



Title/Topic: Early Childhood Programming Clarification

Date: April 23, 2025

To: The Board of Education

From: Superintendent Kate Donegan

Background

Following our February presentation, we've received feedback from parents who have shared their appreciation for the current Junior Kindergarten (J/K) experience and voiced concerns about the upcoming change to our early childhood programming. Their responses speak to the high value they place on their children's experiences and the trust they have in our educators. This memo aims to reaffirm our commitment to maintaining a high-quality early learning program that meets the needs of all students while explaining the purpose and design of the new model.

What is the Change?

To meet our legal requirements, the Board of Education approved an early childhood model that includes a small number of three-year-olds in the morning of our current full-day four-year-old program, which will be supported by additional educators, beginning in the 2026-2027 school year.

Why the Change?

The shift in our preschool model is rooted in a clear goal: to best serve all District 38 children, including our legal responsibility to serve those with disabilities who become eligible for special education services at age three. With only two classrooms available and increasing demand from our community, we need an inclusive, sustainable model aligned with research-backed best practices.

Additionally, the landscape of our current partnership with the special education cooperative is in significant jeopardy, and it is becoming clearer that the cooperative will not be able to sustain Kenilworth 38's early childhood programming for three-year-olds moving forward. This uncertainty reinforces the importance of building our internal capacity to serve all eligible students, ensuring we can meet legal requirements and educational standards reliably and within our school community.

Our legal requirements and guiding principles are:

- Providing a continuum of early learning opportunities for District 38 students starting at age three.
- Ensuring children with IEPs are served in their home school alongside their community peers.
- Aligning the preschool program with the academic and social-emotional goals of our K-8 structure.
- Creating consistency and maximizing instructional time and staff collaboration.

What the Research Tells Us

To meet our legal requirements and guiding principles, our planning was grounded in a comprehensive review of best practices and outcomes from peer districts and national studies. Key findings include:

- When three-year-olds make up no more than 30–40% of the class and the instructional quality is high, there is no academic disadvantage for four-year-olds. Many studies show that outcomes are equivalent or better in well-implemented blended classrooms.
- Social-emotional development is either maintained or strengthened in multi-age settings, with increased peer modeling and leadership opportunities for older students.
- Full-day programs consistently produce stronger gains in literacy, math, and school readiness skills compared to half-day programs.
- Critical to the success of any preschool model is the differentiation of instruction for students based on their current needs and development.

The enhanced preschool model reflects a multi-year study that involved our preschool partners at TrueNorth.

- Discussions began in 2022 and included regular planning sessions focused on aligning the program with our legal and guiding principles. Multiple models were considered and evaluated.
- We collaborated with our research firm, EAB, to help us review current best practices.
- Site visits to other early childhood programs gave us valuable insights into different models in action.
- We surveyed our kindergarten families to better understand their preschool experiences and preferences.

All of this input helped shape a direction that balances our community's needs with best practices and positions us to serve more students in an inclusive and equitable manner.

What Families Can Expect to Remain Consistent

We want to assure families that the new model builds upon the strengths of the current J/K program.

Four-year-old students will continue to benefit from:

- Exceptional instruction delivered by highly trained educators with early childhood, special education, and English learner credentials.
- Exposure to specials such as World Language, Music, Art, PE, and Hub time.
- A rich curriculum that supports language development, early literacy and numeracy, inquiry, and social growth.
- An environment that emphasizes kindergarten readiness—both academic and social-emotional—from the beginning of the day through dismissal.

What's New—and Why It Strengthens the Program

Beginning in 2026–2027, each classroom will serve both three- and four-year-olds in the morning. In the afternoon, only the four-year-olds will remain for an extended, age-specific learning block. This model was selected as the best option of the five models we considered, allowing us to leverage the most benefits for our students and staff.

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Key advantages include:

- More D38 four-year-olds can be served: The redesigned model increases total four-year-old enrollment from 14 to approximately 20 students across the two classrooms.
- Classrooms will typically include 4 to 5 three-year-olds and 9 to 10 four-year-olds in the morning session.
- The full program will be supported by additional specialized staff, such as a special education teacher, speech and language pathologist, social worker, and occupational therapist.
- The morning will also benefit from an additional instructional assistant, allowing for small-group instruction, responsive support, and differentiated learning opportunities for both age groups.
- The afternoon session is exclusively for four-year-olds, with time intentionally structured around age-specific academic and social-emotional readiness, including extended project work and targeted instruction.

Implementation Timeline

- Spring 2025: Finalize staffing model and begin professional development on multi-age differentiation.
- Fall 2025: Host family Open House to preview the program.
- Fall 2026: Launch the blended program model.

Next Steps

We will continue to communicate directly with families to ensure their understanding and to answer questions. Upcoming actions include:

- A fall Open House to walk families through the daily schedule, curriculum structure, and instructional strategies.
- Sharing specific examples of how differentiation will occur throughout the day for both age groups.
- Ongoing professional development for staff on curriculum alignment, differentiation, and progress monitoring.

In summary, this redesign preserves the excellence that families have come to expect while expanding access and strengthening alignment across our early childhood and elementary programs. It also positions us to meet growing community needs and shifts in external service availability with greater stability. We are confident that this model will serve all learners, especially our four-year-olds, with the individual attention, challenge, and preparation they need for a successful transition to kindergarten.

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Family Questions

- **Is the current JK model replaced by a mixed-age program in 2026-27?** Yes. This hybrid model—approved in March after evaluating four distinct options—will integrate just 4-5 three-year-olds each morning without negatively impacting existing routines or expectations. The blended model follows best practices, maximizes slots, reduces waitlists, and ensures equitable access, all without negative impacts.
- **Why make this change after the JK pilot?** We evaluated four separate models and designed a fifth hybrid solution to satisfy legal requirements for three-year-old IEPs, expand four-year-old capacity from 14 to 20, and maintain program quality as our cooperative partnership ends.
- **How will instructional quality be maintained?** Lead teachers will co-teach small-group rotations with support from additional specialists (SPED teacher, SLP, social worker, OT) and an extra instructional assistant, ensuring differentiated, developmentally appropriate learning for both age groups.
- **How will this preserve our program's reputation and avoid a negative impact?** This minor adjustment is paired with expanded staffing and grounded in research-backed best practices. All core strengths—rigorous curriculum, hands-on specials, and social-emotional focus—remain fully intact.
- **Why Not Keep One Dedicated J/K Room?** A full-day four-year-old JK classroom would support about 14 students. In the enhanced model, we can serve 20 or more four-year-olds, reducing the number of students on a waitlist. A separate three-year-old classroom would be half-day only. These students would then be eligible for the full-day JK classroom the following year, reducing the possibility that students could enter the program as a four-year-olds. While we could consider adding an additional half-day afternoon four-year-old program, historically, we have not been able to fill these classes because our community wants full-day programming for four-year-olds. The enhanced model serves to maximize the number of children served in our preschool program and provides equitable access.

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