

**Nassau County**

**Office of the Comptroller**



**Opportunities for Improving Preschool Special Education Outcomes  
for Nassau County Children**

**GEORGE MARAGOS**

*Comptroller*

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**NASSAU COUNTY**  
**OFFICE OF THE COMPTROLLER**

**George Maragos**  
*Comptroller*

Eleni Manis, Ph.D.  
*Senior Research Analyst*

Sergio Blanco, Esq.  
*Counsel to the Comptroller*

Jostyn Hernandez  
*Director of Communications*

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**Table of Contents**

**1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY ..... 3**  
**2. BACKGROUND..... 6**  
**3. COST OF PRESCHOOL SPECIAL EDUCATION IN NASSAU COUNTY..... 9**  
**4. STUDENT PLACEMENT PRACTICES..... 12**  
**5. STUDENTS’ DEVELOPMENTAL OUTCOMES ..... 17**  
**6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS..... 21**

## 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Nassau County's preschool special education program is mandated by New York State Education Law and the Federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. The program provides services to three-to-five year old children with developmental delays at no direct cost to families. These services are intended to help children achieve or approach the same developmental milestones as typically developing children. A designated Committee on Preschool Special Education in each school district determines children's eligibility for special education services and children's individual education plans. The Nassau County Health Department is responsible for overseeing these programs.

Nassau County school districts can recommend a comprehensive range of services to eligible preschool children with special needs. These services range from targeted therapy to one-on-one instruction, preschool classes and residential programs. Services can be provided in a variety of settings, including a child's home, regular preschool classes, day care, and centers for children with special needs. Private for profit and nonprofit service providers supply most preschool special education services in Nassau.

The cost of preschool special education is shared between the County and New York State (NYS). The County pays 40.5% and NYS pays the remaining 59.5%. In 2014, Nassau County served 5,249 students at a total cost of \$100.7 million. The average cost per student was \$19,186, but private center-based programs can cost as much as \$52,000 per child. Rates paid to service providers can vary widely for similar services due to the cost-based methodology established by the NYS Education Department.

Federal standards emphasize that most preschool students with special needs achieve better developmental skills when taught in classes or settings attended by typically developing, age-appropriate peers. The NYS guide on preschool special education adheres to this standard, emphasizing the importance of educating special needs students with typically developing peers. Such integration can occur in regular preschool classes and in special education classes that accommodate both typically developing and special needs children ("special classes in an integrated setting").

Federal and NYS standards evaluate the performance of school districts' special education programs using two key metrics, student placement (referring to students' placement in integrated settings) and students' developmental outcomes. Data on Nassau County school districts' placement and outcomes performance is very limited. Of the two key performance metrics, student placement data for Nassau County districts is available for only three years (2011-2012 through 2013-2014), while student outcome data is available for a limited rotating sample of districts each year for the school years 2008-2009 through 2013-2014.

The available data indicates that Nassau County significantly underperforms the NYS average with respect to placing students in integrated settings. Less than one in four Nassau preschool special education students (22%) attended a regular or integrated class from 2011-2012 through 2013-2014, compared to 43% of students across New York State

and 42% of students nationwide. Within the County, placement results vary dramatically from district to district. At the low and high extremes, East Meadow school district placed 3% of special needs students and Island Park placed 49% of special needs students in regular or integrated preschool classes.

Surprisingly, Nassau's below-average integration rates do not appear to have resulted in special needs students failing to reach the NYS average for skill development. Countywide, more than 50% of Nassau County's students reached age-appropriate development in any given skill category by the time they finished preschool and nearly 9 of 10 students improved substantially. These results for student outcomes are consistent with NYS averages and the NYS Education Department's performance targets.

The question that naturally arises is, why should Nassau County school districts, which pride themselves on being some of the best in the nation, accept underperformance in student placement and merely average developmental outcomes? Additionally, would increased placements in integrated settings help students achieve better outcomes? Federal and NYS guidelines recommend integration for most special needs students.

Local school administrators surmise that low integration rates may be due to the lack of availability of classes where children with special needs can learn alongside typically developing peers. They also point to parents' and administrators' belief that the more intensive instruction provided in separate classes is beneficial for many children. Integration also appears to be impeded by the historical lack of feedback from the NYS Education Department to districts regarding the merits of integration and regarding their performance compared to their peers. On November 2, the Early Childhood Direction Center, funded by the NYS Education Department, held the first forum to discuss Nassau districts' preschool special education placement practices.

In order to help our Nassau schools achieve better placement results and perhaps better outcomes, we recommend that the Nassau County Department of Health take a greater leadership role. It may be helpful for the Department of Health to take initiatives to track the annual performance of all Nassau school districts and to host a combined countywide conference for school districts, service providers, parents, and advocates of special needs children, including the NYS Department of Education, to explore policies and initiatives that:

1. Help districts understand their relative performance in educating special needs children in order to motivate increased use of integrated placements where warranted.
2. Expand the availability of integrated settings for preschool students by expanding the number of universal prekindergarten classes, similar to New York City.
3. Raise parents' and administrators' awareness of the benefits of integration for children with special needs.

4. Raise awareness that money is available per preschool special education student to incentivize school districts' becoming certified special class providers.

We encourage a renewed focus on the education of our preschool children with special needs. Our school districts should aim to achieve greater integration and higher than average outcomes for these remarkable children.

## 2. BACKGROUND

Nassau County's preschool special education program is mandated by NYS Education Law<sup>1</sup> and the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.<sup>2</sup> The program provides therapeutic and educational services to three-to-five year-old children with developmental delays. Services are provided at no charge to families, with all expenses paid by Nassau County, which is partially reimbursed by New York State. In 2014, Nassau provided preschool special education services to 5,249 children at a total cost to taxpayers of \$100.7 million, or \$19,186 per child. The State currently reimburses the County for 59.5% of its costs.<sup>3</sup>

Across New York State, public school districts are responsible for making preschool special education programming decisions. A child's educational program is determined by his or her school district's Committee on Preschool Special Education, a committee composed of parents, educators, and special education specialists. Each district's Committee on Preschool Special Education determines which children are eligible for services, what services children will receive, and which providers will serve each child. Every eligible child receives an Individualized Education Program that describes the therapeutic and educational services that he or she will receive over the course of the school year. Committees' decisions are guided by the Regulations of the Commissioner of Education and by standards set out in the NYS Education Department's guide on preschool special education.<sup>4</sup>

While regulated by NYS Education Department guidelines, each school district, acting through its Committee on Preschool Special Education, operates autonomously in making special education programming decisions. A county representative may participate in districts' Committee meetings, but only in a nonvoting, advisory capacity.<sup>5</sup> This division of responsibility, whereby districts hold all effective power to make programming decisions, while all costs fall to counties and to NYS, has led to questions about the costs paid by counties and about the effectiveness of the programs that counties subsidize.

