**1. Special Populations Plan**

The Ecology Learning Center holds firm to the belief that all youth can and want to learn and have the right to receive a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment possible. The Center believes that all youth have the potential to be productive members of their community (both in and out of school) and to feel confident to share skills and knowledge with the communities to which they belong. It is the unique and diverse qualities, skills, and perspectives that each student will bring to the Center that will create a creative, diverse, and well-rounded experience for all students as they work together in a project-based, experiential program offered alongside a strong foundation in academics. The Center is committed to meeting all students where they are and to provide any and all necessary services and supports required to meet their individual academic and functional needs. This will be done for the purpose of allowing them to access and benefit from the Center and to achieve their goals upon graduation.

The Center is committed to ensuring that all students are provided with the services, supports, and accommodations required by law, including the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Maine Unified Special Education Regulations (MUSER), and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. All students will be held to and appropriately supported in achieving a high standard of participation, engagement, collaboration, and achievement. It is the responsibility of the Center’s administrators and staff to ensure not only that all students have the programming, services, and supports they need to succeed, but that students and their families play a central role in that process. The unique ecology-based hands-on experiences provided at the Center will offer all students the opportunity to explore and learn a variety of useful skills, while rigorous academic programs will provide students with the foundational knowledge and skills needed to pursue higher education and vast career options.

The Center will hire staff who are specially trained to identify academic and functional needs, design individualized instructional programs, and support functional needs through a continuum of service delivery and supports so as to allow all students to access educational experiences within the least restrictive environment, regardless of their needs. This range of programming, services, and supports will be determined through the IEP process and be carried out as determined by the student’s IEP team. The Center will hire or contract with a director of special services to oversee special services planning and delivery in accordance with federal and state regulations. This will ensure that appropriate services are provided to all special student populations.

2. **Expected Special Populations**

The Center cannot yet know the specifics of the population of students who will enroll in the program. However, it can be expected that upwards of 20 percent of the student body will enter with IEPs, Section 504 plans, and/or be affected by other conditions that may put them at risk for school failure without proper supports. This figure is based on the fact that Maine Department of Education student enrollment data for the 2018-2019 school year reports that nearly 18 percent of the state’s students receive special education services, and the fact that many Maine charter schools experience higher rates of special education than their non-charter counterparts. The Center can also anticipate English Learner rates of up to 3 percent of the student body, and, according to the National Association for Gifted Children, gifted and talented students making up as much as 26 percent of the student body.

The Center’s small group structure for core academic courses (taught during skills blocks) and project-based learning will enable all students to share their gifts and talents while also receiving the individualized supports they may need to learn and thrive. Students requiring greater levels of services and/or specialized programming will benefit from either the direct hire of or contractual relationship with special education staff including a teacher(s), social workers, and speech, occupational, and/or physical therapists. Teachers will be supported by educational technicians who will receive special training for supporting students within the Center’s program.

The Center will focus on a collaborative team approach to teaching, programming, and learning. Each student who receives special services will be monitored and supported by a team of trained professionals, and will experience an educational path that has been shaped based on their unique strengths and challenges. Students receiving special services may have an alternative list of content standards created for their graduation requirements, or may demonstrate proficiency in a different manner than their peers. Student progress will be reported on in accordance with the goals outlined in their IEP, and graduation will be contingent upon successful completion of these goals. Since students entering the Center will be high school age, those receiving special services will be required to have post-secondary transition plans and play active roles in the development of their IEPs, 504 plans, and/or post-secondary career exploration goals.

**3. Special Education**

**3a. Identification Methods**

As a public school falling under the statutes of the Federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and Maine Unified Special Education Regulations (MUSER), the Center is charged with establishing and implementing Child Find policies and procedures to identify, locate, and evaluate children who may have disabilities and require special education and related services. Such procedures for identifying, locating, and evaluating children will take place within the first 30 days of enrollment or transfer to the Center.

Since the Center will serve teens, it is likely that most students who require special services will already be identified before enrollment. As such, the bulk of Childfind work for the Center will involve accurate completion of enrollment documents including items for identification of any existing special services or programming. Upon acceptance and receipt of completed enrollment documents, the Center will request release of educational records from the student’s sending district. For students whose forms require that special services are provided, staff will request documentation such as the student’s IEP, 504 plan, evaluation reports, eligibility forms, etc. to be used in making preparations for services to be offered.

