

A Plan to Expand Preschool in Four Cape Cod Towns

By Alyssa Haywoode

What do you do when you have a great plan to expand preschool—but no new money?

You get more out of what you already have.

For now, that’s the plan on Cape Cod where four towns have used a \$39,000 state-funded preschool planning grant to develop a detailed strategic plan for expanding high-quality preschool programs for more of the Cape’s young children.

The four towns—Dennis, Yarmouth, Harwich, and Chatham—have taken a leap of faith. Planning grants require a lot of work, and the final product is only a plan. There is no promise of funding to put that plan into

partners representing the four towns and their two school districts, the Dennis-Yarmouth and Monomoy Regional School Districts.

“It was just the most gratifying, really thrilling experience,” Jan Rotella, the PEG grant manager, says. Public and private preschool teachers and administrators worked with local service agencies and parents.

“They came together, some with trepidation, some with fear that their income was going to be destroyed,” Rotella adds, acknowledging that private preschool

The heart of the plan is a stirring vision of “expanded access to high-quality pre-schools for every child and family in the four partnering towns, and eventually, hopefully, across the Cape and Islands.”

The four towns could make real progress—if they had funding.

Year-Round Cape

A haven of sandy, summertime bliss, the Cape doesn’t always spring to mind as a public policy priority. But it should. The Cape’s beach houses and sailboats co-exist with familiar social problems.

Like other regions, the Cape grapples with child poverty, job shortages, and unaffordable housing. Last spring, an estimated two to 12 children per night needed foster care placements, prompting local officials and the YMCA to host foster care recruitment events.¹ Opioid and substance abuse have taken a toll on the adult population; and because of parental substance abuse, 3 percent of Cape babies are born with withdrawal symptoms, a condition called Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome.²

Preschools also face problems. Surveys of preschool programs and parents in the four PEG grant towns found:

- programs enrolled at capacity, and several programs with waiting lists, indicating a need for more classroom space to accommodate preschool expansion;
- unmet professional development needs, and difficulty accessing trainings due to times and locations; and
- parents’ dissatisfaction with program hours.

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action. So towns can be left hanging—all dressed up with nowhere to go.

But Cape educators saw past this limitation. They understood the power of being ready. If more substantial funding came, they would be prepared to use it.

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programs worried about losing children to the school district. But the committee never wavered in its commitment.

There was a feeling, Rotella says, of, “We’re really better together,” and “a very deep profound belief that every child deserves an equal chance.”

Two community forums were held. Parents and preschool programs filled out surveys. And the committee came up with a proposed strategic plan.

These kids come to school needing support, Dotti McDevitt says. The owner of A Child’s Wonderland Preschool in Harwich, she often sees children being raised by grandparents as well as children with serious learning difficulties and behavioral challenges. “As a private program, it’s difficult because we don’t have the means to have a school psychologist or a school nurse... the best we can do is start with the pediatrician and refer them to public school.”

There’s also a workforce problem. “We’re having a crisis of availability of certified EEC teachers here on Cape Cod,” McDevitt says. “Millennials are not going into this profession; it doesn’t pay.” The region, she says, needs more qualified teachers, money to pay them with, more collaboration and shared professional development with the public schools, and more alignment between the Department of Early Education and Care and the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

Transportation for young children is variously described as “a huge thing” and “a horror show,” on the Cape and in many rural communities. Some children also move multiple times during the school year because their parents are seasonal workers, so preschool programs need the regional coordination it takes to keep transient youngsters moving toward kindergarten readiness.

Funding, if it came, could address some of these problems.

The Cape’s Assets

Given all its sand, it’s no surprise that the Cape has grit. Armed with a fierce commitment to its children, the region is forging ahead on two fronts: low-cost innovations and nose-to-the-grindstone fundraising.

Many of the necessary relationships are already in place. Thanks to previous grants, conversations between public school educators and administrators and private preschool educators have been going on for years, spurred in part by the creation of the Cape’s [Early Learning Network](#), an informal

association of early childhood education and care providers.

The strategic plan pushes further, calling for parents and educators to work together to achieve sustainable preschool expansion. Teachers’ salaries would be equalized, so that private pre-K teachers would no longer lag behind their higher-paid public school colleagues. Families would be able to choose between spots in public schools and spots in private, licensed child care centers. An Early Education Advisory Committee would steer this work. An Early Childhood Education Coordinator would be hired. And, best of all, children’s lives would be changed for the better thanks to a strong foundation of early learning.