The NYS Education Department's guide on preschool special education provides two key forms of guidance to districts to help them decide what services are appropriate. First, it contains detailed recommendations regarding the type and frequency of services that are appropriate for various special needs. A child's services can range from 1-2 therapy sessions a week at home, to more intensive one-on-one teaching provided at a setting such as a day care center, on through half- and full-day preschool classes and residential programs for those with the greatest needs.

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<sup>1</sup> N.Y. EDN. LAW § 4410: NY Code - Section 4410: Special education services and programs for preschool children with handicapping conditions.

<sup>2</sup> Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 20 U.S.C. § 1400 (2004).

<sup>3</sup> According to NYS law, counties should be reimbursed for 69.5% of their costs. N.Y. EDN. LAW §4410 [11][b](i) (2015).

<sup>4</sup> "Guide for Determining Eligibility and Special Education Programs and/or Services for Preschool Students with Disabilities", The New York State Education Department Office of Vocational and Educational Services for Individuals with Disabilities, January 2003, Albany, New York.

<sup>5</sup> "A Roadmap to Mandate Relief," New York State Association of Counties, November 2012, pp. 5 and 7. "Operational Review of the Nassau County Department of Health's Preschool Special Education Program," Office of the Nassau County Comptroller, May 21, 2013, pp. 3 and 5.

Second, the Guide addresses where children should receive their special education instruction, emphasizing that students should receive special education services while in classes or settings with typically developing, age-appropriate peers. The NYS Education Department encourages districts to accommodate children in regular early childhood programs such as day care, Head Start, and preschools and discourages children's relegation to separate, special-needs-only settings, even when children face considerable special needs challenges. This guidance is grounded in the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, which defends integration as a component of including individuals with special needs in mainstream society and on the basis of the educational benefits associated with integrated classes.<sup>6</sup> As the Act states, "Almost 30 years of research and experience has demonstrated that the education of children with disabilities can be made more effective by having high expectations for such children and ensuring their access to the general education curriculum in the regular classroom."<sup>7</sup> The federal Office of Special Education Programs has emphasized the importance of integrating preschool students in particular.<sup>8</sup>

Integration, however, has its detractors. A study commissioned by the NYS Education Department on preschool integration demonstrated that some students may benefit from preschool integration.<sup>9</sup> It also showed that a significant number of students had to be removed from integrated classes in the years following their integrated preschool placements.<sup>10</sup> A different study cited by the Education Department in its recent "New York State Systemic Improvement Plan" showed that children with severe disabilities showed improved language development in integrated classes—but that behavioral issues were more effectively addressed in separate classes.<sup>11</sup> If the use of integrated settings is to increase, its specific benefits for children with particular special needs must be explained and publicized.

The NYS Education Department publishes an annual report on statewide special education outcomes, using the federal Office of Special Education Programs' performance indicators to assess preschool special education programs.<sup>12</sup> The indicators track two distinct areas of programs' performance, which we refer to as student placement and student outcomes.<sup>13</sup> Student placement data measures the percentage of each district's preschool special education students who attend an early childhood program with typically developing peers, and the percentage who receive their education in separate, special-needs-only programs. Placement data (as currently measured) is only available for the school years 2011-2012 through 2013-2014. Student outcome data measures students' development in three broad skill areas: socio-emotional skills, knowledge/language

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<sup>6</sup> 20 U.S.C. § 1400 (c)(5) (2004).

<sup>7</sup> 20 U.S.C. § 1400 (c)(5) (2004).

<sup>8</sup> "Dear Colleague: Preschool Least Restrictive Environment," an open letter from the Office of Special Education Programs, February 29, 2012. Footnote 3 of the letter documents the Office's outreach regarding Least Restrictive Environment going back to 1987.

<sup>9</sup> "A Longitudinal Study of Preschool Special Education: Final Report," MGT of America, Inc., September 6, 2007, p. 6-18.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6-3.

<sup>11</sup> NYS Education Department, "New York State Systemic Improvement Plan," 2015, p. 23.

<sup>12</sup> This annual report is the NYS Education Department Part B State Performance Plan (SPP)/Annual Performance Report (APR).

<sup>13</sup> We use Student Placement to refer to Part B Indicator 6, "Preschool Least Restrictive Environment," and Student Outcomes to refer to Part B Indicator 7, "Preschool Outcomes." The full text of these indicators are available at <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/speced/guid/idea/bapr/2014/2014-part-b-measurement-table.pdf>



development, and appropriate behavior. Student outcome data is available for 2008-2009 to 2013-2014, though individual school districts' student outcomes are sampled only once every six years on a rotating basis. All data is reported directly by each school district to the NYS Education Department.

The NYS Education Department's annual report on preschool special education outcomes contains limited analysis of regional and county-level outcomes. Indeed, the NYS Association of Counties has noted that counties do not know whether preschool special education services "are providing good outcomes for these children."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> "A Roadmap to Mandate Relief," p. 3.

### 3. COST OF PRESCHOOL SPECIAL EDUCATION IN NASSAU COUNTY

The following section analyzes Nassau’s spending on preschool special education for the fiscal years 2008 to 2014. Our cost analysis is based on data drawn from the Nassau Integrated Financial System.<sup>15</sup> Figure 1 below summarizes Nassau County’s spending and enrollment data. In addition to total cost and enrollment data (columns B and C), we include the average cost per student (column D), cost and enrollment data for Special Education Itinerant Teacher services (SEIT) (columns E, F, and G), cost and enrollment data for center-based preschool classes (columns H, I, and J), and all other preschool special education costs (columns K, L, and M).<sup>16</sup>

**Figure 1: Nassau County Preschool Special Education Cost and Enrollment History**

A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M
Year	Total County Cost	Total Enrollment	Cost Per Student	Cost of SEIT (one-on-one teachers)	SEIT as % of Total Cost	Enrollment in SEIT	Cost of Center-Based Classes	Center-Based Classes as % of Total Cost	Enrollment in Center-Based Classes	Transport. Costs	Related Services Costs	Other Costs
2008	\$106,794,077	6327	\$16,879	\$ 24,649,542	23%	1494	\$56,814,456	53%	2471	\$17,755,153	\$ -	\$ 7,574,926
2009	\$115,891,806	6193	\$18,713	\$ 17,069,029	15%	1289	\$60,770,347	52%	2510	\$16,983,289	\$ 11,496,058	\$ 9,573,083
2010	\$113,546,424	5843	\$19,433	\$ 10,324,104	9%	1093	\$68,812,179	61%	2430	\$16,079,768	\$ 9,080,791	\$ 9,249,582
2011	\$110,902,452	5640	\$19,664	\$ 9,778,127	9%	999	\$66,566,001	60%	2389	\$16,141,851	\$ 9,999,780	\$ 8,416,693
2012	\$102,009,463	5505	\$18,530	\$ 5,910,998	6%	766	\$64,270,595	63%	2282	\$15,198,325	\$ 8,950,115	\$ 7,679,430
2013	\$ 97,643,731	5358	\$18,224	\$ 4,722,545	5%	687	\$60,859,399	62%	2217	\$15,806,586	\$ 8,655,926	\$ 7,599,275
2014	\$100,709,649	5249	\$19,186	\$ 4,197,609	4%	625	\$61,715,525	61%	2189	\$15,108,092	\$ 10,223,183	\$ 9,465,240
% Change (2008 vs 2014)	-6%	-17%	14%	-83%		-58%	9%		-11%	-15%	since 2009, -11%	25%

As seen above, from 2008 to 2014, total costs (column B) declined 6% from \$106.8 to \$100.7 million. Taking inflation into account, this is a 14% total decrease in spending.<sup>17</sup> There are a number of factors that have contributed to the County’s declining spending. Overall enrollment declined 17% (column C<sup>18</sup>) and spending on SEIT (one-on-one instruction) declined 83% or approximately \$20 million (column E) due to a 58% decline in children receiving these services during the period in question. The freezing of preschool service providers’ pay rates since the 2009-2010 school year also contributed to containing costs.

