

Name/Organization	Topic/Comments
Maria De La Cruz	Many parents are keeping their children home right after school due to the fact that even when they get vouchers, their co payment they have to pay the Child's agency, it turns to be too costly, even worst if they more than one child.
Tracey Nardone	Thank you Board Members for including the public in your discussions. I wanted to ask that you give careful thoughtful discussion of the review of "Minimum Teacher Requirements' '. I have had many discussions with directors who are fearful of the change back without grandfathering those that are doing the job currently. It closes some of their classrooms. I also feel most assistants need more than the 6 mos. minimum But not all. Maybe a letter of recommendation from the director who is on the front line could be useful in making those decisions.



Inc. Leading through Empowering Opportunities

3/20/2023

EEC Board Meeting 3/21/2023

Trisha-Lynne Coolong/Birgitta Damon/Gerri Bertrand

LEO Inc., Community Action Program and Early/Head Start Early Childhood Education Programs

My name is Trisha-Lynne Coolong. I have worked in the field of Early Childhood Education for the last 18 years. I hold a Master's degree in Special Education, an Autism Spectrum Disorder Certification, and my undergrad was focused in Early Childhood Education. I have worked with LEO Inc. for 9 years and counting. LEO Inc. is a Community Action Program that also provides early education through Early Head Start Home-Visiting and Center-Based options, as well as Head Start preschool programs. LEO Inc. services Lynn, Swampscott, Lynnfield, Marblehead, Saugus, Nahant and Wakefield. LEO Inc.'s mission is to strengthen the Greater Lynn community through resources and services that provide opportunities for children, families and individuals to thrive.

For over 3 years now, my role, Education Access Senior Manager, has been heavily focused on collaborating with early intervention services and local public schools when children are identified to need further evaluations for possible individualized support and/or special education services. I coordinate and supervise planning with teachers and families to support children's goals through available resources within LEO's programs, while testing is pending or until the child ages out of our programs.

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the increasing challenges in the field of Early Education and Care around more accessibility to resources and collaboration measures with local schools for children identified with disabilities, suspected disabilities, or developmental delays. Currently, we have 178 children enrolled in our Head Start (3-5 year olds) programs, Of this number, 21 of our preschoolers have an active Individualized Education Plan (IEP) based on evaluations from local public schools; 35 children are in the referral process for further evaluations to determine eligibility. Referrals are based on concerns raised from teachers, parents, and/or screenings and assessments. This figure (56 children with disabilities or suspected delays) represents more than 31% of our Head Start population.. One hundred of our three to five year olds are moving into Kindergarten for the 2023-2024 school year.

One of the top priorities to be addressed is that there are no policies around the number of children with special needs that we are able to service per classroom or center. Because of this, children, teachers, and families are tremendously challenged day to day.

I would like to take a moment to talk about a specific child, Lenix. Lenix is an endearing four-year-old boy with a great smile. He is the youngest in his family. He has two older brothers, ages 5 and 12; they all live together with their mother, who is the primary support for their family. Lenix will attend Kindergarten in Fall 2023. Lenix joined our Jack Robinson Head Start program in September 2021 at three years of age; he had recently been diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). At the time of enrollment, Early Intervention had initiated a referral for testing with the local public school, prior to him aging out of Early Head Start. He was also in the referral process for ABA (Applied Behavior Analysis) services and was waiting for insurance approval.

Lenix had previously been enrolled with another childcare provider. During a transition meeting, mom shared concerns about potty-training, eating, and speech. Lenix was evaluated by the local school and deemed eligible for partial-day supportive services in November 2021. However, the written IEP was not available to mom until January 2022. Mom accepted the IEP, with a start date toward the end of January, although both mom and LEO staff felt the services offered (2.5 hours daily) were not adequate to support Lenix. His service placement and times required Lenix to be:

- Dropped off to our program at about 8:00 am
- Picked up by the school's transportation department around 10:15 am
- Attend his services in the local public school until about 1:15 pm
- Transported back to LEO by about 1:45 pm
- Picked up by mom at 4 pm

This was many unnecessary transitions for a child on the autism spectrum. The Team had significant concerns about the number of transitions daily, and how they might adversely impact a child on the autism spectrum. However, limited options were available to negotiate with the local public school for additional services. Lenix attended partial-day services with local schools through early June 2022.

Lenix was deemed ineligible for any summer services through the local school, a decision LEO staff unanimously opposed. However, because the local school's data showed increasing development, they deemed him ineligible; they did not take into account any of LEO's data as part of their eligibility process.

In the fall of 2022, now age 4, Lenix was placed in a classroom of 7 students and 5 teaching staff at the local public school, a more appropriate setting to support his goals and individual needs. I can imagine the immense success LEO would have seen if we had been able to provide this setting to him. However, being an early childhood education program, our ratio is 2 teachers to 18 children. There were many days that transitioning Lenix to and from our setting was very overwhelming for him, but we worked together with our in-house resources to support his transitions. Because Lenix's mom needed full-day childcare to be able to work and support her family, Lenix has continued to attend LEO Head Start to supplement the 2.5 hours of education Lenix receives through the public schools. During this period, his mother did not pursue ABA services as she was waitlisted for an identified provider. Lenix appeared to benefit from the services that were in place, especially in language development and communication.

