

A LONGITUDINAL STUDY OF PRESCHOOL SPECIAL EDUCATION



Final Report

September 6, 2007



Submitted by:

MGT 
OF AMERICA, INC.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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From September 2000 through March 2007, MGT of America, Inc. conducted *The Longitudinal Study of Preschool Special Education*. The New York State Education Department (NYSED) commissioned this study as part of its commitment to:

...assure that all students achieve high standards through access to the general education curriculum and to educating all students in the least restrictive environment, including educating preschool students in developmentally appropriate activities and with their nondisabled, age-appropriate peers.

As one of the first comprehensive statewide reviews of preschool special education and early school-age special education, this study provided the unique opportunity to examine the effect of special education programs and services. The resulting report includes the following:

- An overview of the evaluation questions and goals for the longitudinal study.
- A description of the study methodology and the study sample.
- A discussion of the characteristics and special education services provided to preschool children with disabilities participating in the study.
- A summary of data collected from preschool special education providers and parents of preschool children with disabilities participating in the study.
- A comparison of various developmental outcomes between the preschool special education students in the study and their peers in kindergarten through third grade who did not receive preschool special education services.

The study found that the developmental progress of a representative sample of students with disabilities who received preschool special education services (the “*preschool cohort*”) generally exceeded that of a matched group of students who received only school-age special education services (the “*comparison cohort*”). While the continued receipt of school-age special education services exerted a positive developmental effect on both cohorts, the receipt of preschool special education services contributed to an overall higher rate of development for the preschool cohort. This difference was statistically significant.

The following sections summarize findings and conclusions represented in the final report, organized by study goals.

GOAL I. Understand the nature of placement recommendations for students with disabilities in grades K-4 who received preschool special education services.

- **Determine the rate of placement in general education.** To what extent are preschool students with disabilities who received preschool special education programs and services placed in general education classes upon entry into kindergarten or school-age programs?
- **Determine the effect of preschool special education type (integrated vs. separate) on placement in general education.** What are the differences in the rate of placement in general education settings in elementary school between students who received preschool special education in settings with nondisabled peers versus those students who received preschool special education in separate settings?

Upon Entry to Kindergarten

- Twenty-two percent of preschool special education students had been declassified. An additional 3 percent were declassified by third grade.
- The more integrated the preschool special education settings, programs and services, the more integrated the kindergarten placement.
- Kindergarten students from Preschool Special Class programs less frequently met developmental expectations for language, literacy and mathematical thinking than those students from less restrictive preschool special education settings, programs and services.
- The majority of kindergarten students with disabilities had previously been served in preschool special education.

Through Third Grade

- General education placements both for those served previously in preschool special education (preschool cohort) and those who did not receive preschool special education but became classified at school-ages (comparison cohort) shifted toward more restrictive placements. By third grade, all special education students were placed primarily in two categories, those who were served outside of the general education classroom for 0-20 percent of the day (Highly Integrated) and those who were served outside of the general education classroom for 61-99 percent of the day (Minimally Integrated).
- The shift for preschool cohort students from more integrated settings in kindergarten to increasingly less integrated settings by third grade occurred in higher need districts, especially New York City and the Large Four Cities compared with relative stability in the lower need districts. This may reflect the limited availability of resources in the

higher need districts to address the needs of special education students.

- Students who moved from more integrated school-age special education settings in kindergarten to less integrated settings in subsequent grades may have needed a broader and deeper range of services in preschool years.

GOAL II. Understand the scope and intensity of special education service recommendations for students with disabilities who received preschool special education services.

- **Determine the effect of preschool special education type (integrated vs. separate setting) on intensity of services.** To what extent do students with disabilities who received preschool special education programs and services in a setting with nondisabled peers receive a lower intensity of services upon entry to kindergarten or school-age special education programs compared with students who received preschool special education programs and services in separate settings?

To respond to this research goal, a measure of the intensity of services was created. “Service Intensity” represents a combination of school-age special education service type, location, instructional setting, and duration.

