



Strengthening Early Childhood Inclusion

Opportunities to improve collaboration between school districts and community partners to support young children with disabilities

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Executive Summary

In March 2021, Start Early received a short-term exploratory grant from the Illinois Council on Developmental Disabilities to gather insights into how to better support the inclusion of young children with disabilities across school and community settings by engaging school district leaders and their management organizations. From March through August 2021, Start Early conducted key informant interviews and focus groups with school management associations and school district leaders, including principals, superintendents, school board members, and early childhood and early childhood special education coordinators to gain an understanding of what Local Education Agencies (LEAs) would need to be able to provide services to all preschool aged children with IEPs regardless of setting, with a focus on outside-of-school settings.

This report outlines key findings from these focus groups and potential next steps for policy makers and systems leaders to build LEA and state capacity to leverage new federal resources on inclusion. This work will inform early childhood systems efforts in Illinois including the Early Childhood Transformation's implementation of the Funding Commission recommendations, the Governor's Office of Early Childhood's needs assessment and strategic planning process funded through the federal Preschool Developmental Grant, and the work that is anticipated under the Build it Back Better Act.

Framing the Issue

The Importance of Early Childhood Inclusion

The importance of inclusion for young children with disabilities in early childhood programs is supported by both a human rights framework and evidence-based research. Being meaningfully included as a member of society is a human right that all children deserve and should be able to access through inclusive opportunities. As defined by the 2009 statement from the Division for Early Childhood (DEC) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), inclusion embodies the values, policies, and practices that support a child having full membership in their classroom and community, regardless of ability:

“Early childhood inclusion embodies the values, policies, and practices that support the right of every infant and young child and his or her family, regardless of ability, to participate in a broad range of activities and contexts as full members of families, communities, and society.

The desired results of inclusive experiences for children with and without disabilities and their families include **a sense of belonging and membership, positive social relationships and friendships, and development and learning** to reach their full potential.

The defining features of inclusion that can be used to identify high quality early childhood programs and services are access, participation, and supports.”

JOINT STATEMENT FROM THE DIVISION FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD (DEC) AND THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR THE EDUCATION OF YOUNG CHILDREN (NAEYC)⁷

Additionally, there is clear research on the benefits of early childhood inclusion for both young children with disabilities and their typically developing peers. Studies show that children with disabilities who spend more time in general education classrooms are absent fewer days from school, achieve higher test scores, demonstrate stronger social-emotional skills, and have larger friend networks than children in separate settings. Importantly, studies also indicate positive developmental, social, and attitudinal outcomes for children without disabilities in inclusive early childhood programs, including greater compassion and empathy and a positive perception of children with disabilities.²

The human right to equal opportunity and the scientific basis for inclusion are also reflected in the law, which calls for young children with delays and disabilities to receive special education and related services in the least restrictive environment (LRE),³ alongside their typically developing peers. The LRE is the language in the law that defines the environment in which services are received, and is foundational to the legal framework that ensures that children receive their special education and related services in the LRE across a continuum of settings. Under Part B of

the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), special education and related services are to be made available to all children with disabilities ages three through 21, to the maximum extent appropriate, in the least restrictive environment factoring in an individual child's unique strengths and needs.

As clarification of the requirements under Part B of the IDEA, in 2015, the U.S. Departments of Education (ED) and Health and Human Services (HHS) jointly released a Policy Statement on Inclusion in Early Childhood Programs⁴ that specifies IDEA's free appropriate public education (FAPE) and LRE requirements to non-public school settings, such as child care and Head Start. Under this framework, Local Education Agencies (LEAs) must ensure that a free appropriate public education (FAPE) is provided in the LRE to every child with a disability in its jurisdiction. In implementation, this encompasses providing special education and related services across a range of early childhood or preschool programs, including Head Start and Early Head Start programs, and community-based child care programs, depending on the regular classroom the child would attend if they did not have a disability.

While LEAs and other stakeholders may interpret the FAPE and LRE requirements under Part B of IDEA as only calling for preschool special education and related services to be delivered in LEA-administered public school settings, the 2015 joint statement from ED and HHS clarified that these services can, in fact, be delivered in child care and Head Start settings as the mixed delivery system is crucial to increasing the availability and accessibility of high quality inclusive early childhood opportunities. In 2017, noting a concerning lack of expansion in inclusive early learning opportunities across school and community settings, the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) released an updated Dear Colleague Letter (DCL) to clarify that LRE applies to 3-5 year olds, regardless of whether the school district offers a general education preschool program and includes community-based settings.