Despite the fact that most students requiring special services are identified before high school, there may be students who enroll at the Center who require services and have not yet been identified. These may be students who have been learning through home instruction or in private school settings where their needs have been addressed and accommodated within the context of their alternative programing, rather than through the channels provided within public schools. Unidentified students may come to the Center with disabilities and/or other functional and academic needs that range from mild to severe. Students may be identified for evaluation based on academic performance, ability to engage with curriculum, and other significant factors. Staff will refer students for evaluations using a Childfind referral form, available in the staff handbook and from the school’s special education teacher.

The Center will be responsible for ensuring that these students are identified and evaluated in accordance with Maine Special Education regulations. This will include a process by which all children entering the school program undergo a universal benchmark assessment process to measure academic achievement or proficiency (NWEA). Additionally, the Center will use universal screeners to examine social emotional and/or functional performance, such as parent and student questionnaires or rating scales, to examine behavior, social emotional awareness, perceptions about learning, and potential aptitudes and career interests. Using data-based inquiry methods, staff will look at universal data provided through these evaluations to help identify not only students who may be at risk of failure, but also those who may be performing or achieving well above average and who may benefit from specialized enrichment programs.

**3b. Interventions Provided**

The Center will use research-based practices from the RTI (Response to Intervention) Action Network (a program of the National Center for Learning Disabilities) to provide appropriate support to students and to aid in the identification of students with disabilities. The Center will implement a tiered RTI plan, wherein three tiers of intervention are utilized. All students will experience Tier 1, where high quality, differentiated, research-based instruction is offered. Within Tier 2, the Center will create small groups of students who require additional instructional support in order to progress at an appropriate rate. In Tier 3, students receive intensive and targeted interventions in order to remediate past learning and support them for future learning. The information used to inform RTI planning will include standardized test scores, student proficiency data, self evaluations, and student work.

Students who do not make expected progress will be given intervention support in the tier that is most appropriate for their needs. Students who are given RTI support for a trimester or more and are still unable to make expected progress will be considered for a Childfind referral. Numerous factors will be discussed, including non-disability factors that may be impacting the student’s ability to learn. Students who are referred for Childfind will be formally evaluated. The initial evaluation will include comprehensive assessment procedures as identified in MUSER and will address all areas of suspected disability. The Center’s special services staff member (or contracted professional) will be responsible for ensuring that the IEP process, initial referral, and ensuing evaluation meet the timelines and include the required elements required by IDEA and MUSER.

**3c. Instructional Programs, Practices, and Strategies**

Students who enroll in the Center with identified special education needs will be entitled to services, supports, accommodations, etc. as outlined by the IEP or 504 plan. Staff will review existing plans to adopt them as written and/or provide comparable services, or will schedule a transfer meeting involving the student, their family, and staff from the Center and the student’s sending school. Due to the unique experiential and project-based curriculum provided at the Center, students may require different supports and services than were necessary in their previous educational setting. As a result of the small class sizes and opportunities for dynamic groupings that enable students to demonstrate proficiencies through various means, some students may be able to access and benefit from the school program with fewer specialized services; however, these programming decisions will be made on a case-by-case basis following careful review.

Those students who are newly identified for special services will go through the IEP process to determine the types of special education and related services they will need in order to access and benefit from the Center’s program. The IEP process will guide all decision making for students with disabilities as identified under IDEA. The IEP team will review all current and existing evaluation data, identify student strengths and needs, establish current levels of academic and/or functional performance, and develop goals to help the student make growth and work toward meeting learning targets as identified in the Center’s student performance standards. The Center will employ special education teachers and educational technicians to provide appropriate case management, specially designed instruction, and behavioral and instructional supports in both special and regular education settings. In addition, the Center will contract with specialists and service providers as needed. All students receiving special services will be granted access to the general education curriculum in the least restrictive environment possible.

The range of services provided to students will fall along a continuum. The student-centered nature of the Center’s special services will allow for instruction and supports to constantly be adapted to meet students’ immediate individual needs, and will follow them along their own path of growth regardless of where it begins.

