

**WORKING PAPER FOR DISCUSSION**

**INCLUSIVE EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION POLICY FORUM**

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**Sponsored by:**

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## *Inclusive Early Care and Education Forum Synthesis*

Early care and education provides critical support for families in the United States. However, not all families have equal access to these care arrangements, most particularly families with children with disabilities. Recognizing the issues facing families with children with disabilities, the Child Care Bureau (CCB) and Administration on Developmental Disabilities (ADD) in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services convened the *Inclusive Early Care and Education Policy Forum*. The goal of the *Forum* was to explore and address the inclusion of children with disabilities and particularly to discuss how to support the needs of all families in accessing and comfortably relying on early care and education. Key issues related to early care and education for children with disabilities discussed at the *Forum* were:

- Increasing access to and retention in early care and education settings;
- Creating early childhood environments that foster full participation for all children;
- Creating effective training and technical systems;
- Leveraging funding sources; and
- Increasing collaboration across programs and services.

The purpose of the *Forum* was for the CCB and ADD to gather information from key stakeholders, including families with children with disabilities, service providers, State-level early intervention, special education and child care administrators, policymakers, Federal agencies, and researchers, on policies and practices that support the inclusion of children with disabilities in early care and education settings.

During the course of the *Forum*, we heard that inclusive early care and education is critical to meeting the needs of families with young children with disabilities. We learned that inclusion means more than access to early care and education settings - it also means active participation in the same activities as other children in the program. These principles are firmly established in a long history of inclusive early care and education, including lessons learned from initiatives such as *Maps to Inclusive Child Care*, the *Passages to Inclusion* monograph, and other similar endeavors. These principles are embedded in the strategies generated at the *Forum* as potential

“next steps” for Federal and State agencies that could build upon current knowledge and advance the inclusion of children with disabilities in early care and education activities.

The strategies suggested at the *Forum* primarily centered on implementation – *how* to create inclusive systems at the State and local level. A key message was that Federal and State level administrators – across all systems involved in the services and supports of young children with and without disabilities – could support this implementation effort by using and promoting the use of effective strategies that positively impact practice at the provider level which, in turn, could lead to positive child and family outcomes. More specific strategies were identified in three central categories: (1) comprehensive, cross-system approaches to early childhood inclusion, (2) workforce development: early care and education as a profession, and (3) accountability for inclusion initiatives. Each of these categories is described below to provide Federal and State administrators with ideas that support inclusive early care and education. Potential products the federal government could create in support of State level administrators were also identified for each category.

### **Creating a Comprehensive, Cross-Systems Approach to Early Childhood Inclusion**

Visions of a comprehensive, cross-system approach to support inclusion emerged from discussions about the multiple systems providing supports to families of young children, each with their own set of eligibility requirements, services and goals. Federal agencies involved in early childhood initiatives include the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (e.g., Child Care Bureau, Administration on Developmental Disabilities, Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services, Health Resources and Services Administration, National Institutes of Health, National Institutes of Mental Health), the U.S. Department of Education (e.g., Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, Office of Special Education Programs, the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education), and the Department of Justice (e.g., Civil Rights Division, Disability Rights Section). State level systems include agencies responsible for services related to early care and education, early intervention, special education, and child welfare. Local providers include the myriad of licensed and exempt child care providers such as center-based child care, family child care homes, and family, friend and neighbor care. Other

local providers include early intervention agencies and public school programs responsible for early childhood special education and general preschool education programs. Furthermore, private institutions, such as corporations, foundations, and professional organizations, committed to improving practice continue to be involved in early childhood initiatives. While these systems provide a rich array of services and supports, we heard it is difficult to navigate at the ground level with individualized terminology and varied or differing system requirements for each program. For example, while Medicaid pays for early intervention services in general, some early interventionists find it difficult to be reimbursed for services provided in natural environments, such as early care and education settings, which can provide general early childhood professionals the supports necessary to successfully include children with disabilities in their programs.