These lower cost trends have been offset by the rising cost of providing center-based instruction (column H). This more intensive service category encompasses half- and full-day preschool classes typically provided at early childhood centers specifically for children with special needs. Center-based instruction is the largest item in Nassau’s preschool education budget. In 2014, the cost for center-based education grew to represent

<sup>15</sup> The Nassau County Department of Health noted these figures do not reflect expenses reported after the calendar year. The period for which claims can be submitted is open for 4 years.

<sup>16</sup> Nassau County financial data was drawn from the Nassau Integrated Financial System. Enrollment data was provided by the Nassau County Department of Health. SEIT consists of instruction, typically one-on-one by a special education teacher at a site such as a preschool or Head Start program. Preschool classes are provided for children whose needs warrant more services than a SEIT teacher can provide. We refer to these preschool classes as center-based classes because they are typically hosted at centers for children with special needs.

<sup>17</sup> Adjusting for inflation, total spending in 2008 was \$117.4 million in 2014 dollars. We relied on the United States Department of Labor calculator available at [http://www.bls.gov/data/inflation\\_calculator.htm](http://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm) (last accessed August 7, 2015).

<sup>18</sup> County enrollment totals include all students enrolled throughout a year, while school districts report enrollment as of a single point in time, early in the year (October). This results in County enrollment totals appearing higher than totals reported by school districts to the NYS Education Department.

61% of total spending from 53% in 2008, even as enrollment in center-based classes fell 11%.

In 2014, the County’s average cost per preschool special education student was \$19,186 (see Figure 1). There are twelve approved service providers who offer preschool classes for children with special needs and whose administrative offices are in Nassau County.<sup>19</sup> The table below (Figure 2) lists the widely varying tuition rates paid to these providers for supplying center-based preschool classes to children with special needs. The left side of the chart shows providers’ rates for **separate** special-needs-only classes. The per-student cost of these classes ranged from \$19,694 to \$52,353 for 10 months of full-day instruction and from \$27,169 to \$52,156 for 10 months of half-day instruction. The right side of the chart shows providers’ rates for **integrated** classes attended by special needs and typically developing students. Integrated class rates range from \$20,444 to \$40,817 per special needs student for 10 months of full-day instruction and from \$19,579 to \$32,054 for half-day instruction. All rates, including half-day rates, are adjusted for the equivalent of a 5-hour day. There are additional providers serving Nassau students whose administrative offices are outside the County. Nevertheless, the rate table below vividly demonstrates the wide range of costs for similar services and raises serious questions about the NYS rate-setting methodology. These costs are borne by local and state taxpayers.

**Figure 2: Nassau County Tuition Rates for Preschool Special Classes (2012-2013)**

Provider	Special Class (Separate)		Provider	Integrated Special Class		
	Full Day	Half Day		Full Day	Half Day	
Brookville Center for Children's Services	\$ 52,353		School for Language and Communication Development	\$ 40,817		
Variety Child Learning Center	\$ 43,937	\$ 52,156	Variety Child Learning Center	\$ 36,284		
Nassau BOCES	\$ 40,563		ACDS, Inc.	\$ 35,386		
School for Language and Communication Development	\$ 39,154		Interdisciplinary Center for Child Development	\$ 34,486		
Hebrew Academy for Special Children	\$ 38,812	\$ 41,362	Brookville Center for Children's Services	\$ 33,379		
Children's Learning Center--United Cerebral Palsy Association of Nassau County	\$ 37,496	\$ 41,859	Mill Neck Manor School for the Deaf	\$ 32,738		
ACDS, Inc.	\$ 33,356	\$ 34,443	Hebrew Academy for Special Children	\$ 32,103	\$32,054	
Hagedorn Little Village School	\$ 32,852	\$ 45,677	Children's Learning Center--United Cerebral Palsy Association of Nassau County	\$ 23,996		
Interdisciplinary Center for Child Development	\$ 31,333		Crossroads School for Child Development	\$ 20,444		
Mill Neck Manor School for the Deaf	\$ 31,203		Bellmore UFSD		\$30,991	
Crossroads School for Child Development	\$ 27,119	\$ 27,169	Hagedorn Little Village School		\$26,116	
Bellmore UFSD	\$ 19,694		Nassau BOCES			
	<b>High</b>	\$ 52,353	\$ 52,156	<b>High</b>	\$ 40,817	\$32,054
	<b>Low</b>	\$ 19,694	\$ 27,169	<b>Low</b>	\$ 20,444	\$26,116
	<b>AVERAGE</b>	\$ 35,656	\$ 40,444	<b>AVERAGE</b>	\$ 32,181	\$ 29,720

The tuition rates presented here are the certified reconciled tuition rates paid to Nassau County approved preschool special education service providers, available from the NYS Education Department at <http://eservices.nysed.gov/netrates/>.

<sup>19</sup> Floral Park-Bellerose UFSD is an approved service provider but has not offered special classes for several years.

The NYS Education Department annually develops rates for center-based programs operated by approved providers based on providers' enrollments and actual costs as reported to the Education Department, but without any automatic inflationary adjustments. These rates have remained essentially unchanged since 2009-2010.<sup>20</sup> In its December 2014 report on tuition rates for preschool students with special needs, the NYS Education Department scrutinizes the existing tuition rate setting system, concluding that "although correlation exists between educational and related service provision and total tuition reimbursement, there still remains a wide variety of tuition rates among similar programs."<sup>21</sup>

In response, the Education Department proposes modifications to the existing cost-based rate setting method. One proposal ties providers' pay to regional rates. Beginning in 2015-2016, the Education Department will phase in regional rates for all providers of Special Education Itinerant Teacher (SEIT) services operating in NYS. No such plan exists for special class rates.