- Preschool cohort students who received preschool special education services in the least integrated preschool special education service category (i.e., Special Class) continued to receive the most intense combinations of special education services in school-age programs. In contrast, school-age students who formerly received preschool Related Services Only, the most integrated preschool special education service type, had the lowest Service Intensity during kindergarten through third grade.
- The average Service Intensity values for school-age special education services provided to the preschool cohort was significantly higher than for the comparison cohort.

GOAL III. Distinguish differences in the achievement, emotional well-being, and social adjustment of elementary students with disabilities who received preschool special education programs and services in two different types of settings:

1. **With nondisabled peers.**
2. **In separate settings with only disabled peers.**

Goal III also involves distinguishing differences in the above-mentioned outcome variables factors for elementary students with disabilities who:

1. **Received preschool special education programs and services.**
 2. **Did not receive special education programs and services until elementary school.**
- **Determine the effect of preschool special education type (integrated vs. separate) on reading, math, and behavioral assessment scores.** What are the differences in the achievement, emotional well-being, and social adjustment of elementary school students with disabilities on statewide/districtwide standardized measurements of reading and math and behavioral assessments between students who received preschool special education programs and services in a setting with nondisabled peers and those who received preschool special education programs and services in a separate setting?

- Preschool cohort students who had received services in more integrated preschool settings required significantly less teacher assistance in the third grade general education classroom than students in the comparison cohort on learning tasks related to language and literacy development, personal and social development, cognitive and academic development and physical development.
- Teachers gave significantly higher developmental ratings to third grade students who had received preschool special education services in Highly Integrated settings than were given to their comparison group peers.
- Third grade students who received preschool Related Services Only required less assistance from teachers in the general education classroom than students who received preschool special education services in less integrated settings and than students in the comparison cohort.
- Preschool cohort students in other categories of preschool programs, including Special Class, also required significantly less teacher assistance in third grade than students in the comparison cohort.
- Developmental progress for students by third grade in both the preschool and comparison cohort was positively impacted by the intensity of their school-age special education services, kindergarten

through third grade: the more intense the school-age services, the higher the developmental ratings by third grade.

- Using statistical methods to control for the beneficial effects of the intensity of school-age special education services, analysis showed that preschool special education services have a statistically significant positive effect on student development by third grade.

GOAL IV. Distinguish differences in satisfaction among parents of children who received preschool special education programs and services with nondisabled peers, in separate settings, and students with disabilities who did not receive preschool special education programs and services.

- **Determine effect of preschool special education type (integrated vs. separate) on parent satisfaction.** What are the differences in satisfaction among the parents of children who received preschool special education services with and without their nondisabled peers?
- **Determine the effect of preschool special education on parent satisfaction.** What are the differences in satisfaction among the parents of children who did and did not receive preschool special education services?

With the assistance of the Preschool Longitudinal Special Education Study Advisory Committee, MGT designed and implemented both written surveys and focus group interviews to understand parental perceptions of their child's preschool special education experience. The parent focus groups augmented the survey data by providing additional insight into each parent's experience. Focus group questions probed areas such as overall satisfaction with preschool special education, impact of services on both parent and child, satisfaction with child progress, and satisfaction with the transition to school-age programs.

- Parents were globally quite satisfied with preschool special education programs, services, and staff. Parents were particularly impressed with the quality and responsiveness of staff and the progress their child had made towards the goals and objectives outlined in his or her individualized education program (IEP). Although there were some comments about delays and administrative procedures, special education programs and services were otherwise rated positively.
- Although parents were also generally satisfied with Committee on Preschool Special Education (CPSE) processes and the transition process to school-age programs, areas of dissatisfaction were identified in one-third of the survey comments and in 10 of 20 focus group discussions. Some parents were intimidated and overwhelmed by the CPSE bureaucracy. Some parents also commented that the district did not provide adequate preparation for the transition to school-age programs.

- Although the process presented challenges for some parents, the more general sentiments expressed by parents was that their children benefited from preschool special education programs and services and that they were grateful to staff, whom they viewed as competent, caring and professional.