Alignment of systems is a critical component supporting the inclusion of young children with disabilities in early care and education settings. Federal agencies can play a leadership role in the development of a comprehensive system through cross-agency collaboration. The *Forum* participants identified ways Federal agencies could support the creation of a cross-systems approach to early childhood inclusion at the Federal, State and local levels to maximize resources and support children and families. Comments and suggestions include:

- ***Create a standardized taxonomy of terminology.*** Different systems at the Federal, State and local level use different words and definitions to describe their services and supports. This is further complicated as each State uses different terms. A common language across systems, initiated at the Federal level, could encourage collaboration around a unified vision and clarify how each of the systems is a resource for other systems.
- ***Provide joint guidance on “how to” create and implement comprehensive inclusive opportunities through system collaboration.*** Many challenges identified during the forum were not around *what* needs to happen, but *how* to collaborate and align systems to make inclusion happen. Specific questions were how to: (1) provide inclusive child care for all who require it, (2) coordinate all resources, (3) effectively blend funding, and

(4) include all partners such as child welfare, social workers and Medicaid in the process. Joint guidance could be targeted at State and local systems as well as local providers. Each system could clearly document what is expected at the provider level to directly impact quality inclusion. For example, what does the early intervention system expect from early care and education providers when a child with a disability is enrolled in the program? How can providers support families in accessing child care subsidies? How do early intervention providers ensure that family support continues even if early intervention is provided only in child care? Joint guidance on each system's expectations could facilitate best practices being implemented.

- ***Verify that guidance documents on policy directives are aligned with other systems and their policies.*** Policy directives from one system might contradict policy directives or expectations from another system. Therefore, constant communication among systems and confirmation from the systems that policy directives are aligned with each other's policies will support inclusive efforts.
- ***Revise existing child care resources to reflect inclusive practices.*** Federal and State child care administrators could ensure that all resources clearly embed children with disabilities and inclusive practices. For example, the child care handbook could be expanded to include special education/early intervention, mental health and welfare systems and best practices in inclusion with clear guidance for providers across early childhood systems.
- ***Establish a National Alliance of Inclusive Child Care.*** To work towards a more comprehensive, cross-systems approach to early childhood inclusion, federal agencies could form a joint effort that can focus on the issue of early childhood inclusion. Structuring a cross-agency effort will maximize cross pollination of agency efforts in early childhood.
- ***Development of Products.*** Specific products created by Federal agencies involved in inclusive early care and education, especially the Child Care Bureau, Administration on

Developmental Disabilities, and Office of Special Education Programs, Department of Education, could provide to support State and local work on creating collaborative early childhood systems centered on inclusive care and education. Products suggested at the *Forum* include:

- ***Development of a series of case studies*** using the common terminology devised across systems that provides guidance on a variety of issues in each case study. The issues to be addressed can include funding services and supports, including early intervention and child care subsidies, family support in accessing child care, and cross-system administration and provider collaboration.
- ***Creation of a website with multiple resources*** by the *National Alliance of Inclusive Child Care* to ensure system collaboration where information can be shared in a central location. Situated within this website could be best practices and effective strategies to support inclusion (which could also be disseminated on CD-ROM), models of effective strategies for addressing inclusion issues at the State, local and provider level, access to existing curricula, training and technical assistance materials and models across States and training sites, a directory of resources with a searchable database, and a listserv on inclusion. This website could be a model for States to create their own website specific to inclusion and the system models in their State, while simultaneously serving as a resource across States. For example, if a State administrator is considering using a single plan to meet the needs of each individual child that crosses systems, the State administrator can look at what other States have done in this respect. They can use what has worked and avoid pitfalls, thus increasing their efficiency and effectiveness. The resources suggested on the national website could also be created and disseminated through other mediums separate from the website.
- ***Development of a user-friendly guide on funding early childhood inclusion***, jointly created by the Department of Health and Human Services, the Department

of Education and other federal agencies. This guide would provide specific strategies on “how to” fund an inclusive system.

