or between these entities. Such implications may have positive or negative effects, depending on the specifics of what the policy addresses. This specific policy on hiring teams will affect the process of how staff is hired for the preschool program. It includes a team approach, a shift from the current process, moving from a single hirer to a team of a variety of perspectives in the decision-making process. This hiring policy will also use a selection of staff (the hiring team) to implement the program to ensure that candidates are highly qualified. Teachers and administrators would work together in building cohesiveness and partnership in meeting the vision of the program through the hiring policy transition. The
hiring team would need to attend professional development to increase their knowledge on how to implement appropriate hiring practices.

The policy implications for community relations include the community’s understanding how this policy change could impact student performance. Ideally, staff with specific expertise would decrease at-risk factors in preschoolers, and increase their achievement gains.

These improvements support the allocation of funds for professional development and substitute coverage, another part of the plan. The investment in this policy will contribute to strengthening the program with the assets of the staff hired. Incorporating communication, with all stakeholders, fosters improved understanding of the policy change and the effects on candidate selection, ensuring candidates have strong backgrounds and expertise in early childhood development.

**Conclusion**

The policy change allows for a cohesive process in place when hiring staff specific to the preschool program. This policy change would increase collaboration between the administrative team and staff, leading to trust in the hiring process. Each of the above analyses applies to implementing the policy change, leading to effectiveness in the preschool program delivery. Having the right staff in place not only increases student achievement, but also provides students with essential readiness skills in preparation for kindergarten; thus, changing the hiring policy positively impacts student performance.
CHAPTER 8

Conclusions

Early childhood education for the district in this study has been essential to the developmental growth of at-risk children from the community. Its play-based model has been key to this growth, particularly in these students attaining educational milestones. This study focused on whether the at-risk preschool programming prepares young learners with kindergarten pre-academic readiness skills. Seeking to determine whether children who participated in an at-risk play-based program attained pre-academic skills at the same level as their peers who attended outside programming, also led to establishing factors that may impact the level of academic growth for at-risk students.

Discussion

State guidelines, which fund the at-risk preschool program in this study, require that children learn through exploration, as opposed to teacher-guided instruction. The purpose of this study was to determine whether that play-based preschool model provided its students pre-academic skills for kindergarten. The unstructured model demonstrated that students needed time to adapt when transitioning into the more rigorous kindergarten classroom. However, students not at-risk were able to adapt to teacher expectations, yet—through teacher observation—demonstrated deficiencies in their social-emotional skills. In comparing the groups in this study, the data demonstrated no significant difference between pre-academic skills attained by at-risk preschoolers and their same-age peers. From their exposure to a preschool program, students were able to attain pre-academic skills and demonstrate growth regardless of their learning environment.
Although its sample included only the Kinder Hearts School, the study showed a difference in philosophy and instructional delivery at both grade levels. The teaching and support staff who work in the preschool program focus on the whole child, whereas kindergarten teachers primarily target academic skills. Creating professional development goals to increase the developmental knowledge for both groups was one way to create opportunities for staff to understand the progression of academic skill attainment. Professional development can increase knowledge not only for staff, but for stakeholders either unclear or unaware of the program specifications. Part of the expected growth involved stakeholders becoming aware that children may be “kindergarten-ready” yet remain unprepared for the level of expectations teachers have in place. The focus of incorporating professional development for stakeholders increased not only their knowledge of child development, but also on the requirements of the program when compared to kindergarten that is not state-funded.

Funding allocations for the at-risk preschool program discussed in this study were specific to how resources are used in relation to hiring of staff. This specification decreases the program opportunities in increasing time the speech pathologist and occupational therapist might dedicate in the classroom setting with students not identified as at-risk. Thus, the allocation of funds in this area could impact student skills through increasing the direct contact time with students in the classroom; however, the restrictions of how grant funding could be used limits the possibilities of how to incorporate additional therapeutic staff within the program in ways that target the increase of foundational skills for success in kindergarten. Throughout this study the need
for additional supports was noted in discussing how best to increase the instructional delivery for at-risk students.

The current process for hiring of this preschool program’s staff, who worked with at-risk students and the district’s special education team, has decreased opportunities for collegial conversation and partnership. Although the program delivery was done by a team qualified to support and instruct the children in the program, candidates were interviewed and hired by a person not directly involved in the delivery of services or instruction. This study found that this hiring model limited the opportunities for discussion and for building trust among staff. The special education director, who interviews and hires, had limited understanding of the program guidelines, which carried over to hiring staff who may not have had the knowledge for program implementation. Restricting participation of staff in the hiring process, resulted in limited opportunity to increase the diversity in knowledge that new staff would bring to the school and program.

