

What Makes The Children's Way Unique?

We were recently asked a question regarding The Children's Way: Why is The Children's Way often described as "unique" or as having a "unique program," as it was most recently in the SPED consultants' report. Here is the answer:

The Children's Way (TCW) is unique for a combination of reasons. The program is a fee-based publicly run program administered under the auspices of the community programs rather than directly under the School Department. It emerged from a public/private partnership that saw the merger of two programs in town into the current TCW. The current space was built and renovated as a result of a major fundraising effort called the Space Launch. If the public schools directly ran their own preschool -- as some districts do -- all of this would have had to be funded through tax dollars. TCW also maintains a favorable student to staff ratio. Its general programming for all students is well attuned to the development needs of this age group which encourages creative play, fosters social emotional learning (such as the social thinking curriculum) and academic skill building (such as Handwriting Without Tears). Having started many years ago, TCW stood out as one of the first programs to operate a truly integrated model.

Unlike other integrated programs, it maintains a ratio of 1 special education student out of every 4 students. This 75%/25% split is different than many programs that operate under a 50%/50% split. In some school systems, preschool students with special needs are served in classrooms, not in a separate preschool. At TCW, they are truly part of a community and because of how the school is organized and staff are compensated, this turns out to be significantly less expensive.

A 75/25 split is an uncommon and highly advantageous design for a few reasons. First, it allows for a truly inclusive model that assures the presence of positive peer role models. A 50/50 model is often not viewed by parents of "typical students" as a high quality typical preschool program both because of the special education/regular education ratio and because of the less favorable student/staff ratio. To a degree, there *is* a difference in that the higher ratio of students with special needs may call for classrooms which are more structured, with less opportunity for developmental play, inclusion and, above all, individualized instruction. This makes it challenging to find families of typical children who want to enroll their children in such programs. Districts, as a result, often offer these enrollments for free or highly reduced rates to encourage such families.

The 75/25 split is a model that allows for successful full inclusion for children with delays as well as providing benefit for typically developing preschoolers. Inclusion works by forming classrooms which are predominately composed of typically developing students (so the curriculum and expectations are age appropriate) and then providing support for the children with delays (to help them access that curriculum). It provides sufficient peer models to support peer to peer learning and it adds diversity and learning to embrace individuality to our typical Wayland preschool child's learning experience. The highly skilled staff, aided by the hands-on administrative support of the Director and the Inclusion Coordinator, has allowed for inclusion of children that might have been out-placed otherwise.

It's the combination of TCW's unique structure, inclusive programming, student/staff ratio, low staff turnover, and developmentally attuned programming that makes it a special place. TCW is not just a program; it is a devoted school community with both a strong educational philosophy and a special character with its own history and traditions. Other preschools may have some of these traits, but it is the combination that makes TCW unique.

October 25, 2015