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TO: District Superintendents
Directors of Pupil Personnel Services
Administrators of Universal Prekindergarten Programs
Directors of Special Education
Chairpersons of Committees on Preschool Special Education
Elementary School Principals

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SUBJECT: Universal Prekindergarten Program: An Ideal Setting for the Integration of Preschool Students with Disabilities

The purpose of this memorandum is to encourage the collaboration between school districts and preschool special education programs in creating a system of programs for four-year-olds that meet the needs of preschool children with disabilities through the use of Universal Prekindergarten Programs (UPK). The implementation of the UPK in New York State is a unique way to meet the requirement of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) that preschool children with disabilities be placed in the least restrictive environment.

Key goals of the UPK Program are the increased participation of preschool students with disabilities in prekindergarten programs and an assurance of high quality early childhood programs aligned with the New York State Learning Standards. If students with disabilities are to meet the requirements for high school graduation and have access to the statewide assessment program, they must begin learning in the general education environment with their non-disabled peers.

Across the State, many districts have already entered into collaborative efforts with approved preschool special education programs and offer integrated services through preschool special education providers in UPK programs. In the 1999-2000 school year, approximately 5 percent of four-year-olds enrolled in the UPK program were children with disabilities. This percentage is not inclusive of children who are also in the UPK programs in approved special education programs. It is important that the participation rate of preschool children with disabilities increases as programs expand.

UPK programs are educationally-based, developmentally-appropriate programs that meet the social, cognitive, linguistic, emotional, cultural and physical needs of children. A child's Individualized Education Program (IEP) is easily implemented within the context of the developmentally appropriate UPK program. Many preschool students with disabilities are identified at age three. This allows districts sufficient time to plan for their participation in the UPK program. Communication among UPK administrators and/or staff and members of the Committee on Preschool Education (CPSE), preschool special education administrators, providers and parents is essential to facilitate the participation of students with disabilities and to implement models which promote integration.

Following this memorandum please find a list of questions and answers addressing requirements for UPK, integration of students with disabilities and other program areas. For further information about UPK programs in your area that are successfully integrating students with disabilities, please contact:

For UPK:

Office of Child, Family and Community Services
NYS Education Department
Room 381 EBA
Albany, New York 12234
518-474-5807

For Preschool Special Education:

Special Education Policy
NYS Education Department
VESID - Room 1624
One Commerce Plaza
Albany, New York 12234
518-473-2878

**Universal Prekindergarten Program: An Ideal Setting for the Integration of
Preschool Students with Disabilities**

Questions and Answers

What is Universal Prekindergarten?

The Universal Prekindergarten Program (UPK) was created in 1997 to establish an early education foundation by providing high quality, developmentally appropriated programs in New York State designed to meet the social, cognitive, linguistic, emotional, cultural and physical needs of children. This program is intended to

provide an opportunity for universal access to prekindergarten services for all four-year-olds by the 2001-02 school year; however, it is not a mandated program. School districts are not required to implement such programs, and parents are not mandated to enroll their children. Rather, it encourages school districts and communities, by providing funding, to examine the needs of families and children and to explore how the implementation of a prekindergarten program meets the needs of the community. It is an opportunity for districts to both collaborate with agencies to provide early care and education programs and to design innovative programs that meet an array of family needs.

The legislation that established the Universal Prekindergarten Program includes two unique components. The first is a requirement that all school districts convene a Prekindergarten Advisory Board in the year prior to the school year in which it is first eligible to receive UPK funding. The purpose of the Advisory Board is to ensure community participation in a full discussion regarding the needs of children and families in the district and to make a recommendation to the Board of Education as to whether a UPK program should be established in the district. The Advisory Board must include representatives of the Board of Education, teachers, early childhood providers, parents, community leaders and others as deemed appropriate. Representatives of approved preschool special education providers and parents of students with disabilities should be considered for participation on the Advisory Board as they can provide valuable information regarding the needs of these children and appropriate accommodations which some children may require.