**3d. Plans for Evaluating and Monitoring Students with IEPs**

Each student’s IEP Team will be required to meet annually to review the previous IEP and discuss progress made toward IEP goals. In preparation for these annual reviews, staff will gather current data on the student’s academic, social/emotional, and functional performance. Data used to evaluate progress will include standardized test data (NWEA and MECAS, where relevant), student proficiency data, and work samples. Throughout the academic year, progress toward goals will be monitored and reported at regular intervals that coincide with the end of trimesters and the academic year. Given that the Center will use a team approach, classroom and special education teachers, school counselors, speech and occupational therapists, as well as parents and administrators will collaborate to establish common language, practices, and knowledge about the individual students they serve. This team collaboration is essential to monitoring and assuring student success and growth.

A vital component of consistent and regular monitoring is the need to make necessary adjustments to programming if challenges arise or growth and learning has stalled. It is critical for the team to always consider program options with the intent to provide the least restrictive programming possible for students. The Center recognizes that students learn best when part of a community and that all students have the right to learn alongside their nondisabled peers to the fullest extent possible. With this in mind, Center educators will implement frequent/continuous formative assessment and collect observational and qualitative data to help guide their decision-making year to year and throughout the year to always work toward providing the best educational program for all children in the least restrictive environment.

**3e. Plans for Evaluating and Monitoring Students with 504 Plans**

Although Section 504 does not carry with it the same strict regulations about yearly meetings, notifications, and evaluations as set out in IDEA and MUSER, it holds a tremendous amount of weight and the Center is obligated to offer students with the supports called for within their 504 plans. The evaluation process for Section 504 will follow similar team-based procedures to the methods used to monitor and evaluate students with special education needs. The Center’s special education coordinator will oversee the caseload of students who have 504 plans or require the creation of a new plan, including the scheduling of meetings and maintenance of plans. The appropriately licensed special services coordinator will be the Section 504 contact person for students, parents, and staff and ensure that annual (or more frequent) meetings are held and that students’ plans successfully allow them to access the Center’s educational program.

**3f. Graduation Promotion for Students with Special Needs**

3f. Students with IEPs will be highly supported so as to ensure that they have the opportunity to meet graduation requirements or to receive a certificate of program completion (in the rare instances that proficiency standards cannot be met adequately). IDEA and MUSER require that all students receiving special education services have a Post-Secondary Transition plan as a component of their IEP. In order to offer the greatest chance of success, especially for those students who are performing significantly below proficiency standards or who may require more time to reach proficiency standards in the usual four years of high school, students who receive special services are entitled to remain in high school through the year in which they turn 20. The decision to extend into a fifth or sixth year of high school will be made on a case-by-case basis and will be done through IEP team meetings. Students with IEPs are expected to participate as they are able to in the development of their Post-Secondary Transition plan, and special emphasis will be placed on designing a course of study that will help them to successfully achieve the proficiency standards as defined by the Center’s student performance standards. Post-Secondary Transition plans will include:

* Projected date of graduation/program completion
* Transition Assessments
* Child’s preferences and interests
* Post-Secondary education, employment, and independent living goals
* Planned course of study during high school
* Transition services and activities
* Agencies responsible for supporting the student with disabilities transition to post-secondary life including employment, education, and independent living

**3g. Staffing**

The Center will hire or contract with a special education director who has appropriate licensure as well as knowledge and experience in the implementation of special education laws and regulations within a school program. The special education director will also be responsible for the Center’s Section 504 caseload, and may have other roles and/or responsibilities. At least 20 percent of the special education director’s role will be dedicated to the oversight of appropriate implementation of special education services and procedures. This role will be vital to ensuring that students with disabilities receive the appropriate services they deserve and need in order to access, participate in, and benefit from the Center program. The special education director will also be responsible for ensuring that the program meets the requirements of federal and state special education laws.

Day-to-day case management and special education instruction at the Center will be managed by a certified special education teacher. The special education teacher will design special education instruction, coordinate related services; develop IEPs, progress monitor through the use of relevant assessments, and consult with the regular education staff. The special education teacher will also supervise support staff who will be hired on an as-needed basis relative to the supports and services identified within IEPs. Education technicians will support students as outlined in the IEPs, and will help to ensure that students are able to learn in the least restrictive environment possible.

Specialists such as speech and occupational/physical therapist, school psychologist, social worker, and as needed behavioral specialist or BCBA will be contracted by the Center on an as-needed basis.