However, when services stopped again for the summer in June 2022, both mom and LEO staff expressed concern about the possibility of significant regression and loss of developing skills due to the three-month break in services. Again, there was no opportunity to negotiate with the public school to better meet Lenix's needs.

During this period, LEO staff strongly encouraged mom to begin pursuing ABA services again to help meet Lenix's needs during the break in services. ABA services began in July 2022 through an agency in Wakefield (InBloom). The family briefly considered an ABA program in Woburn, but the transportation was not feasible for mom. During July and August, Lenix received a few hours of ABA during some weeks, but the provider was inconsistent. He did not receive the 30 hours per week for which he is eligible. This Fall, Lenix began to receive ABA services at home in the evenings. Mom did not find this helpful, as Lenix was exhausted and mom felt that the provider was not a good match; there was a lot of turn over with ABA staffing and inconsistency with scheduling.

Currently, Lenix is no longer receiving any ABA services. While ABA promised services on-site at LEO's Jack Robinson Head Start from 11:00-1:00 daily (15 hours per week), this has not materialized. During the Summer 2022, while services were paused, Lenix experienced notable regression in his developing skill set. The frequency, intensity, and duration of challenging behaviors—especially physical (hitting, scratching, pushing, slapping, kicking, and biting), increased significantly during these months without consistent support services. Lenix resumed partial-day services with the public schools in September 2022. His schedule was modified to decrease transitions this time around. Currently, mom brings Lenix to the public school each morning for services, and Lenix receives transportation to LEO afterwards, arriving each day around 10:45 am.

Lenix demonstrates behaviors consistent with an ASD diagnosis in the school setting. Lenix is still wearing diapers. His mom continues to worry about his eating. Attempts to access feeding therapy have been unsuccessful because most providers do not accept MassHealth. Lenix is using more language while at school with teachers and peers, but is not yet consistently using two-three word phrases or sentences.

In his class at Jack Robinson Head start, Lenix still experiences significant challenges during peer interactions. Lenix communicates by pushing, scratching, hitting, and slapping peers, often in the face. Lenix is not yet able to take turns or wait for a desired item; he frequently grabs toys that peers are using, or will hit/push/scratch to get the desired toy. At times, Lenix will hit, push, or scratch a classmate for no obvious reason. These interactions have made classmates afraid of Lenix. Classroom teachers provide 1:1 support as much as possible with Lenix while he is in the classroom to try to decrease incidents with peers. Lenix demonstrates similar behaviors toward teachers—hitting and scratching, again often on the face. Individualized Special Education Services provided at LPS have helped Lenix to increase his verbal skills, but he is still communicating primarily through physical contact. At this point, services will again stop during the summer, as his IEP does not provide year-round services. Lenix will enter Kindergarten in Fall 2023.

LEO has recently developed a behavior intervention plan to decrease unsafe incidents and re-establish a sense of safety within the classroom for Lenix, his classmates, and staff, but in our general Early Childhood Education setting, we cannot provide the small-group setting and specialized services he is receiving for 2.5 hours at the public school.

Lenix's class at LEO's Jack Robinson Center has 7/18 children with either a diagnosed disability or who are in the referral process for special education testing for other suspected developmental delays. If you begin to think about other challenging measures, such as trauma history and DCF involvement, the number of identified children in Lenix's classroom jumps to 11/18 -- more than 60% of the classroom. LEO has considered possible solutions, such as breaking up these children and spreading them throughout other classrooms, but the reality is we are seeing similarities of this exact situation across the board in each of our classrooms.

The challenge is a heavy burden when available resources are not as accessible as we need them to be. There is no cap set on the number of children with special needs that LEO can service, and it is nearly impossible to have a conversation about our capacity without appearing discriminatory. There is a flexpool that is offered from EEC to obtain 1:1 support for children like in Lenix's situation, but the funding is only guaranteed for 6 months and we have the responsibility of identifying and hiring the contracted candidate when the funding is approved; just the approval process currently takes 3-5 months. Like early education centers nationwide, LEO is already struggling with hiring qualified teaching staff for permanent positions. The system would be improved if EEC hired the candidates for 1:1 support so that centers had a ready pool of candidates.

The flexpool system could also be improved by aligning it with the 12-month state subsidy (voucher) system. There also needs to be increased collaboration between DESE and EEC to break down the barriers to services or evaluations, and more resources for ECE altogether, allowing our programs to merge data and truly be a part of the child's team when determining eligibility for special education services. The CPPI grant seems promising, but our local public school is just now planning to get it up and running.

Today, I focused on preschool. However, our Early Head Start program services 66/107 children with Early Intervention services or referrals to determine eligibility and/or DCF involvement. This is 61% of the 0-3 year old children and families that have been identified with individualized needs of support and resources. Because of the increased numbers of children and families coming in with higher levels of needed services and supportive resources, it is our responsibility to provide access. We all know how important it is to act early and provide intervention to benefit children as soon as they have been identified with a need. The foundation of children's learning, behaviors and health are typically before a child turns 3 years of age. The sooner we are able to access support for them, the better they will be able to succeed in their lifetime.

Again, I appreciate the opportunity to share my input today on behalf of the 500+ children and families that partner with LEO every year.