- ***Creation and dissemination of a newsletter on child care***, which focused on quality child care overall, could be designed to promote high quality early care and education as a necessary condition for successful inclusion. An article on inclusive practices could appear in every issue. The newsletter, as well as the other resources, could provide information to be shared across systems and with local providers and families, so that all stakeholders are informed of the benefits of inclusion and what “good inclusion” looks like.

### **Workforce Development: Training Early Childhood Care and Education Professionals**

Recent attention on the importance of the early years has increased the value of early care and education as a profession. This shift has led to new career paths and raised expectations for the level of expected knowledge and practice of early care and education providers. In turn, this has increased the need for professional development through training and technical assistance. Many believe training and technical assistance can systematically increase quality when all early care and education providers – licensed center and family child care providers as well as exempt providers – are expected and willing to participate. Specific to inclusion, it was suggested that weaving practices of inclusion into all training activities would be more effective than training on “inclusion.” To promote this approach, State level administrators could examine their professional development systems, including feedback from the local level, to identify and address systemic issues that hamper the implementation of inclusion content.

Training and technical assistance are integral to creating a professional workforce that is prepared for quality inclusive early care and education. The strategies identified by *Forum* participants suggested a role for State early care and education administrators in creating quality training and technical assistance systems, and a role for Federal systems in supporting the identification of effective training and technical assistance models. Comments and suggestions include:

- ***Create training and technical assistance initiatives that are evidence-based using adult learning principles.*** To successfully impact practice, effective training strategies focus on changing provider behavior, rather than provider awareness. We heard that effective training occurs and is sustained over time rather than during isolated activities, such as a single in-service opportunity. For example, technical assistance might include mentoring as a strategy to truly change provider behavior. Training, according to adult learning principles, is tailored to the needs of the individual learner, and is practical in nature by focusing on skill building. Using trainers who are familiar with the region in which they train, and therefore aware of its nuances, are one way to ensure that the training and technical assistance is tailored to the needs of the learners in a specific community.
- ***Create training and technical assistance initiatives that are flexible, responsive and individualized to the needs of the various providers.*** Early care and education arrangements, as well as the providers who work in them, vary greatly. It was suggested that, in order to meet the needs of all providers, training be designed and implemented in a variety of formats with multiple language and literacy levels, and that it provide a myriad of content to address a wide spectrum of needs. To accommodate providers' time constraints, on-line learning could be examined as a possible training medium. Chat rooms and bulletin boards might enable providers to stay connected with each other as a source of support, while giving and receiving "virtual" technical assistance.
- ***Provide incentives for engaging in professional development opportunities.*** Providers must take advantage of professional development opportunities for successful change in practice to result. Training could be aligned with a career path as an incentive for participating. Another suggestion was to make licensing dependent on training and technical assistance participation. Other incentives might be needed to gain investment from exempt care providers where licensing and career paths might not be as attractive.
- ***Recognize and support the role that professional specialists play in providing technical assistance to child care providers.*** The role of early interventionists, early childhood

special education providers, mental health specialists, and other specialized providers was described as supporting caregivers in providing quality early childhood experiences for children with special needs and ensuring full participation in activities. These specialists could be viewed as sources of individualized technical assistance. The early care and education system, as well as the systems to which specialized providers belong, could be encouraged to recognize this as an opportunity for technical assistance rather than just discrete “therapy” time between provider and child.

- ***Jointly fund demonstration projects on effective training practices and models.*** Federal systems can take the lead in identifying effective training models on inclusion from a variety of professional perspectives. Different early childhood systems partnering in this effort could foster the creation of positive models that are effective across early childhood providers.
- ***Provide commensurate salaries.*** Higher expectations for quality early care and education should result in higher compensation, reflecting the professional stature of the early childhood profession. This could reduce attrition and increase recruitment of committed professionals into the early childhood field.

**Products.** Products that could support workforce development were included in the *Comprehensive Early Childhood* section. The website described would include ***shared curricula, State and training sites’ training and technical assistance models and materials*** and a ***listserv on inclusion***. These resources would be designed to support the use of effective training practices.