**4. EL - English Learners**

**4a. Identification and Placement**

In accordance with Maine DOE Letter #11, the Center will identify and place English Learners (ELs) in the English language development program using assessment data gathered through the WIDA ACCESS test for ELs. The need to administer the ACCESS test will be determined based on information gathered through the state-generated language use survey that will be distributed to the families of all enrolled students within 30 days of enrollment from the beginning of the school year, or within two weeks in cases where students enroll during the school year. Should survey responses indicate that a student may have a need for placement within the English language development program, the test will be administered by a trained school staff member. ACCESS test results will be used first to confirm need for placement in the program (determined by a composite score of less than 4.5, in accordance with Maine DOE Letter #20), and second to shape the level of support necessary for the student. It is possible that students may enroll in the Center who were placed in the English language development program within their previous SAU. In these cases, the language use survey and ACCESS test will still be administered, and the plans created in the student’s previous SAU will be used to inform the type of English language support the student will need to succeed in the program.

**4b. Transitional Bilingual Instruction Program**

Once a student’s need for a transitional bilingual instructional program or an alternative instructional program has been determined, school staff will work together with the student and their parents to create a plan for an English language acquisition program. Each student’s plan will be created with their specific needs in mind, and may include (but is not limited to) tutoring, additional classroom support, specialized materials, sheltered instruction, professional development for teachers, etc. The English language support services offered to EL students will be structured in a way that minimizes isolation and maximizes their participation in all aspects of the school program. If a student’s plan creates the need for the student to be removed for any portion of content area classes (resulting from pull-out services, for example), any resulting academic deficits will be remedied so that the student is able to remain on track with assignments and projects as compared to their non-EL peers - thus allowing EL students to function within a least restrictive environment, akin to that experienced by students will IEPs. All ELs will be entitled to participate in appropriate programs and services until they score proficient on the ACCESS test with a composite score of 4.5 or above.

**4c. Monitoring and Evaluating English Learner Progress**

All EL students at the Center will be given the WIDA ACCESS test annually in order to determine English language proficiency. Students whose composite scores are less then 4.5 will receive EL services, while those who score 4.5 or higher will be considered proficient and therefore not in need of English Language Acquisition Services. Student progress and success will be monitored by a school staff member who is appropriately certified and trained, and meetings will be held annually to discuss student progress and evaluate instructional programs.

**4d. Staffing**

The school staff member responsible for creating and overseeing instructional plans for EL students will have the required 660 English as a Second Language (K-12) endorsement. This staff member may (and likely will) be certified in other areas, such as content area classroom teaching or SPED. The Center will provide necessary instructional supports and services to ELs in accordance with their instructional plans, and will provide such instruction through the use of school staff and/or through the use of specialists hired on a case-by-case basis from outside the school community. WIDA ACCESS testing will be administered by a staff member who has been trained to administer the test, but may not necessarily be administered by a staff member with a 660 English as a Second Language (K-12) endorsement.

**4e. Parent Notification**

In accordance with Maine DOE Letter #11, the Center will provide parents of all students with the Maine Department of Education’s Language Use Survey as part of its enrollment packet. As previously mentioned, the survey will be given to families within 30 days of enrollment before the school year, and within 2 weeks in cases of enrollment during the school year. Responses to the survey will be used to determine student need for EL instruction, and will also be used to determine a need for parent/guardian communication in a language other than English. Should Language Use Surveys indicate a need for non-English parent communication, school staff members will utilize relevant available resources to translate school communication into the language spoken by the student’s parents/guardians.

**5. Homeless Students**

The Center will identify either an administrator, the special education director, or the special education teacher to be the Homeless Student Liaison. This person will be trained to carry out responsibilities as set forth by the McKinney Vento Homeless Assistance Act. Each year the Maine Department of Education holds a training to help district homeless liaisons keep abreast of expectations for support for students who are homeless or in foster care, even in cases of temporary circumstances. The Center recognizes that the lack of a consistent, permanent place to call home can be detrimental and disruptive to a child’s educational experience, and will monitor its student population and notify families and students of the provisions offered through the McKinney-Vento Act. Students and families will be made aware of this information in enrollment materials, and can secondarily access it on the school’s website or request copies of this information in person at the Center.