While this study was being conducted, the district leadership team discussed the importance of shifting current hiring practices to a team approach beginning at the district level and then moving to the school level in a two-part process. This change included the creation of a tiered process for interviewing and hiring of candidates. The shift allowed for conversations to take place regarding the candidates and whether they would be a good fit for the program. This increased the opportunity to implement different approaches in meeting student needs.

The new process consists of two rounds in candidate selection. In Round 1 at least two administrators interview the selected candidate and give a rating. Once they have given the candidate a rating, Round 2 interviews are given by the school administrator
and selected staff. This change in process allows staff to be viewed as partners and increases the diversity in knowledge for the hiring. Even though state program guidelines could not be changed, modifying what was in place improved the system, increasing the partnership between staff and the program administrator.

The preschool team increased student achievement and decreased developmental gaps noted throughout the study. The connectedness in every part of the program’s process impacted student development, resulting in a trickle-down effect when a missing or broken connection between two or more parts occurred. The preschool team at this school was highly qualified, per state criteria, yet needed additional staff support affected the delivery of instruction and student achievement. Within this school’s program model, more time was given to generate ideas for increasing student support, which allowed a shift in how staff implemented strategies in addressing pre-academic targets. In participating in professional development that enhanced skills required to meet the expectations of state program implementation, preschool staff worked together to strengthen their approaches to meet student needs.

**Leadership Lessons**

Through this process, I learned that fostering teamwork increases the potential of meeting set programmatic goals and expectations. In paying attention to program staff member concerns, I noticed an increase in ideas contributed to improve the hiring process. I also realized that incorporating staff permitted them to experience more of a leadership role in the program, and to feel their views were being heard. For example, once the change in hiring was implemented and staff was part of the process, I observed an increase in teamwork from once a week to twice a week. Staff worked together to
review the preschool guidelines and implement a variety of strategies that followed procedures and increased pre-academic skills through play.

Another leadership lesson learned concerned wisdom, in that I developed a deeper understanding about changes needing to occur, and also best practices in applying those changes. I also learned to be open about my views and make those involved in the process know where I stood on topics discussed. Throughout this study, opportunities presented themselves around creating possibilities to increase communication when discussing changes in current practices beneficial to the overall program delivery. For example, the kindergarten team discussed concerns regarding skills they believed at-risk preschoolers needed to further develop before entering kindergarten. An area that kindergarten teachers had limited knowledge about concerned teacher perceptions and lack of understanding of what the PFA grant guidelines stated about the program model.

A third leadership lesson concerned the importance of better understanding the data generated so as to improve instruction within the preschool’s play-based model. It was important to be open to what the data indicated and not to suppress or put aside unwanted results or thoughts about what the data exhibited. As a leader, being open and accepting a need for improvement, or accepting that a change must occur to improve practices, are both vital in providing staff necessary tools for success. Students need experienced educators to provide the most knowledge in creative and authentic ways. Being accountable as a leader enhances the skills and tools provided to the school’s educational team. This accountability not only demonstrated partnership to the staff but also the notion that “there’s no ‘I’ in the word team.” As I hold myself accountable for
program results, others should as well, which forms one way to improve what is currently in place.

I see myself using the leadership lessons learned throughout this process in providing necessary tools and strategies for program staff to enhance their play-based knowledge. It was important for me to remember that education includes the future, and that being a life-long learner and growing as a leader are important to consider when making plans or working through problems of the moment. As a part of a system that incorporates the views and skills of its educational team within programming, I want to continue to keep the door open for opportunities that increase collaboration and trust within the organization. A critical piece to this came when I deepened my understanding about staff as essential to the success of Kinder Hearts School. As a leader being vulnerable to criticism, or open to suggestions and ideas, not only builds stronger relationships between the school’s preschool and kindergarten teams, but also between myself as their leader and my role as a colleague. Implementing collaboration and vertical alignment between both grade levels increase student academic success.

**Conclusion**

Albert Einstein stated that “play is the highest form of research” and through this we learn how children respond to the techniques utilized in play. At-risk preschool, play-based programs have been shown to provide students with essential pre-academic skills for success in kindergarten. The importance in ensuring the educational journey for students includes not only a focus on the developmental, but also on the academic forms part of the responsibilities of the leadership team. Although not definitively, the results in this study suggest that the play-based model provides the necessary skills for
preschoolers to be successful in kindergarten. The play-based model at Kinder Hearts School, at the very least, provides children an opportunity to gain momentum in learning, but its success depends on the investment of all stakeholders.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A: As-Is Framework

Context
- One district, one school, 3 preschool classrooms, 3 preschool classrooms with 3 certified teachers and 3 paraprofessionals.
- Preschool sessions are 2 ½ hours each, 5 sessions total.
- District preschool program is funded by Preschool For All Grant for children who are at-risk of academic failure.
- Funding specifically outlines the implementation of the program, the children served, and the utilization of a play-based curriculum.
- Grant guidelines require 65 minutes of choice play, 10 minutes of gross motor, leaving 55 minutes for arrival, small groups, whole group and dismissal.
- Grant restricts the application of pre-made worksheets with students.
- Support services such as ELL teacher, special education resource teacher, speech pathologist, social worker, occupational therapist, physical therapist are not included in the grant because grant restrictions.
- Due to grant funding intense support services are not always provided to help decrease the achievement gap for our qualifying at-risk preschool students.
- Discrepancy between Illinois Early Learning Standards and Illinois Common Core Kindergarten Learning Standards.