The second unique aspect of UPK is that it is designed as a public/private partnership and requires collaboration with eligible agencies. A participating district must set aside a minimum of 10 percent of its grant funds to collaborate with one or more eligible agencies. The collaboration must result in the agency providing the instructional program to children. Districts must conduct a competitive process to select the agency(s) with which it will collaborate. Approved special education providers are eligible agencies with which a district may contract for the provision of the UPK program. In such collaborations, the UPK-funded children often are the non-disabled students in the preschool special class in an integrated setting.

How can preschool children with disabilities participate in UPK?

Students with disabilities can participate in UPK programs and receive preschool special education programs and services while enrolled in UPK programs. A child's Individualized Education Program (IEP) can be implemented easily within the context of the developmentally appropriate UPK program. Preschool students with disabilities are eligible for the UPK program and should be considered for enrollment if the following criteria are met:

- is a resident of the school district; and
- is four years of age on or before December 1st of the school year, or will be old enough to attend kindergarten the next school year (children who are eligible for kindergarten cannot be enrolled in UPK).

Some preschool children may have been referred to the Committee on Preschool Special Education (CPSE) without having previously received early childhood education. When this occurs, a child's parents should be provided information to encourage enrollment in the district's UPK program. If the parents choose to enroll their child in UPK, the CPSE will then develop the IEP to deliver special education services within the UPK program.

Other preschool children with disabilities may begin in a UPK program and later demonstrate a need for special education services. UPK staff should encourage the parents to make the referral or directly refer the child to the CPSE. It is recommended that UPK staff participate in CPSE meetings as the child's teacher or as others who have knowledge regarding the child. The UPK administrator and/or staff can provide the CPSE with valuable information on the learning standards addressed in the UPK curriculum. This will assist the CPSE in identifying appropriate special education services to support the child's UPK program.

In either case, when preschool children with disabilities are enrolled in UPK, funding from the Universal Prekindergarten Program and funding available through federal, State and county sources for special education, can be used to support such arrangements.

What factors do UPK programs with successful integration practices consider?

Programs that have had particular success in the integration of students have learned that there are specific areas that assist them in planning and developing integrated programs. Questions related to each of those areas are listed below. It may be helpful to consider these in reviewing program implementation and practice.

School District Planning/Communications:

- Is the school district plan developed and implemented to identify areas of collaboration and mutual practice between the UPK program and preschool special education providers?
- Are preschool special education providers identified as eligible agencies to receive funds to establish UPK classes in the community?

- Are preschool students with disabilities identified as eligible students in the design and implementation of the district's UPK enrollment process?
- Do the district's UPK informational materials identify the program as available to all four-year-olds, including those with disabilities?
- Do the district's UPK staff and CPSE Chairperson meet regularly to plan for students with disabilities in the UPK program?

Advisory Board/Parent Participation :

- Are preschool special education programs, related service providers and parents of preschool students with disabilities selected to participate on the district's Advisory Board and contribute to the district's UPK application?
- Are parents of all children, with and without disabilities, given opportunities to actively participate in all phases of the UPK program, including volunteering in classes, serving as chaperones for field trips and serving on the district's UPK Advisory Board?

Joint Staff Development:

- Are joint staff development activities planned and implemented for all general and special education staff in UPK programs, especially those with collaborative models?

What information should be exchanged between the UPK providers and the CPSE?

An important part of the successful participation of preschool children with disabilities in UPK, is the success of the communication with the CPSE. A flow of information is needed to ensure that the CPSE, UPK providers and parents communicate about programs and potential options. It may be helpful for the CPSE Chairperson and the UPK administrator to meet periodically to share information about their respective programs and address the needs of individual children with disabilities.

In order to facilitate effective planning for individual students, the CPSE must have adequate information from UPK staff regarding:

- UPK program goals and program design;
- UPK program capacity;
- placement options;

- providers of UPK services;
- recruitment;
- staff development opportunities; and
- time lines for completion of planning activities.