### **Accountability of Inclusion Initiatives**

There are many information gaps that hinder the creation of effective and efficient inclusive early childhood systems. There is a need for child level data. What children are served in what communities? What does inclusion look like for individual children? There is also a need to identify what is known about effective inclusion, and to use that evidence base to design

inclusive early childhood programs. Information on the effectiveness of policies, inclusive models, and training practices in improving access and participation in early care and education settings is limited. Few specifics are provided that clearly describe *how* a model was implemented. Any effective practices need to be examined in terms of their potential for producing consistent results across systems, rather than serving as isolated pockets of effectiveness.

State and local systems, as well as individual providers, need to be accountable for ensuring that the initiatives and practices being implemented do in fact promote access and participation in quality early care and education. The strategies generated with regard to accountability centered on evidence-based decision making to insure quality inclusive practices. Comments and suggestions include:

- ***Enforce regulations on accessibility, accommodations, natural environments, least restricted environments and other inclusive regulations.*** There are multiple Federal policies and regulations that expect and require inclusive opportunities, most particularly the *Americans with Disabilities Act* and the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*. Better mechanisms could be in place to enforce the regulations at the provider level.
- ***Justify state level practices by their impact at the provider level.*** Whether it is training, funding or other initiatives, State level policies and practices should be accountable for improving inclusive outcomes at the program/provider or child level. One idea was for each State to complete a mandatory self-assessment of the status of inclusion in their State, and to create a State Improvement Plan outlining needed follow-up and technical assistance.
- ***Examine the administration and infrastructure of early childhood systems to determine the most efficient use of resources.*** Streamlining systems administration and infrastructure may free up funds to be redirected to training and implementation efforts that directly influence practice and outcomes at the provider and child level.

- ***Determine the current research base on effective practices at all levels (State, local and provider) and fund demonstration projects for information gaps.*** Current research should be compiled to identify what is known and not known about effective inclusion efforts at the State, local and provider levels. Gaps in the research should be jointly funded by the Federal stakeholders identified in the *Comprehensive Early Childhood* section.
  
- ***Create a State-specific unified training and technical assistance plan that spans all localities with benchmarks for demonstrating effectiveness.*** Training and technical assistance initiatives are only efficient if provider behavior changes in ways that increase quality. Training and technical assistance efforts should be evaluated from this perspective, rather than simply whether or not the training occurred. As discussed in the *Workforce Development* section, effective training is comprised of long-term, sustained professional development rather than “one shot” training. Training and technical assistance plans at the State level should be flexible so that localities can create and implement training and technical assistance based on their needs, but the State plans should also include rigorous standards to ensure effectiveness. The effectiveness of local training and technical assistance, as well as a compilation at the State level, should be evaluated based on evidence of successful inclusion as defined by access and participation in early care and education settings.
  
- ***Development of Products.*** Two specific products were identified to support State administrators in creating systems of accountability for effective inclusion efforts:
  - ***Identify and disseminate effective inclusive practices*** in sufficient detail so that the practices can be replicated. Examine any new or previous initiatives from a cost perspective so that those who want to replicate the initiatives can determine how much funding would be required.
  
  - ***Share State plans and performance reports*** in their entirety on the Child Care Bureau website or the recommended *National Alliance of Inclusive Child Care*

website, instead of State compilations, so that States can examine each others' specific inclusion initiatives and record of effectiveness.

### **Conclusion**

The *Inclusive Early Care and Education Policy Forum* generated a variety of strategies to help Federal systems administrators support the work of State system administrators, and, in turn, to help State system administrators promote inclusion at the local level, concentrating on cross-system approaches, workforce development, and accountability. The group made suggestions on funding, policy research, collaboration, training, and technical assistance. Responsibility for achieving quality, inclusive early care and education was spread across a variety of systems and sectors – child care, public and private education, health, child welfare, public and private insurance, private corporations and private foundations were cited as needing to work together to promote evidence-based practices and supports so that all children have access to and can participate in early care and education.