The strategic plan is “a road map,” according to Carole Eichner, the Director of Early Learning in Dennis-Yarmouth, and former principal of a PK-3 elementary school in the district. So if funding comes, the Cape partners and their systems for

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supporting families—with housing, hunger, or substance abuse, for example—would have a clear path forward.

How much would preschool expansion in the four towns cost? That depends on the size of the expansion. The strategic plan lays out options. For instance, providing 100 children with full-day, year-round programs, plus additional family support services, would cost \$16,000 per child, a total of \$1.6 million. Another approach is to follow New Jersey’s model, which would cost \$13,000 per child for a full-year model with extended day programs. There isn’t one best pre-k model, but research shows that quality doesn’t come cheap.

Ultimately, the planning committee decided on a phased-in approach that would

cost \$10,500 per child, with limited add-on services for children and families. **That lower price tag would not be enough to equalize teachers’ salaries, but the plan commits to conducting more research on that issue.** The money would pay for five classrooms with 20 children each, serving a total of 100 children, which is currently a third of the Cape’s estimated unmet need.

The strategic plan also calls for the four towns to seek federal, state, and private grant funding. The Early Education Advisory Committee will gather and use data to assess the work of all the early childhood programs. High quality would be maintained across the classrooms.

Moving Forward

Ideally, the state would invest new money for preschool in the Cape and other cities and towns. But in the meantime, these four towns are pushing forward.

In November, the annual “All Cape” in-service training day for 600 K-12 public school teachers included for the first time private preschool teachers. In fact, the day has been rebranded as a “Pre-School to Grade 12” initiative. A commitment to shared professional development has helped strengthen the bonds among public and private preschool educators over the years, while ensuring children have equal access to quality teaching and curriculum, regardless of where they attend.

These public/private relationships are essential, regardless of funding. “That’s how we’re going to keep the movement going forward,” Joe Gilbert, the PEG grant administrator, says. Gilbert is also the professional development director for the

Cape Cod Collaborative, and he served as superintendent of the Harwich Public Schools.

Gilbert and the collaborative are also working on two projects that grew out of the PEG grant process. One is a professional development initiative for teachers that will provide training on working with English Language Learners (ELLs), a small but growing student population on the Cape and Islands.³

The four towns hope to be a model for the Cape and the state by sharing some of the lessons they've learned.

For example, having safe, transparent discussions is essential so that stakeholders can bring up all their concerns.

Principals should be in charge of pre-school efforts, Gilbert says, because they can make the case for collaboration to

superintendents who may ask: What's in it for me? Why, in other words, should a public school work closely with private preschool providers? The answer is simple. By working together, public and private preschool programs can make sure all children are prepared when they start taking the state's standardized exams in the third grade.

And of course, understanding and meeting families' needs is crucial. Parent surveys conducted by the preschool planning team revealed that the largest concern by far is program hours. A half-day is too short a schedule for most working families. As one parent shared, "She goes to her school because it is 8-2:30 and sometimes aftercare. Half day programs do not work for us, and this only works because we have family that picks her up at 2:30 most days."

Parents also showed general support for expanding early learning opportunities, community-wide. In an open-ended survey question about suggestions for future preschool services, one parent said, "The more we can do to bring families in when their children are young the better. From infant on..."

The Cape's regional partnership provides a unique model for other areas of the Commonwealth that are not urban, but are seeing increasing needs. Towns with smaller populations will need to band together to advocate for funding, and design and implement a strategy that enables them to better serve families.

Perhaps the most important lesson is to stay sharply focused on meeting the needs of young children, because whether or not the money comes, they are essential to the Cape's future.

1 Merchant, B. (2016, May 14). YMCA Hosting Foster Parent Recruitment Event. CapeCod.com. Retrieved from www.capecod.com/newscenter/foster-parent-recruitment-event/

2 Based on 1,185 births in FY15, 3% = 35 children. Carter, A. (2016, Jan 21). Effects Of Opioids Can Reach Into Womb. Retrieved from www.capenews.net/mashpee/news/effects-of-opioids-can-reach-into-womb/article_0e4fcdfe-7933-5f6f-91c0-29eada2ff602.html

3 In Nantucket, for example in the 2015-16 school year, 15.7 percent of school children were ELLs, according to the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. Among the PEG grantees, Dennis-Yarmouth had the highest concentration of ELLs: 8 percent of students, a total of 247 children. In the Monomoy district only 3.3 percent were, but that's still 64 students.

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