UPK administrator and providers of UPK services need the following information from CPSEs and preschool service providers:

- when and how to access CPSEs;
- what special education services are available;
- what services a specific child needs;
- how special education services are provided; and
- how special education services are funded.

This information exchange is crucial if CPSEs are to convey needed information to parents and begin planning earlier for four-year-old children with disabilities to ensure increased participation in UPK.

How can staff development support integration of students with disabilities?

A common knowledge base is helpful in effectively meeting the needs of children and families. A useful strategy is to provide regularly scheduled opportunities for district and non-district UPK and preschool special education staff to share in joint staff development activities.

UPK and Preschool Special Education staff may also benefit from training provided by the Office for Child, Family and Community Services and VESID. School districts and preschool special education providers may request training from the Special Education Training and Resource Centers (SETRC) to address their specific needs related to the increased integration of preschool students with disabilities. The topics of training programs that may be helpful include:

- designing the classroom environment to address the developmental needs of preschool students with and without disabilities;

- effective communication and team planning among general and special education staff;
- scheduling the instructional day to include special education and related service providers;
- implementing IEPs of preschool students with disabilities within the UPK program;
- appropriate use of assistive technology and modified instructional activities for preschool students with disabilities;
- communicating with and involving parents of preschool students with and without disabilities in UPK programs; and
- evaluating student progress.

How are parents involved in UPK integration?

Parents are partners with the education programs serving their children. In addition to including parents on the Advisory Board, districts must provide opportunities for parents to be involved in the program at a variety of levels - in the classroom, at home, by attending workshops and parent meetings and in decision-making capacities. In addition, the UPK program must provide, or facilitate access to, other services for children and families (e.g., social services, health services, housing) needed to support a child's successful participation in the program.

Parents also are members of the CPSE. At the time of referral to the CPSE, they may choose to enroll their preschool student with a disability in the district's UPK program with the appropriate support of special education programs and services. All parents are encouraged to participate in their child's program by volunteering in UPK and preschool special education programs. In addition, parents of preschool students with disabilities may receive parent education and training within their child's program, at home or in-group informational sessions. Districts are encouraged to periodically take the opportunity to provide joint information and/or support sessions for all parents of children receiving UPK services.

What are the assessment and re-evaluation requirements?

Both UPK and preschool special education programs require assessment of all children's progress. UPK programs are required to establish an assessment process to determine a developmental baseline and the progress of children participating in the program. Preschool special education requires an assessment of a child's progress in achieving IEP goals and objectives. Preschool students with disabilities must

participate in any student assessment of progress in meeting learning standards, as well as their progress in meeting their IEP goals and objectives. All students should be assessed with the same measures. A child's IEP may identify certain approved accommodations that the student requires in order to appropriately participate in the UPK program's assessment process.

In addition, UPK programs are required to submit a final report describing the district's success in meeting its established goals in required component areas. These areas include support services to children and families, parent involvement, staff development, transition of children to school-age programs, continuity between the UPK program and the early elementary program, integration of preschool children with disabilities and meeting the needs of English language learners. Preschool students with disabilities who are enrolled in UPK and their families are to be included in any evaluations of the program's effectiveness.

How do students with disabilities transition to kindergarten?

Transition to kindergarten is a key element of both UPK and preschool special education programs for four-year-old children. The goal of these programs is to build early literacy skills and readiness skills in cognitive, motor, communication, and the social/emotional areas to prepare children for kindergarten. UPK programs must include developmentally appropriate activities to prepare children with and without disabilities for this critical transition. It is important to establish continuity between pre-kindergarten programs and the early elementary program.

A number of activities may facilitate transition and are most successful when conducted each year. These include the establishment of shared goals and objectives; joint staff development; opportunities for joint planning, both for individual children and program implementation; shared curricula; and regular meetings between district and non-district UPK staff and kindergarten teachers. As children transition from the UPK/preschool special education program, it is important that regular opportunities are provided for them and their parents to visit kindergarten classes, ride school buses and meet kindergarten teachers and staff. This provides an opportunity to familiarize the children with their next education program and makes the transition a comfortable and positive experience for children.