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<sup>20</sup> "NYS Tuition Rate Setting Methodology: Tuition Rates for Preschool Students with Disabilities," The State Education Department, The University of the State of New York, December 2014, p. 9.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

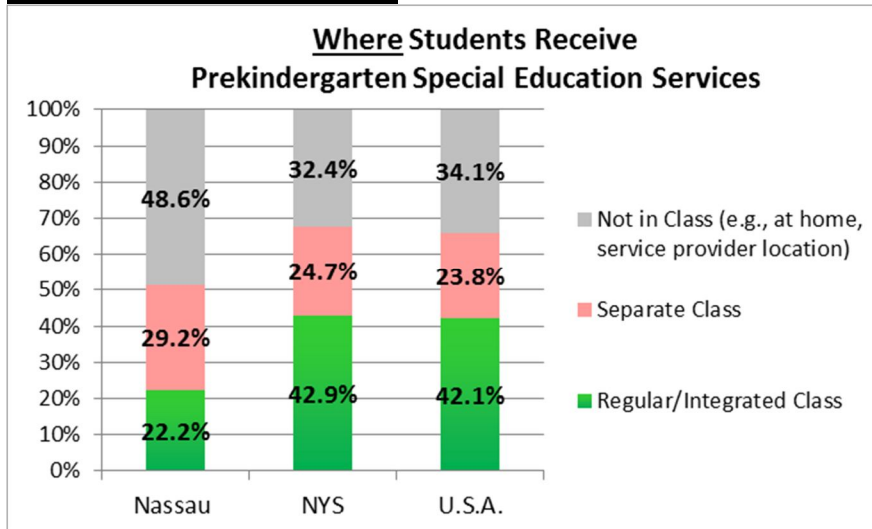
#### 4. STUDENT PLACEMENT PRACTICES

In its guide on preschool special education, the NYS Education Department emphasizes that most students with special needs can and should receive their special education services in classes or settings with typically developing, age-appropriate peers.<sup>22</sup> It encourages districts to accommodate children in regular early childhood programs, day care, Head Start, or other integrated settings and discourages children’s relegation to separate, special-needs-only settings, even when children face considerable special needs challenges.

Every year, each New York school district reports its success at placing students in integrated settings to the NYS Education Department. Districts report the percentage of their preschool special education students who attend “a regular early childhood program” (including special classes in integrated settings) and who receive the majority of their special education services there. Districts also report the percentage of preschool special education students who attend separate, special-needs-only programs.

Our analysis of Nassau County’s placement performance examines its districts’ performance on the measures of integration and separation. The analysis covers the entire short period for which data is available, 2011-2012 through 2013-2014.<sup>23</sup> Nassau County’s performance is calculated as the average of its districts’ performance. Below, we compare Nassau County to New York State and the nation on placement.

**Figure 3: Student Placement**



Nassau County Data is calculated using information obtained from NYSED’s database at <http://data.nysed.gov/lists.php?type=district> under Special Education Data by school district using Fall 2011, 2012 and 2013 data. NYS data is drawn from the NYS Education Department FFY 2013 Part B State Performance Plan (SPP)/Annual Performance Report (APR). U.S.A. data is drawn from the U.S. Department of Education’s 35<sup>th</sup> and 36<sup>th</sup> Annual Reports to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (2013 and 2014, respectively).

<sup>22</sup> “Guide for Determining Eligibility and Special Education Programs and/or Services for Preschool Students with Disabilities,” p. 25.

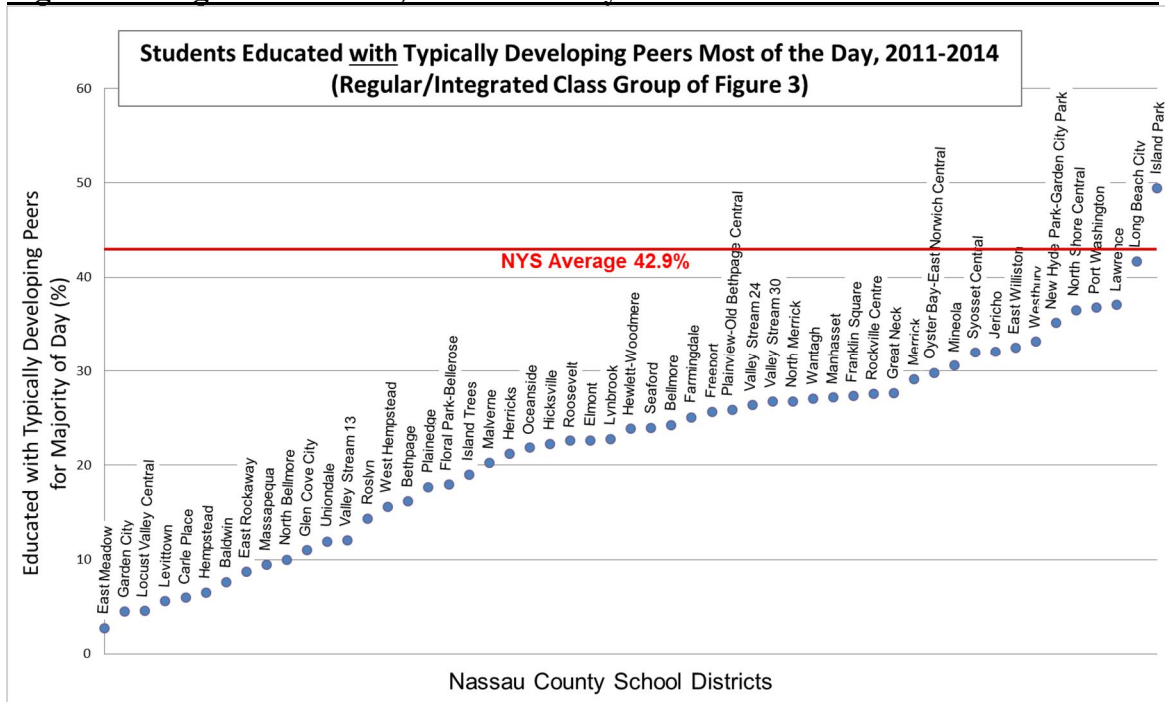
<sup>23</sup> Data collection was suspended for several years prior to 2011-2012 while the placement indicator was revised.

As the green bars (Regular/Integrated Class) indicate, Nassau lags New York State and the nation in placing preschool special education students in classes with typically developing peers. Less than one in four Nassau students (22.2%) attended a regular or integrated class, compared to 42.9% of students across New York State and 42.1% of students nationwide.<sup>24</sup>

The County also educates students in separate, special-needs-only programs at a slightly higher rate than New York State and the nation (29.2% to the state’s 24.7% and the nation’s 23.8%). A large third group of students, labeled “Not in Class” and shown in the grey bars above, receives special education services—typically related services—at home, a provider location, or another non-class setting.

Figure 4 below shows the percentage of all preschool special education students who are placed in integrated classes in each Nassau County school district.<sup>25</sup> Each district’s placement result is the average of its 2011-2012 through 2013-2014 placement data. Within Nassau, districts vary dramatically in their placement results for preschool children with special needs. Depending on a student’s district, the student faced a 3 to 49% chance of attending a regular preschool class (range extends from 3% in East Meadow to 49% in Island Park).