**6. At Risk Students**

The Center is in and of itself an alternative learning option for those who enroll. The small class sizes and hands-on, ecology-based programs appeal to students who may have been disenfranchised by traditional education methods. For many of our at-risk youth, the need to conform to the daily routines and structures of a typical high school program may be beyond their capabilities due to other challenges faced in their daily lives. The Center will offer mentorship and/or apprenticeship opportunities in realms of high interest and meaning to our at-risk students. Studies show that time outdoors in a natural environment can have positive effects on emotional well-being, coping skills and otherwise improved health outcomes. In addition, nature-based learning and time in the outdoors can be highly motivating to students who choose this pathway, which will ultimately lead to higher performance both in and out of school. The Center may be an ideal option for students who are at risk for school failure thanks to its ability to provide them with the opportunity to develop a meaningful, productive, and perhaps even lucrative connection to their local community and landscape.

Students who are identified as being at-risk will be closely monitored, both through the Center’s RTI program and through close communication with their advisor. The Center will work to keep at-risk students deeply engaged in programming, and will offer appropriate supports as necessary to such students.

**7. Gifted and Talented Students**

**7a. Instruction**

The educational program offered by the Center is uniquely designed to allow students to perform to the greatest extent of their abilities. Core content area classes are structured so as to allow students to learn the skills they’re ready for, rather than being structured so that students are always grouped according to age or years spent in school, and students are able to move through the curriculum at their own pace, allowing for early graduation to take place for students who have the necessary skills and knowledge to move on. Project-based learning experiences offered alongside core content area classes allow for students to build upon preexisting knowledge and skills, meaning that students will always be appropriately challenged in their interdisciplinary work. The Center will utilize numerous practices and strategies that allow all students (not only those identified as gifted and talented) to enhance their abilities. Place-based education, experiential education, project-based learning, and hands-on learning have all been proven to provide learning experiences that are inherently self-differentiating, thereby appropriately challenging all learners. Students identified as gifted and talented will not be removed from the regular educational setting or offered specialized parallel or supplementary programming to their regular education. Instead, their learning will be monitored by school staff who are trained and certified in gifted and talented education. While average students will work alongside school staff to plan and evaluate the specifics of their learning, gifted and talented students will do this work with the support of school staff with the skills and knowledge necessary to best support their unique learning needs in mind. Additionally, learners who are identified as gifted and talented will be uniquely poised to take advantage of partnerships with local institutions of higher learning (such as Unity College and UMaine’s Hutchinson Center), and may (and likely will) elect to take college courses in their pursuit of a diploma.

**7b. Evaluating and Monitoring of Gifted and Talented Students**

Gifted and talented students at the Center will be monitored and evaluated for academic progress in the categories of General Intellectual Ability, Specific Academic Aptitude, and Artistic Ability, as outlined in the Maine Department of Education Chapter 104. As the Center will serve high school students, those showing aptitude in these areas will likely have been identified as gifted and talented prior to their enrollment. Should students enroll who show signs of such aptitude and have not been previously identified, the Center will take measures to determine whether they are eligible for specialized instruction.

In accordance with Chapter 104, the Center will use three measures of assessment to identify and monitor all gifted and talented students. These measures include but will not be limited to academic testing (NWEA, for instance), teacher recommendations, and evaluations created based on sample forms issued by the Maine Department of Education. Students identified as gifted and talented will be monitored for progress using a combination of narrative evaluations from teachers, self evaluations, and academic aptitude testing (such as NWEA). Progress will also be monitored using grades from college courses when applicable. Gifted and talented students will be evaluated annually, and the specifics of their specialized instruction will be determined at this time. Students will be considered successful if they have made appropriate growth in the academic areas in which they have received individualized instruction.

The specialized instruction offered to gifted and talented students will be individualized, and a school staff member with appropriate training and certification will monitor the implementation of each gifted and talented student’s individualized plan.

**7c. Staffing**

The Center will employ a school staff member to monitor, evaluate, and create individualized instruction for gifted and talented students. This staff person will hold the requisite 690 Gifted and Talented (K-12) endorsement. Since the Center will have a small student body and low student-teacher ratios, there may not be enough students to necessitate a full-time gifted and talented teacher. As such, the qualified staff member may also take on roles other appropriate roles within the school community. Additionally, the Center may utilize independent contractors to provide services and opportunities that meet the specific needs of gifted and talented students. Administration of the gifted and talented program will be done by a school staff member with administrative certification, and the school will conduct program plan and budget approvals, as well as program evaluations in accordance with Maine Department of Education Chapter 104.