

Report to the Windham School Board
From Roxanne Wilson
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Windham Transition Program: Background Information

According to the historical perspective provided by Judy Newcomb, Windham adopted an alternative developmentally based transition program in 1968. The transition program was studied in 1999 through PERC and approved to continue. A major reason it was approved to continue was due to the fact that Windham did not have a public Kindergarten. At that time, students were coming to first grade from many different Kindergartens and preschools.

When Windham instituted Public Kindergarten in 2009-10, the district agreed to continue to offer one Transition class for students whose teachers and parents felt were not ready for first grade. The eligibility requirements for being referred to this program were narrowed and currently there are 20 students in the class. This represents about 8% of the entering grade 1 cohort.

Most transitional programs were designed to provide an extra year of school for children who after kindergarten were predicted not to do well in first grade. They may be children who the teacher perceives and being “unready” to participate in the first grade curriculum. Perhaps these are children who are not prepared in reading readiness, such as not understanding the letter/sound relationships. These children might not be able to follow directions well, or attend to task long enough to finish them. They might lack age-appropriate social skills or have behaviors that are not suited to a classroom setting.

These transitional programs may be well intentioned, but there has been a much research in the late 1980’s and 1990’s, calling these transitional programs a form of retention, and showing little evidence of making a difference. Many of the national associations of early childhood educators became quite concerned about the use of retention and transition classes in this time period. As schools have become more effective in meeting each child at their own individual level, the use of transition or readiness classes has greatly declined.

Placing students in transition classes sets up classes that have a wider range of age span of students that affects the classes all the way through the system. This has more impact at the middle and high schools as students mature at different rates. In some cases there could be students in the same class or same sports team who are more than one year apart. It is also harder on some students who are older in high school than their peers. There are parents who definitely support giving this extra year to their 6 old students, but it is hard to determine the long-term effects at middle and high school.

The intent of educators who endorse transitional programs is to help children entering first grade, but in all other grades, we accept each child at whatever academic level they are- there are no transitional classes for other grades. If students come to our schools,

educators work from an aspect of growth, and they take the students from where they are to a new level through a variety of instructional strategies.

Golden Brook's Response to Intervention Program (RtI)

This is the second year of Golden Brook's systematic approach to identifying and helping students who are below expectations in various skills. GBS students are assessed to determine how they are performing on specific grade-level expectations or standards. If students are identified below average, interventions are put into place to give them assistance for a short period of time on that particular skill. This could be extra help in the classroom, or small group instruction both, in or outside of the class. This RtI program targets those students who fall behind and assesses them in short increments to see if the interventions are working.

In November, the Assistant Superintendent met with some Golden Brook staff representing kindergarten, transition, grade 1, special education, reading, and administration. At this meeting, advantages and disadvantages were discussed about the Transition Program. All agreed that due to the fact that we have public kindergarten and the RtI program, the needs of individual students coming into GBS can be met without having to have a segregated transition class.

National Policy Statements and Position Papers:

Several prominent associations dealing with early childhood have held the position for a number of years that children should start school at the age they are eligible. In Windham, students who are age six before September 30th, enter grade 1; and children who are age five before September 30th may enter Kindergarten. RSA 193:1 says, "a parent of child at least 6 years of age and under 18 years of age shall cause such child to attend the public school to which the child is assigned in the child's resident district. Such child will shall attend full time when such school is in session."

In the position papers below, the reference to kindergarten is made because kindergarten was part of the public school systems in many states before NH required it. The issue is the same regardless if it is a level before Kindergarten or before first grade.

A. National Association for the Education of Young Children (2004). *Where We Stand.*

NAEYC believes it is the responsibility of schools to meet the needs of children as they enter school and to provide whatever services are needed to help each child reach their potential.

Kindergarten entry should be based on chronological age, and not mastery of skills. The use of readiness test to exclude children from school and to make other high-stakes decision is indefensible.

Raising the legal entry age or voluntarily holding children back from Kindergarten will not ensure that more children are ready for Kindergarten. Little evidence exists that older children are more successful in Kindergarten. Hoping to promote kindergarten readiness, families may decide to hold a child out of school for a year; in general, holding children out of school has not been found to predict better social or academic outcomes.

Schools must be ready to help children learn by 1) having curriculum that builds on prior learning, 2) taking individual differences into account, 3) knowing how to teach young children and having the resources to do so.

B. National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (NAESC/SDE (2000), *Still Unacceptable Trends in Kindergarten Entry and Placement*.