**Figure 4: Integration Results, Nassau County School District Placement Performance**



Data is calculated using information obtained from NYSED’s database at <http://data.nysed.gov/lists.php?type=district> under Special Education Data by school district.

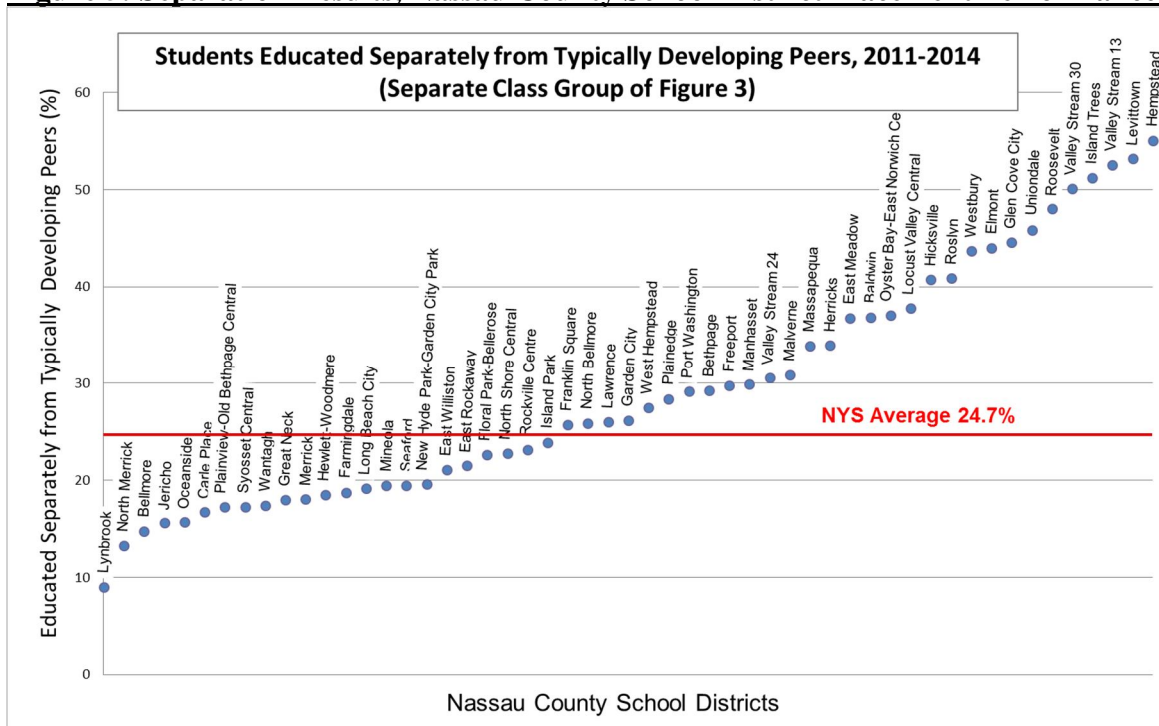
<sup>24</sup> Nassau and NYS figures are average of Fall 2011, 2012, and 2013 data. U.S.A. figures are averages of Fall 2011 and 2012 data.

<sup>25</sup> A small number of Nassau County’s preschool special education students attend Suffolk County school districts. These Suffolk County districts are excluded from our analysis.

Note that only one of 53 Nassau County school districts exceeds the NYS average in placing students in integrated classes. This district, Island Park, is the only Nassau district that places nearly 50% of special needs children in regular classes.

Figure 5 below displays individual Nassau County school districts' reliance on separate, special-needs-only settings. It shows the percentage of students placed in separate classes in each school district.

**Figure 5: Separation Results, Nassau County School District Placement Performance**



Data is calculated using information obtained from NYSED's database at <http://data.nysed.gov/lists.php?type=district> under Special Education Data by school district.

Again, we saw that districts vary markedly in their placement decisions. A student faced a 9% to 55% chance of attending a special-needs-only preschool class from 2011-12 to 2013-2014, depending on the district in which he or she resided (Lynbrook separated 9% of students, while Hempstead separated 55%).

The charts above show that Nassau County has a low integration rate and high separation rate relative to NYS and that the County relies rather heavily on separate preschool classes, despite the high priority placed on integration by the NYS Education Department. Additionally, Nassau County districts display a very wide range of integration and separation practices.

Figure 6 below summarizes placement performance from Figures 4 and 5 for each school district in Nassau County for ease of reference. A high integration score and low separation score are the most desirable. Only one school district, Island Park, betters the state average on both measures.

**Figure 6: Nassau County School District Placement Performance (2011-2014)**

District	% Integrated	% Separated	% Other (e.g., home)
Island Park	49.4	23.9	26.7
Long Beach City	41.7	19.2	39.1
Lawrence	37.1	26.0	36.9
Port Washington	36.8	29.2	34.0
North Shore Central	36.6	22.8	40.6
New Hyde Park-Garden City Park	35.2	19.6	45.2
Westbury	33.2	43.7	23.1
East Williston	32.5	21.1	46.4
Jericho	32.1	15.6	52.3
Syosset Central	32.0	17.3	50.7
Mineola	30.6	19.5	49.9
Oyster Bay-East Norwich Central	29.8	37.1	33.1
Merrick	29.2	18.1	52.7
Great Neck	27.7	18.0	54.3
Rockville Centre	27.6	23.1	49.3
Franklin Square	27.3	25.7	47.0
Manhasset	27.2	29.9	42.9
Wantagh	27.1	17.4	55.5
North Merrick	26.8	13.3	59.9
Valley Stream 30	26.8	50.1	23.1
Valley Stream 24	26.4	30.6	43.0
Plainview-Old Bethpage Central	25.9	17.2	56.9
Freeport	25.7	29.8	44.5
Farmingdale	25.1	18.7	56.2
Bellmore	24.3	14.8	60.9
Seaford	24.0	19.5	56.5
Hewlett-Woodmere	23.9	18.5	57.6
Lynbrook	22.8	9.0	68.2
Elmont	22.6	44.0	33.4
Roosevelt	22.6	48.0	29.4
Hicksville	22.3	40.7	37.0
Oceanside	21.9	15.7	62.4
Herricks	21.3	34.0	44.7
Malverne	20.3	30.9	48.8
Island Trees	19.0	51.2	29.8
Floral Park-Bellerose	18.0	22.7	59.3
Plainedge	17.7	28.4	53.9
Bethpage	16.2	29.3	54.5
West Hempstead	15.6	27.5	56.9
Roslyn	14.4	40.9	44.7
Valley Stream 13	12.1	52.6	35.3
Uniondale	11.9	45.9	42.2
Glen Cove City	11.0	44.6	44.4
North Bellmore	10.0	25.9	64.1
Massapequa	9.5	33.9	56.6
East Rockaway	8.8	21.5	69.7
Baldwin	7.6	36.9	55.5
Hempstead	6.5	55.0	38.5
Carle Place	6.0	16.7	77.3
Levittown	5.7	53.2	41.1
Locust Valley Central	4.6	37.8	57.6
Garden City	4.5	26.2	69.3
East Meadow	2.8	36.8	60.4

Data is calculated using information obtained from NYSED’s database at <http://data.nysed.gov/lists.php?type=district> under Special Education Data by school district.