Culture
- Kindergarten teachers perceive preschoolers aren’t prepared with readiness skills.
  - When preschoolers demonstrate difficulties with their developmental milestones support staff will collaborate with resource team even if the student has not been identified.
  - Informational parent workshops to target areas that children qualified under are lacking.
  - Support staff will schedule time to create space to provide small group instruction for identified students.
  - Worksheets are utilized to reinforce kindergarten skills such as letter and number formation.
  - Inconsistency in program implementation within the three classrooms makes it difficult when students transition into other classrooms.
  - Inconsistency of parent volunteers to help support their children while learning educational strategies and techniques to use in the home.

Conditions
- District funding does not give the opportunity to have a dedicated speech pathologist and occupational therapist who serve only preschool students.
- District contract does not require preschool teachers to have their ESL endorsement prior to being hired. This impacts their understanding of teaching diverse learners.
- Building administrator is also the district’s Multilingual Department Director which impacts the amount of time dedicated to ensuring program model meets state guidelines while still providing students the necessary education to get them ready for higher level learning.
- Director of Special Education influences the decision-making process for children who transition from early intervention and at times don’t meet the state required preschool program criteria for placement.
- District leadership knowledge regarding program specifics varies and impacts the allocation of resources and support staff.
  - Staff is supported with options of professional development to attend.
  - Grade centered district that has limited ability for collaboration among schools and grade levels.
  - Grade centers negatively impacts the ability for the elementary schools to understand the developmental and academic growth children have made in preschool Kindergarten before entering their classrooms.
  - Professional development can be specific to the developmental practices of young learners based on the age group of the school.

Problem:
To what extent is an at-risk preschool program effectively preparing its students with the appropriate kindergarten readiness skills.

Competencies
- Teachers struggle with the in-depth understanding of the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS 3).
  - Staff demonstrate limited developmental and social emotional knowledge for the children who are enrolled in the program.
  - Staff have limited knowledge in the area of Culturally Responsive Teaching.
  - Defined roles and responsibility for contractual staff that work with students is needed to avoid misunderstandings and close the achievement gap.
  - Staff is knowledgeable in using creative approaches to reach young learners.
  - Using state’s criteria staff utilize technology to enhance lessons and increase student understanding.
APPENDIX B: To-Be Framework

Context
- Using grant funding, adding another classroom teacher for preschool will provide academic and social support to students who will be transitioning into kindergarten.
- In correlating the Illinois Early Learning Standards and Illinois Common Core Kindergarten Learning Standards, teachers will be able to build a strong foundation while maintaining a developmentally appropriate curriculum.
- One district, one school, 3 preschool classrooms, 3 preschool classrooms with 3 certified teachers and 3 paraprofessionals.
- District preschool program is funded by Preschool For All Grant for children who are at-risk of academic failure.
- Funding specifically outlines the implementation of the program, the children served, and the utilization of a play-based curriculum.
- Support services such as ELL, teacher, special education resource teacher, speech pathologist, social worker, occupational therapist, physical therapist are not included in the grant because grant restrictions

Culture
- Supporting teachers with professional development that will provide understanding of early childhood development and specific grant curriculum requirements.
- When preschoolers demonstrate difficulties with their developmental milestones, support staff will collaborate and document interventions currently in place using the school’s formal problem-solving team model.
- Hiring of Parent Educator for preschool program will assist in implementing informational parent workshops to target areas that children were identified to be at risk in.
- Parent Educator will send monthly parent newsletter that has information resources for parents to use in the home with their children.
- Support staff will schedule time to create space to provide small group instruction for students who are in Tier 2 and/or Tier 3.
- To improve classroom consistency, teachers will use the ECERS checklist model every trimester.
- Teachers will collaborate on ways to encourage students to communicate using their reasoning skills.
- Parent Educator communicates and creates parent volunteer opportunities.