This is a revision of the 1987 document.

A number of highly questionable practices include the inappropriate use of screening and readiness tests, discouragement or outright denial of entrance for eligible children; development of segregated transitional classes for children deemed unready for the next traditional level of school; and an increasing use of retention.

Principles that should be followed:

1. Kindergarten teachers and administrators guard the integrity of effective, developmentally appropriate programs for young children.
2. Children are enrolled in kindergarten based on their legal right to enter. Families are not counseled or pressured to delay entrance of their children for a year by keeping them at home or enrolling them in other programs. Families are encouraged to enroll age- appropriate children.
3. Kindergarten teacher and administrators are informed about assessment strategies and techniques and are involved responsibility in their use.
4. Retention is rejected as a viable option for young children
5. Tests used at Kindergarten entrance are valid, reliable and helpful in initial planning and information sharing with parents.
6. All children are welcomed- as they are- into heterogeneous kindergarten settings... they are not segregated into extra-year programs prior to or following regular kindergarten.

C. Learning to Read and Write: Developmentally Appropriate Practices for Young children (1998). A joint position statement from NAEYC and International Reading Association

Among many early childhood teachers, a maturationist view of young children's development persists despite much evidence to the contrary. A readiness view of reading development assumes that there is a specific time in early childhood years when the teaching of reading should begin. It also assumes that physical and neurological maturation alone prepares the child to take advantage of instruction in

reading and writing. The readiness perspective implies that until a child reaches a certain stage of maturity all exposure to reading and writing, except perhaps being read stories, is a waste of time or even potentially harmful. Experiences throughout the early childhood years, birth through age eight, affect the development of literacy. Failing to give children literacy experiences until they are school age can severely limit the reading and writing levels they ultimately attain.

Research: Examples

Most of the research is older since the readiness issue really surfaced in the late 1980's.

A. The Condition of Education: Trends in Full and Half-day Kindergarten (2004) US Department of Education: IES

In 2001, full day kindergarten was generally more common than half day kindergarten throughout different segments of the population. Children enrolled in Kindergarten in the South were more likely to attend full day kindergarten (78%) than children in the Northeast, (60%) Midwest (53%) and West (43%).

B. Findings from the Condition of Education (2003) Reading- Young Children's Achievement and Classroom Experiences. National Center of Education Statistics.

Public School children who attend Kindergarten for a full day make greater gains in reading over the Kindergarten year than public school children who attend Kindergarten for half a day.

C. Sue Dockett and B Perry (2002) Who is reading for What? Young Children Starting School. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, Volume 3, Number 1.

The results of this analysis suggest very strongly that we cannot assume that all the participants in children's transition to school are focused on the same things. Any judgments about children's readiness, or otherwise, can involve different things for different people. Even when talking about the same general areas, different people have different understandings and expectations, and seek to find different things as indicators of a child's preparedness for starting school.

Despite an increasing amount of attention, readiness for school remains a complex issue. The data reported in this article support Meisels's (1999) call for a view of readiness as a 'process that occurs over time and is not complete by the first day of Kindergarten' (p. 62). This view proposes that readiness is more than a checklist of skills and contextually isolated knowledge and more than a set of behaviors that enable a child to be regarded as compliant in the classroom.

D. Jo Ann Brewer (1990) Transitional Programs: Boon or Bane? *Young Children*: September

In a review of 16 controlled studies on the effects of extra-year programs, the

predominant finding is one of no difference. For example when researchers follow extra year children the end of first grade of as far as fifth grade and compare their performance to unready children who parents refused the extra year, the extra-year children performed no better academically despite being a year older for their grade.

E. Mary Lee Smith and Lorrie A Shepard (1987) What Doesn't Work: Explaining Policies of Retention in the Early Grades. *Phi Delta Kappan*: October 1987 Volume 69 NO. 2

A review on the research of such transitional placements indicates that this practice is no more successful than retention and references the work from Gilbert Gredler, Transition Classes: A Viable Alternative for the At-risk Child? *Psychology in the Schools* vol. 21, 1984, p. 463-470.

F. Lorrie Shepard and Mary Lee Smith (1986). Synthesis of Research on School Readiness and Kindergarten retention. *Educational Leadership*.

Contrary to popular belief, repeating a grade does not help gain ground academically, and has a negative impact on social adjustment and self esteem. Providing an extra year before first grade does not solve the problems it was intended to solve. Children in these programs show virtually no academic advantage over equally at-risk children who have not had the extra year.

