

Preschool Inclusion: Ensuring Equity for All Children

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The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) mandates *access* to early intervention and early childhood special education services for all young children with disabilities from birth. Under IDEA, for children with disabilities from ages 3 to 21, a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) must be provided in the least restrictive environment (LRE). Inclusive preschool settings, in which children with and without disabilities participate, are often the least restrictive environments under IDEA. Unfortunately, 2017–2018 data from the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) in the U.S. Department of Education showed only 45.92 percent of preschool children with disabilities spent 10 hours or more a week in inclusive educational settings. During the 1984–85 school year, similar data showed that 36.8 percent of preschool children with disabilities received special education services in inclusive settings. After 30 years, the percentage of children with disabilities who are experiencing opportunities to interact with and learn alongside their typically developing peers is still less than 50 percent.

Currently under IDEA, preschool children with disabilities have *access to services* that cannot be denied, but *access to inclusive services*, and *equity of services*, are not being provided to the majority of preschool children served.

Access to Inclusive Services

When IDEA was amended in 1986 to mandate FAPE for children with disabilities from age three, few local education agencies (LEAs) had classrooms for preschool children without disabilities



in public schools, nor did many LEAs collaborate with community-based programs. As a result, separate or “self-contained” special education preschool classrooms often were established. Over the past 33 years, the number of early childhood programs for preschool-aged children in the United States has increased greatly—through school districts, state-funded programs, and Head Start. Yet in spite of this increased availability, the data show that access to inclusive settings has not increased significantly for preschool children with disabilities, especially for children with more significant disabilities, even though research has consistently demonstrated the benefits of inclusion for all children.

Equity of Services

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) has drafted a position statement addressing equity in early childhood (www.naeyc.org). NAEYC takes the position that *all children* have the right to *equitable* learning opportunities to help them achieve their full potential as engaged learners and valued members of society.

Equity refers to fairness, but it does not mean that every child gets the same (equality). Equity ensures that needed opportunities, supports, or services are in place so that every child has what she or he needs to achieve desired outcomes.

Access to special education services only in segregated settings, however, does not ensure equity. Ensuring equity requires parents and educators to consider carefully the individual strengths and needs of each child and then to identify

additional supports (e.g., curricular enhancements or modifications, environmental and instructional adaptations/accommodations, or individualized instruction) that will facilitate learning in the least restrictive environment for that child.

The individual strengths and needs of children vary significantly. IDEA has ushered in progress in identifying strategies that facilitate the creation of equitable learning opportunities, including the following:

- Universal design for learning (UDL; www.cast.org) to construct classroom environments that facilitate the learning and engagement of all children by planning for the use of multiple means of representation, engagement, and expression.
- Differentiated instruction to facilitate a system for individualizing instruction, both academically and behaviorally
- Additional accommodations or adaptations as identified in the Individualized Education Program (IEP) for some children (e.g., assistive technology [both high tech and low

tech] to support the engagement of all children by optimizing communication, social interactions, mobility, visual access, auditory access, manipulation of objects, and positioning)

- Strategies for collaborating and teaming—among family members, teachers/assistant teachers, related service providers and administrators
- Activities and routines that are part of a preschool classroom.

Preschool activities and routines offer an especially important context for children to develop interest in and engage and interact with both peers and materials; develop relationships with others; and participate in a wide variety of developmentally appropriate activities. Research has consistently demonstrated that, rather than *removing a child* from these activities and routines, *embedding individualized instruction* in the activities of inclusive environments—with opportunities for interactions, engagement, and participation among all children—leads to positive child outcomes.¹

Providing equitable services in inclusive environments is especially important for young children—in fact, the younger they are, the more important it is. The first five years of life are a time of rapid brain development. Young children need continuous, positive interactions with adults and other children; and they need repeated, contextualized learning opportunities to facilitate early language, cognitive, motor, and social-emotional development. Reducing opportunities for interactions and contextualized learning has a negative effect on development and learning, both for children without disabilities and children with disabilities, even if the disability is considered significant.

It has been 33 years since the passage

1. Snyder, P., Hemmeter, M. L., McLean, M., Sandall, S., McLaughlin, T., & Algina, J. (2018). Effects of professional development on preschool teachers' use of embedded instruction practices. *Exceptional Children*, 84(2), 213–232.

of the law that mandated services for preschool children with disabilities. Many of us have witnessed the benefits of including young children with significant disabilities in inclusive preschool settings and of enhancing equitable learning opportunities. We have seen the gains made by children with significant physical, cognitive, or sensory disabilities in inclusive settings *and* have experienced the difficulty of predicting the amount of growth a young child might make based on a test score or educational diagnosis. Time and time again, we have all heard predictions of limited futures for children with disabilities—and then we have seen these predictions defied by parents, teachers, and the children themselves who believe in focusing on strengths, on taking advantage of every opportunity, and on realizing full potential. In addition, we have witnessed the benefits to other children (and teachers) in the inclusive classroom based on the resulting interactions and relationships that develop and endure.

What Needs to Be Done

Research tells us that including children with disabilities in early childhood settings leads to positive child outcomes. Still the percentage of preschool children who are reported to be served in inclusive settings has only slightly increased in more than 30 years—a clear example of a *research-to-practice gap*. Implementation Science² offers strategies for reducing this gap and increasing the prevalence of inclusive preschool services for all young children with disabilities. Strategies from Implementation Science include leadership, organizational, and competency supports.

Leadership supports might include work by local program administrators to identify and change barriers to inclusion within their program. A review of the

2. Fixen, D., Blasé, K., Horner, R., & Sugai, G. (2009). *Scaling up evidence-based practices in education: SISEP scaling up brief*. Raleigh, NC: OSEP Technical Assistance Center on State Implementation of Scaling Up Evidence-Based Practices.

system in place in local programs can lead to changes that will facilitate preschool inclusion.

The California Department of Education, Special Education Division, has been working to provide the necessary *organizational* supports that promote inclusion and equity for preschool children with disabilities through innovative programs:

- The Supporting Inclusive Practices (SIP) Project (www.sipinclusion.org) provides technical assistance to LEAs to increase the extent to which children with disabilities have access to general education settings.
- The Embedded Instruction California Project (<https://ca.embeddedinstruction.net>) supports equitable instructional practices through professional development, including onsite coaching provided directly to teachers in their inclusive preschool classrooms.
- CDE has developed California's Early Learning Foundations (<https://www.cde.ca.gov/Sp/cd/re/psfoundations.asp>) that specify what is important for *all* children from birth to age five in California to know and be able to do.
- The Desired Results Developmental Profile (<https://www.draccess.org>) provides assessment information to guide instruction and ensure that all children are achieving desired outcomes. *Competency* supports include strategies for additional professional development as well as onsite coaching for teachers as they implement inclusive practices that ensure equity.

California has many resources available to assist early childhood programs to work toward equity through preschool inclusion. It is time to put these resources to work for *all* young children in inclusive preschool settings. ◀

Resource

- ▶ National Association for the Education of Young Children. (2017). *Advancing Equity in Early Childhood Education*. Retrieved from <https://www.naeyc.org/resources/position-statements/equity-draft>