

U.S. DEPARTMENTS OF EDUCATION AND HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

**DRAFT POLICY STATEMENT ON INCLUSION OF CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES**

***EXECUTIVE SUMMARY***

***May 15, 2015***

This year our country proudly celebrates the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act, the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Head Start. All three efforts have been transformative in ensuring equal opportunity for all Americans. While tremendous progress has been made, the anniversaries of these laws are cause for reflection on the work that lies ahead. Children with disabilities and their families continue to face significant barriers to accessing inclusive high-quality early childhood programs and too many preschool children with disabilities continue to receive special education services in separate settings. This lag in progress is troubling for many reasons:

- Being meaningfully included as a member of society is the first step to equal opportunity, one of America's most cherished ideals, and is every person's right—a right supported by our laws.
- A robust body of literature indicates that meaningful inclusion is beneficial to children with and without disabilities across a variety of developmental domains.
- Preliminary research shows that operating inclusive early childhood programs is not more expensive than operating separate early childhood programs for children with disabilities.
- Meaningful inclusion in high-quality early childhood programs can support children with disabilities in reaching their full potential resulting in societal benefits more broadly.

It is the Departments' position that all young children with disabilities should have access to inclusive high-quality early childhood programs, where they are provided with appropriate support in meeting high expectations. To further this position, the Departments will release a policy statement on the inclusion of young children with disabilities in early childhood programs. The policy statement:

- Provides a definition of inclusion in early childhood programs,
- Highlights the legal and scientific foundations supporting inclusion, and
- Provides recommendations to States, local educational agencies (LEAs), schools, and early childhood programs for expanding inclusive high-quality early learning opportunities for all children.

Though this policy statement focuses on including young children with disabilities, it is our shared vision that all Americans be meaningfully included in all facets of society throughout the life course. This begins in early childhood programs and continues into schools, places of employment, and the broader community.

**Defining Inclusion in Early Childhood Programs**

The Departments define *inclusion in early childhood programs* as including children with disabilities in early childhood programs together with their peers without disabilities, holding high expectations and intentionally promoting participation in all learning and social activities, facilitated by individualized accommodations, and using evidence-based services and supports to foster their cognitive, communication, physical, behavioral, and social-emotional development; friendships with peers; and sense of belonging. This applies to all young children with disabilities, from those with the mildest disabilities, to those with the most significant disabilities.

### **The Scientific Foundation**

- Individualized evidence-based strategies for children with disabilities can be implemented successfully in inclusive early childhood programs.
- Children with disabilities, including those with the most significant disabilities, can make developmental and learning progress in inclusive settings.
- Research suggests that children's growth and learning is related to their peers' skills and the effects are most pronounced for children with disabilities.
- Typically developing children show positive developmental, educational, social, and attitudinal outcomes from inclusive experiences.
- These outcomes are achieved when children with disabilities are included several days per week in social and learning opportunities with their peers, supported by qualified personnel.

### **The Legal Foundation**

- The IDEA supports ensuring that infants and toddlers with disabilities receive services in natural environments or in settings that are typical for a same-aged infant or toddler without a disability;
- For children ages three through 21 services are to be provided, to the maximum extent appropriate, in the least restrictive environment (LRE) which includes a continuum of alternative placements and supplementary services;
- The IDEA presumes that the first placement option considered for each child with a disability is the regular classroom the child would attend if he or she did not have a disability. LEAs must ensure that a free appropriate public education is provided in the LRE regardless of whether they operate a general early childhood program. This may include providing special education and related services in public or private general early childhood programs, including Early/Head Start and child care;
- The Americans with Disabilities Act and the Rehabilitation Act (Sec. 504) require schools and agencies to provide equal educational opportunities for children with disabilities;
- The Head Start Act and the Child Care and Development Block Grant Act have specific provisions that support high-quality early learning opportunities for children with disabilities.

### **Challenges to Inclusion**

***Attitudes and Beliefs*** are the most highly reported and consistent barriers to early childhood inclusion, and may be influenced by misinformation of the feasibility of inclusion, resistance to changing existing practices, stereotyping of children with disabilities, and lack of awareness of the benefits for all children.

***Lack of Expertise of the Early Childhood Workforce:*** Early childhood providers and teachers may lack knowledge and competencies in child development, early childhood pedagogy, and individualizing instruction. This affects all children and presents a challenge to high-quality inclusive early learning.

***Lack of Comprehensive Services:*** The systems that provide services to young children often deliver services in separate settings. The lack of delivery of comprehensive supports in early childhood programs may be a barrier to the full participation and success of children with disabilities in inclusive settings.

***Limited Time and Commitment to Build Partnerships:*** A key ingredient to successful inclusion is a strong partnership between general early childhood programs and early intervention and special education

providers. Many communities believe in the importance of inclusion but have made little progress due to limited time or a lack of commitment and support from leaders.

### **Building a Culture of Inclusion**

Addressing the barriers to inclusion in early childhood programs requires a community-based approach that brings families, advocates, developmental specialists, early childhood programs, schools, LEAs, communities and States leaders together to build a culture of inclusion, supported by the empirical and legal foundations presented in the Federal policy statement. A culture of inclusion sets the stage for the recommendations provided in the Federal policy statement and is the first step to reaching the ultimate vision of providing access to inclusive high-quality early learning opportunities for all children.