G. Deborah C. May and Edward Welch (1985) The effects of developmental placement on young children's cognitive and social emotional development. *Early Child Development and Care*. Vo 22, p. 195-209.

The results of this study contradict many of the cognitive and social-emotional rationales for the Gesell Institute's advocacy of developmental placement. In this study, there were not any demonstrable positive effects of buying a year on children's later academic achievement.

Other Districts:

There are many districts that have dropped their transition/readiness classes years ago, but there are a handful that still operate. When I inquired around the State, these are the districts that responded:

Hampstead	has just done away with its Readiness program at the start of this school year. They agreed to carefully watch what happens to the seven or eight students that would have been identified for Readiness, but so far they have all adjusted quite well. They also have a strong 3-tiered RTI program in place that will address any issues immediately starting in K. This includes developmental, social, and academic difficulties.
New Boston	Still has a readiness class and they are reviewing it.
Milford	has a readiness program that they are considering eliminating next

	year, now that they offer Kindergarten.
Moultonborough	This is the first year they have offered a full day kindergarten class. Up until this year, they had half-day kindergarten classes and a readiness class. This year, they have two full day kindergarten classes and another full day K/R class that has approximately 5 readiness students (were in half day kindergarten last year). This was done in an effort to transition from a half day to a full day kindergarten program. They will not have a K/R class in 2011-2012
Shaker Regional School District	offers readiness classes in addition to half day Kindergarten. In addition, they also have full day K for Title I students. Belmont Elementary Principal has discussed the desire to drop readiness for a full day K option, but space issues make it difficult.
Brookline	still has a Readiness program. They are beginning the process of moving toward a grade level, supportive model of inclusion for these students.
Alton	They are studying a “Kindergarten Plus” program that is in essence a full day of kindergarten only for those students whose skills at kindergarten entry do not seem to be on par with others.
Exeter	discontinued readiness years ago
Hollis	discontinued readiness years ago
White Mts. Regional	discontinued readiness years ago
Department of Education	Patricia Ewen, Consultant for Early Childhood programs. She much prefers full day kindergarten to readiness programs.

Recommendation: Discontinue the Transition Program

Golden Brook School has a Kindergarten program, which is preparing students for classroom routines and supporting the acquisition of literacy skills required for first grade. For this upcoming year 2011-12, we would like to discontinue the traditional readiness class, for the reason cited in the research.

Golden Brook has a way to meet individuals’ needs through their Response to Intervention Program. Students who might be “at risk” are identified earlier than ever and interventions are available. Research does not support the traditional transition program, and it is time that we offer improved services for these young learners.

Create a Kindergarten Intervention Session

We would like to create a Kindergarten intervention program to serve some of the Kindergarten students who may be struggling. We will identify and monitor students in Kindergarten using the Response to Intervention model.

We would propose assessing all incoming Kindergarten students for the purpose of identifying risk factors related to academic, social, physical or developmental needs. We further suggest that an appropriate, and cost-effective alternative to Transitional First

Grade would include intervention plans for at risk students, which could be implemented using the current Response to Intervention model. This would be accomplished utilizing Golden Brook's current RtI Specialist as a half day program interventionist. Research indicates that the most effective practices for remediation include increased instructional time and the delivery of research based interventions. Eligible students would attend the half day Kindergarten program, five days per week, and receive an additional half day intervention curriculum three or four days per week, utilizing the Wilsons Foundations Reading program, and the Number Worlds Math program. Students would be progress-monitored, and entrance and exit criteria for the program would be established. In addition, these students would eat lunch at Golden Brook School. GBS would use existing staff, so there is no additional cost. Parents would have the choice of sending a bag lunch with their child or purchasing lunch at GBS for \$1.90 per day. Only students attending GBS Kindergarten would be eligible for consideration, and we would start with no more than 12 students for the first semester.

This Kindergarten intervention session, if approved, by the Board will fulfill the need of some students who require targeted skill development in certain areas. It will help bridge the gap between half day Kindergarten and first grade, for some students who may have been the traditional transition student.

Along with this program change, we are also asking the Board to continue to support its existing policy of having students who are age 6 by September 30th enter full day, first grade. GBS is ready to meet the needs of all students entering grade 1 regardless of their academic performance or developmental level. Keeping children in Kindergarten an extra year or starting them later is not the solution that research supports.