Conditions
- District will review IDEA Grant to find ways to allocate funds to hire additional support staff for preschool students even if on a part-time basis.
- District will align hiring policy to follow the criteria in meeting state guidelines for teachers to be either endorsed or taking classes to fulfill their ESL endorsements.
- District will reevaluate administrative department in adding an additional administrator to increase the amount of time dedicated to ensuring the preschool program maintains a vigorous model.
- Director of Special Education will collaborate with the preschool screening team on the process and in making appropriate decisions for children who are being transitioned from early intervention.
- District will review IDEA Grant to find ways to allocate funds to hire additional support staff for preschool students even if on a part-time basis.
- District will align hiring policy to follow the criteria in meeting state guidelines for teachers to be either endorsed or taking classes to fulfill their ESL endorsements.
- District will reevaluate administrative department in adding an additional administrator to increase the amount of time dedicated to ensuring the preschool program maintains a vigorous model.
- Director of Special Education will collaborate with the preschool screening team on the process and in making appropriate decisions for children who are being transitioned from early intervention.
- Educating the district’s board of education and the leadership team with the support of professional development on the benefits of early childhood interventions will help with understanding the dynamics of the preschool environment.
- Staff is supported with options of professional development to attend.
- Meeting with administrative staff to creatively build in collaboration time among grade centers.
- Parent Educator will present to each grade center on the developmental stages of children ages 3-5 to familiarize staff on the skills and expectations for this age group.
- Professional development can be specific to the developmental stages of young learners based on the age group of the school.

Problem:
To what extent is an at-risk preschool program effectively preparing its students with the appropriate kindergarten readiness skills?

Solution:
In modifying and incorporating staff in the hiring process, supporting staff with professional development specific to areas of need, and increasing opportunities for parent education, the preschool program will strengthen in its delivery model resulting in kindergarten preparation.

Competencies
- Preschool program leader will use coaching model to increase administrative and staff understanding and awareness of the district’s preschool program model.
- The preschool team will have monthly in-house meetings to target the in-depth understanding of the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS 3).
- Staff will attend STARNet trainings that target developmental and social emotional needs for children in the 3-5 age group.
- Before hiring contractual staff to work in the district, each building administrator will meet with the support staff to discuss, review expectations, and create schedules.
### APPENDIX C: Strategy and Action Chart

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<tr>
<th>Strategies</th>
<th>Actions</th>
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| 1. Distribution of Funding to Increase Instructional Services that will Influence Student Achievement in Kindergarten. | • Request for allocation of grant funds to be utilized for hiring of additional staff members.  
• Meet with district leadership team and board of education to review current grant funding allocations and possibility of changing the distribution of funds in grants.  
• Present to stakeholders’ number of children that attend the district’s preschool program and the need for an additional classroom to better prepare children who are at-risk and will attend the district’s kindergarten program.  
• Increasing personnel, specifically speech pathologist and occupational therapist, will provide students identified as at-risk in those areas that support to decrease gaps in development.  
• Hiring a parent educator to provide support through training and workshops for families will increase the parent to school connection. |
| 2. Creating an Intentional Decision-making Mindset | • Presenting to the board of education and district superintendent the positives of changing the current policy creating a hiring team that will have voice in the process of who is hired for the preschool program.  
• Modify the district’s hiring policy to allow for input from other district leadership team members and staff as representatives in the process. |
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<th>Strategies</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Create a team that includes preschool and kindergarten staff members in the hiring process to increase team knowledge in working to meet diverse learner needs.</td>
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<td>• Include specific criteria to solicit highly qualified staff.</td>
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<td>• Include opportunities for leadership team to collaborate and discuss vision of the district to ensure staff being hired fulfill the intended role.</td>
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<td>• Incorporate within hiring process focus of selecting a candidate versed in understanding instructional practice delivery when working with culturally diverse learners.</td>
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<td>3. Making Space for Innovation</td>
<td>• Develop common planning time once a month to increase teacher collaboration among grade centers.</td>
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<td>• Establish specific objectives that will lead conversations and create understanding between grade centers focused on appropriate student development.</td>
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<td>• Create a list of ways to encourage students to communicate using reasoning skills, explore their learning environments, and increase their abilities to problem-solve.</td>
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<td>4. Professional Development – Targeted Professional Development to Increase Overall Competencies</td>
<td>• Program administrator review of program needs and generate areas of needed improvement for each preschool teacher.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Preschool team reach out to neighboring districts to observe their programs for ideas in learning through play.</td>
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<td>Strategies</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Program administrator reach out to community early childhood organizations as a method of increasing collaboration through implementation of high-quality practices.</td>
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<td>• Implement professional development that focuses on culturally responsive teaching techniques and modeling for teaching, therapeutic, and support staff.</td>
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<td>5. Program Model: Providing Explicit Guidance for Program Expectations</td>
<td>• Increase program communication through monthly parent newsletters.</td>
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<td>• Include informational resources and strategies for parents to apply in the home with their children, those beneficial in increasing educational knowledge for both parent and child.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Parent educator creates an outreach plan for calling each family enrolled in the program and interviewing them to determine support needs.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Classroom teacher enhances lessons for allowing support staff members to include specific targets in the lesson that address deficient student skills.</td>
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