We spoke to preschool special education administrators at Nassau school districts with high integration rates and to preschool special education administrators at the NYS Education Department to ask what factors they believed contributed to integration and what factors discouraged it.

District administrators stressed two factors affecting integration results: commitment to using integrated placements and the availability of these placements. One administrator at a high-integration district articulated her commitment to using integrated settings thusly: “Children do best around children who are typically developing... [Children with special needs get] modeling of social behaviors, language... [They] get modeling of better language, mature language.”<sup>26</sup> An administrator at another high-performing district echoed the same sentiment, saying “I try to give related services or SEIT in typical preschool.”<sup>27</sup> Conversely, we heard from administrators who were less convinced of integration’s broad usefulness, explaining that some children would benefit from separate classes, or were placed in separate classes to appease parents.

<sup>26</sup> Chairperson of the Committee on Preschool Special Education for the Long Beach City school district, phone interview, September 4, 2014.

<sup>27</sup> Pupil Personnel Director, Island Park school district, phone interview, September 9, 2014.



By and large, however, the individuals we interviewed repeatedly articulated the importance of integrated settings' availability. One administrator credited local preschools in her area with being "amenable to having related services provided on their campuses and amendable to working with low-income parents, e.g., sliding scale like the local JCC."<sup>28</sup> An administrator at another high-integration district echoed this theme, saying "integration would be higher if there were more openings in integrated classes.... Private programs are great, but district-based programs can be counted upon to have integrated classes."<sup>29</sup>

The Temporary Task Force on Preschool Special Education agrees with this sentiment, recommending development of Universal Prekindergarten "to increase the availability of integrated settings" for special needs students.<sup>30</sup> Colleagues at the NYS Education Department also confirmed the importance of public preschool classes to increasing integration by emphasizing the difficulty of arranging for integrated classes at private programs: "Getting a special class in an integrated setting together at the preschool level can be difficult because typically developing students have to pay for preschool."<sup>31</sup> To establish a correlation between integration and public school class availability, we compared school districts' integration practices from preschool to school age (kindergarten through grade 12). We found that 52 of 53 Nassau districts integrated more kindergarten through grade 12 students than preschool students.<sup>32</sup> The average district integrated 42% more K-12 students than preschool students. Only half of Nassau County school districts offer prekindergarten programs. All of these districts provide public classes starting in kindergarten and elementary school.

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<sup>28</sup> Chairperson of the Committee on Preschool Special Education for the Long Beach City school district, September 4, 2014.

<sup>29</sup> Pupil Personnel Director, Island Park school district, September 9, 2014.

<sup>30</sup> "Improving Preschool Special Education in New York State: Conclusions and Recommendations from the Temporary Task Force on Preschool Special Education," Report to the Governor, the Temporary President of the Senate, the Speaker of the Assembly, the Minority Leaders of the Senate and Assembly, the Director of the Budget, and the Board of Regents. November 2007, p. 2.

<sup>31</sup> Administrators at the P-12 Office of Special Education Preschool Policy Unit of the NYS Education Department, phone interview, September 5, 2014.

<sup>32</sup> Integration for students in grades K-12 is measured by another data set reported by school districts to the NYS Education Department every year (OSEP Indicator 5, "School-Age Least Restrictive Environment").

## 5. STUDENTS' DEVELOPMENTAL OUTCOMES

Special education services are tailored to help each child to achieve or approach the same developmental milestones as typically developing children, albeit on a modified timetable. For example, while a typically developing child may reach a certain level of verbal fluency by age four, special education works to help children with language difficulties attain that same level of fluency as soon as possible for each child. School districts use standardized assessments to measure preschool special education students' skill development in three broad skill areas:

1. Positive social-emotional skills (including social relationships);
2. Acquisition and use of knowledge and skills (including early language/communication and early literacy); and
3. Use of appropriate behaviors to meet their needs.<sup>33</sup>

For each skill category—(1) socio-emotional skills, (2) knowledge/language development, and (3) appropriate behavior—Nassau school districts report to the NYS Education Department the percentage of students who improved substantially by the time they graduated from preschool or turned six years old, as well as the percentage of students who achieved age-appropriate functioning in the same timeframe. An “age-appropriate” rating is better than “improved substantially.”

Each year, only one sixth of Nassau County school districts are required to report data to the NYS Education Department on student outcomes. As a consequence, any given school district reports data only once every six years. This sampling of districts is adequate for the Education Department to satisfy its mandate to report state-level data to the federal Office of Special Education Programs. However, as a direct consequence of districts reporting data only once every six years, only one sixth of students passing through any given school district are represented in that district's data.<sup>34</sup>

As individual school districts' student outcomes are sampled only once every six years on a rotating basis, only limited data is available for analysis. No conclusions can be drawn about individual school districts' student outcome performance that would be statistically meaningful. The best that can be accomplished is to calculate average student outcomes on a countywide basis.

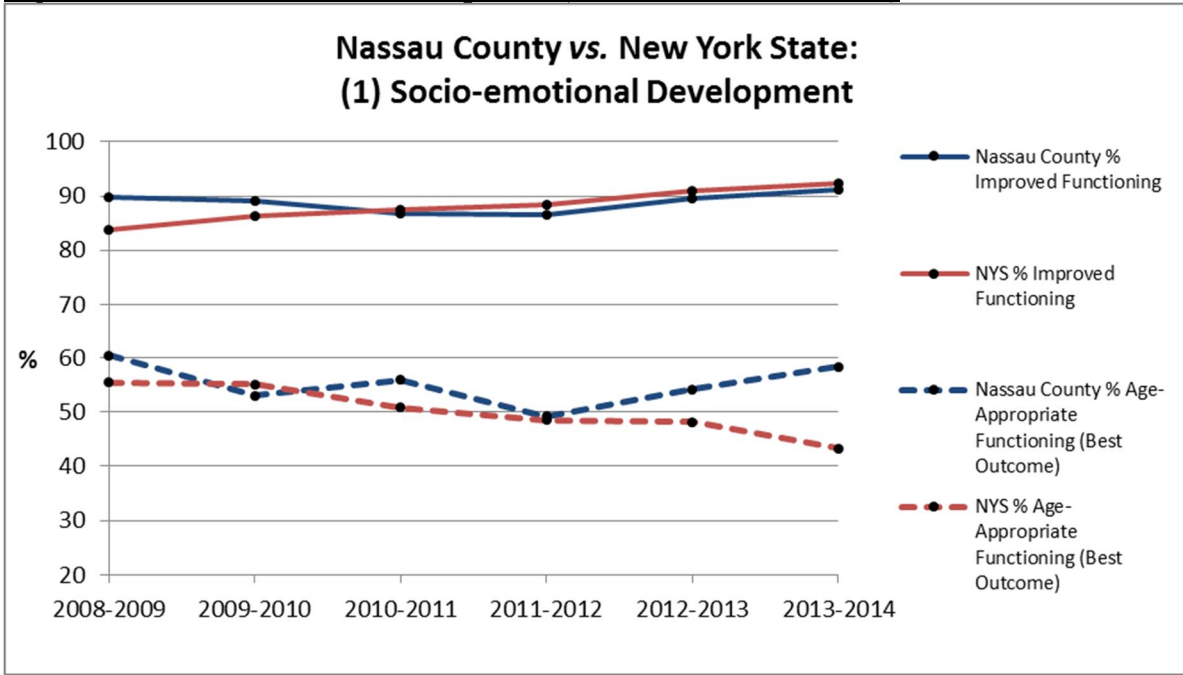
For the six years for which data is available (2008-2009 to 2013-2014), Nassau County's average student outcomes have approximately matched the New York State average in each of the three developmental categories. Figure 7 below, comparing students' socio-emotional skills development at the County and State levels, is representative of their similar results.