### **State Recommendations**

1. **Create a State-Level Interagency Task Force and Plan for Inclusion:** States should leverage existing early childhood councils or taskforces and create or strengthen a focus on early childhood inclusion. This body should build on existing early childhood efforts, bring partners together, co-create a vision statement for early childhood inclusion, and carry out an inclusion State plan.
2. **Ensure State Policies Are Consistent With High-Quality Inclusion:** States should review their policies to ensure that they facilitate high-quality inclusion. The State should modify any policy that promotes separate learning of children with disabilities. The State should ensure that future early learning initiatives within the State have specific policies and procedures to recruit, enroll, and appropriately support the learning and developmental needs of young children with disabilities.
3. **Set Goals and Track Data:** States should set concrete goals for expanding inclusive high-quality early learning opportunities, and track progress in reaching these goals.
4. **Review and Modify Resource Allocations:** States should review how resources are allocated and how they may be reallocated to better support inclusion. States should consider braiding funds across early childhood programs, particularly IDEA funds with other early childhood funding streams.
5. **Ensure Quality Rating Frameworks are Inclusive:** Each level in a quality framework should include indicators applicable to children with disabilities, as opposed to indicators specific to children with disabilities being optional or only applying at the highest level of a framework.
6. **Strengthen Accountability and Build Incentive Structures:** The State must address inclusion within their accountability system. This should include reviewing the individualized family service plan (IFSP) and the individualized education program (IEP) process to ensure that placement decisions are individualized and consistent with natural environment and LRE requirements
7. **Build a Coordinated Early Childhood Professional Development (PD) System:** An effective early childhood workforce is a key component of inclusive high-quality early childhood programs. States should ensure that their professional development efforts are coordinated and that inclusion and children with disabilities are meaningfully addressed across all efforts. Specifically, States should:
  - **Build a Common Knowledge and Competency Base Across Child-Serving Providers**
  - **Ensure that State Certifications, Credentials, and Workforce Preparation Programs have a Strong Focus on Inclusion**
  - **Ensure Personnel Qualification Policies Facilitate Inclusion**
  - **Offer Cross-Sector Professional Development and Technical Assistance**

8. **Implement Statewide Supports for Children’s Social Emotional and Behavioral Health:** Early childhood programs should have access to specialists who can build capacity in working with young children, with an emphasis on fostering social-emotional and behavioral health.
9. **Raise Public Awareness:** The State should take an active role in trying to shift perceptions of inclusion by partnering with families and other community leaders to communicate the benefits of early childhood inclusion, affirm the laws and science of inclusion, and set the expectation that the community is responsible for ensuring that all children have access to high-quality early childhood programs and the individualized supports they need to fully participate in those programs.

### **Early Childhood System Recommendations**

1. **Partner with Families:** Families are children’s first and most important teachers and the most effective advocates. Ensure all families are knowledgeable about the benefits of inclusion and include them in inclusion policy development, advocacy efforts, and public information initiatives. Provide professional development to teachers and providers on forming strong goal-oriented relationships with families that are linked to their child’s learning, development, and wellness.
2. **Adhere to Legal Provision of Supports and Services in Inclusive Settings with IFSPs/IEPs:** LEAs, schools, and other local agencies should review their IFSP/IEP processes to ensure that inclusive settings are meaningfully discussed for each child.
3. **Assess and Improve the Quality of Inclusion in Early Childhood Programs:** Pair children’s assessments with environmental assessments of their early childhood programs to ensure that there are appropriate accommodations and modifications to support children in reaching their goals.
4. **Review and Modify Resource Allocation:** LEAs, schools, and early childhood programs can examine the ways they allocate funds that serve children with disabilities and re-distribute or modify them to promote inclusion.
5. **Enhance Professional Development:** A high-quality staff must have a strong understanding of the concept of universal design, and knowledge, competencies, and positive attitudes and beliefs about inclusion and disability in order to foster the development of all children. Specifically:
  - **LEA Administrators, Early Childhood Directors and Principals** should participate in professional development focused on the science on inclusion, establishing a culture of inclusion and enacting strong inclusive policies, and practical resource allocation strategies that support inclusion. Leaders should require staff to engage in professional development specific to inclusion and supporting the learning and developmental needs of children with disabilities.
  - **Teachers and Providers** should have the skills necessary to meet the learning needs of children with diverse needs. All professional development opportunities offered to early childhood staff should discuss how the content applies and can be individualized for children with disabilities.
  - **Early interventionists, Special Educators and Related Service Personnel** should deliver services to children with disabilities in early childhood setting and embedded in everyday routines and/or co-teach and coach general early childhood teachers, as opposed to working with children in separate settings or pulling children out of their settings for specialized instruction.
6. **Establish an Appropriate Staffing Structure and Strengthen Staff Collaboration:** LEAs, schools, and early childhood programs should shift existing resources and systems to establish staffing structures and increase staff collaboration to better support inclusion. General early childhood

programs should consist of a skilled teacher or provider and an aide, with the support of specialized service providers. Programs should also have a disability or inclusion coordinator.

7. **Ensure Access to Specialized Supports:** Early childhood programs and schools should have access to specialized supports delivered by experts. This specialized support can increase the quality of early learning experiences for *all* children.
8. **Develop Formal Collaborations with Community Partners:** Early childhood programs should be establish formal agreements with other service providers in their community to ensure alignment and delivery of comprehensive services.