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<sup>33</sup> OSEP Part B Indicator 7.

<sup>34</sup> By contrast, every student receives a comprehensive standardized evaluation upon entering preschool special education, and at least every three years thereafter.

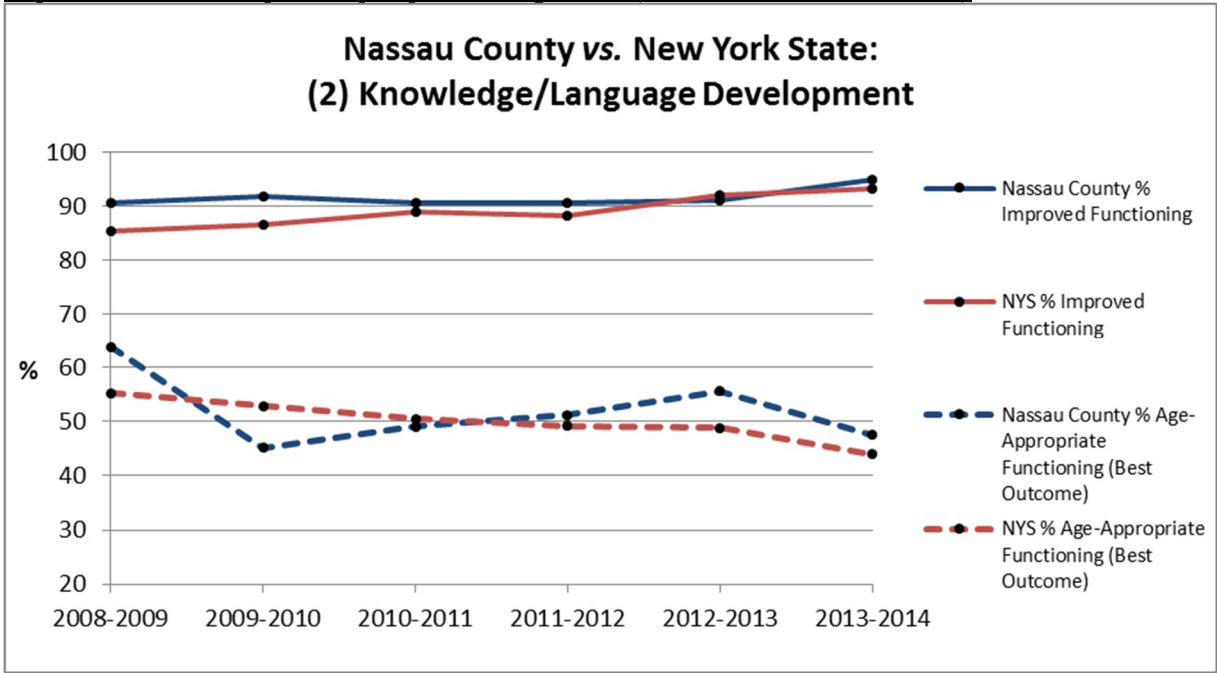
**Figure 7: Socio-Emotional Development (2008-2009 to 2013-2014)**



County data is calculated using information obtained from NYSED's database at <http://data.nysed.gov/lists.php?type=district> under Special Education Data by school district. State data is drawn from NYS Education Department's FFY 2013 Part B State Performance Plan (SPP)/Annual Performance Report (APR).

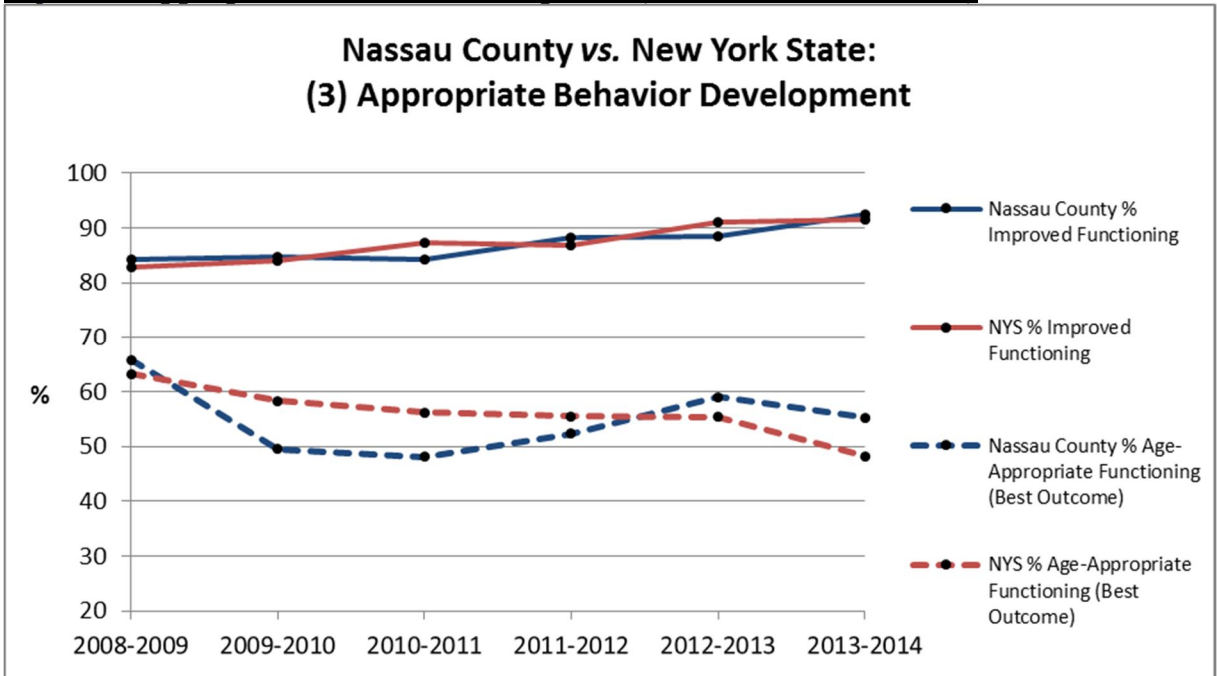
Above, we see that the County and State averages are fairly stable over time. Nearly 9 of 10 students improved their socio-emotional skills (the solid lines on the chart) and roughly half or more of students reached age-appropriate socio-emotional development (dotted lines) by the time they finished preschool. We saw similar results for the other two key areas of development, Knowledge/Language Development and Appropriate Behavior Development, as seen in the charts below.

**Figure 8: Knowledge/Language Development (2008-2009 to 2013-2014)**



County data is calculated using information obtained from NYSED’s database at <http://data.nysed.gov/lists.php?type=district> under Special Education Data by school district. State data is drawn from NYS Education Department’s FFY 2013 Part B State Performance Plan (SPP)/Annual Performance Report (APR).

**Figure 9: Appropriate Behavior Development (2008-2009 to 2013-2014)**



County data is calculated using information obtained from NYSED’s database at <http://data.nysed.gov/lists.php?type=district> under Special Education Data by school district. State data is drawn from NYS Education Department’s FFY 2013 Part B State Performance Plan (SPP)/Annual Performance Report (APR).

The charts above (Figures 7, 8 & 9) illustrate that for each skill category, nearly 9 of 10 students improved substantially (solid lines) and roughly half or more of students reached age-appropriate development (dotted lines) by the time they finished preschool.

The state's target for substantial improvement of socio-emotional skills was 92% in 2013-2014. Targets were 93% for knowledge/language development and 91% for appropriate behavior. By NYS standards, Nassau County is within 1% of expectations for socio-emotional development and slightly exceeds expectations for knowledge/language development and appropriate behavior.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Nassau County prides itself on having some of the best public schools in the country. However, in the area of preschool special education, the County badly underperforms NYS and the nation on student placement while students' developmental outcomes are merely average. Only one school district, Island Park, slightly exceeds the NYS average for placing children in integrated settings.

Special education is deemed most helpful to children when offered in integrated settings with typically developing students. The US and NYS Education Departments recommend these mixed settings for the majority of preschool special education students as a way to improve students' outcomes. Districts are instructed to proactively place preschool students in regular classes, providing students with "supplementary aids and services" to help them learn there.<sup>35</sup>

Despite this guidance, Nassau County districts' integrations levels are persistently low, apparently due to:

- A lack of available integrated classrooms, such as public prekindergarten classes, where special needs students can learn alongside typically developing peers.
- Administrators and parents not being uniformly convinced that integration benefits children.
- Integration not having been historically encouraged by the NYS Education Department, a factor that appears to have changed in the past month.

As a consequence, many special needs students appear to be routed to separate classes at private institutions. Costs at these centers can range up to \$52,353 per student per year.

Our survey of Nassau County district, and NYS Education Department administrators revealed that they attribute Nassau County's low integration rates in part to the lack of availability of integrated classes where children with special needs can learn alongside typically developing peers. High integration districts succeed in part because integrated placements are readily available. One administrator at a high-integration district credited local preschools in her area with being "amenable to having related services provided on their campuses and amenable to working with low-income parents, e.g., sliding scale like the local JCC."<sup>36</sup> An administrator at another high-integration district echoed this theme, saying "integration would be higher if there were more openings in integrated classes.... Private programs are great, but district-based programs can be counted upon to have integrated classes."<sup>37</sup> Colleagues at the NYS Education Department's Preschool Policy Unit confirmed the importance of public preschool classes

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<sup>35</sup> "Dear Colleague: Preschool Least Restrictive Environment," an open letter from the Office of Special Education Programs, February 29, 2012.

<sup>36</sup> Chairperson of the Committee on Preschool Special Education for the Long Beach City school district, September 4, 2014.

<sup>37</sup> Pupil Personnel Director, Island Park school district, September 9, 2014.

to increasing integration.<sup>38</sup> At present, only half of Nassau County school districts offer prekindergarten programs. Countywide, prekindergarten programs enrolled only 3,110 students in the 2013-2014 school year, or about 22% of four-year-olds in the County. By contrast, New York City enrolled 67% of its four-year-olds (55,625 students) in public prekindergarten in 2013-2014. The following year, the city launched its universal prekindergarten program, and 76,000 NYC students are expected to attend district-administered prekindergarten classes in 2015-2016.

Our interviews also revealed that administrators and parents are not uniformly convinced that integration will benefit their children. Some administrators were less convinced of integration's broad appeal, explaining that children's services are determined on an individual basis and that parents' preferences play a determining role in the selection of a child's service provider. This case-by-case decision making opens the door to many child-specific reasons for preferring a separate class, such as parents' interest in securing more help for their child, or parents' desire to enroll their child in a particular program. Some parents and administrators may have the belief that separate classes at an early age better prepare a child.

Until recently, integration was not actively encouraged by the NYS Education Department. There was little evidence that school districts were encouraged or held accountable for their placement practices by the County Department of Health or the NYS Education Department. This lack of accountability is apparent in districts' widely differing placement practices. The Department of Health's annual information conferences with districts' preschool special education staff and with preschool providers appear to have been inadequate to spur change. On November 2, 2015, the NYS Education Department, held only its first forum to discuss Nassau districts' preschool special education placement practices through an initiative with the Early Childhood Direction Center (ECDC). Going forward, Long Island University at CW Post will take over where ECDC began, with the mission to generate and update lists of openings in separate and integrated classes and to offer trainings and workshops for educators and parents.

There now appears to be growing awareness that the educational environment for special needs children needs to improve from its current state of decentralization and generally weak accountability. The recent initiatives by the NYS Education Department and the County Department of Health need to be expanded. Ideally, this should be accomplished in collaboration with our school districts, parents, and advocates of special needs children.

In order to help our Nassau schools achieve better placement results and perhaps better outcomes, we recommend that the Nassau County Department of Health take a greater leadership role. It may be helpful for the Department of Health to take initiatives to track the annual performance of all Nassau school districts rather than rely on belated NYS sampling and to host a combined countywide conference for school districts, service

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<sup>38</sup> Administrators at the P-12 Office of Special Education Preschool Policy Unit of the NYS Education Department, phone interview, September 5, 2014.

providers, parents, and advocates of special needs children, including the NYS Department of Education, to explore policies and initiatives that:

1. Help districts understand their relative performance in educating special needs children in order to motivate increased use of integrated placements where warranted.
2. Expand the availability of integrated settings for preschool students by expanding the number of universal prekindergarten classes, similar to New York City.
3. Raise parents' and administrators' awareness of the benefits of integration for children with special needs.
4. Raise awareness that money is available per preschool special education student to incentivize school districts' becoming certified special class providers.

We encourage a renewed focus on the education of our preschool children with special needs. Our school districts should aim to achieve greater integration and higher than average outcomes for these remarkable children.