The 2017 DCL, which superseded a prior DCL from OSEP from 2012, reiterated key statutory and regulatory requirements pertaining to placement options for preschool children with disabilities. Importantly, recognizing that many young children are first identified and referred for services while enrolled in a community based early childhood public preschool program, like child care and Head Start, OSEP further clarified in the DCL that IDEA presumes that the first placement option considered for a preschool child with a disability is the regular public preschool program the child would attend if the child did not have a disability.⁵ This is particularly important as many LEAs may only offer a limited range of public preschool options for three and four-year olds, including limited full-day, year-round options, which make community settings a vital resource for working parents.

Key Excerpt: U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, Dear Colleague: Preschool LRE⁶

“The following requirements apply when determining placement options for a child with a disability who already participates in a regular public preschool program, including a community-based regular public preschool program operated by a public agency other than the LEA. Under 34 CFR §300.116(c), **unless the child's IEP requires some other arrangement, the child is educated in the school that he or she would attend if nondisabled.** In addition, under 34 CFR §300.116(d), the placement team, which includes the child's parent and may include the child's current teacher, must consider any potential harmful effect on the child and on the quality of services that he or she needs before removing the child from the current regular public preschool setting to another more restrictive setting. Consistent with these requirements, **IDEA presumes that the first placement option considered for a preschool child with a disability is the regular public preschool program the child would attend if the child did not have a disability.** Therefore, in determining the placement for a child with a disability who already participates in a regular public preschool program, **the placement team must consider whether the LEA, in collaboration with the regular public preschool program, can ensure that the child receives all of the special education and related services and supplementary aids and services included in the child's IEP in order to meet the needs of the particular child with a disability.**”

Inclusion & LRE Within the Mixed Service Delivery System

Despite these clear calls to action regarding preschool inclusion, it is well documented that nationally, and within Illinois, young children with disabilities and their families continue to face challenges in accessing inclusive early childhood services across, and in, all settings. Unlike the K-12 system, there is no universal system of school-based preschool in Illinois. Instead, children aged 3-5 years old, including those with delays and disabilities, are served within a mixed service delivery system across settings, including local child care, Head Start, and school-based classrooms. Like their typically developing peers, young children with delays and disabilities are also enrolled in community settings, which may offer full-day services that are not available in all school district programs. Early childhood inclusion and the requirement of LRE must therefore be considered across the various settings in which young children with disabilities are often served, outlined in the chart below.

TABLE 1: ENROLLMENT ACROSS ECE SETTINGS

A) Children in school-district classrooms (full or half day).	B) Children who attend community settings including child care and Head Start in the district boundaries.	C) Children who attend community settings including child care and Head Start outside of the district.
Special education and related services delivered in the district’s program either in inclusive or self-contained classrooms.	Special education and related services often delivered in the school district program by transporting children mid-day OR Parents may be forced to decline special education services .	These children may face similar barriers in accessing special education services as their peers in community settings within district boundaries. Children may be enrolled outside of the district because of proximity to parent’s work or other preferences but may return to the district for kindergarten.

Systems and other barriers mean that preschoolers cannot always access critical special education services where they are, posing significant equity issues for young children with delays and disabilities, their families, and for school districts. Nationally and within Illinois, many school districts are still working to build inclusive classrooms within their district’s own programs to ensure that children are learning alongside their typically developing peers. Part B Indicator 6b data shows that nationally, one out of four preschool age children are served in self-contained classrooms and less than half receive services in settings with typically developing peers.⁷ Illinois’ Part B Indicator 6b is only marginally better, demonstrating statewide challenges to meeting LRE obligations.⁸

Without a system of universal preschool, LEAs may also face barriers to enrolling enough typically developing children to build inclusive classrooms that meet their obligation to serve children with delays and disabilities. As more school districts move to full-day preschool services, further constraining available classroom space and other resources, community partners including local childcare and Head Start programs remain essential collaborators for LEAs as they work to meet their legal and regulatory obligations to deliver special education and related services to children with delays and disabilities.

Despite best efforts at collaboration with community partners, LEAs face concrete barriers including budgetary constraints and limited guidance on how to provide special education and related services to children enrolled outside of school district classrooms. Since many, if not most, school districts lack operational models for bringing special education services into local Head

Start and child care classrooms, children in these community-based settings may not receive the special education and related services to which they are entitled, even if these non-school district settings are the least restrictive environment for them. When LEAs do not provide special education and related services to children enrolled in community settings, families are often forced to have their children attend both their inclusive community-based program and a school-based program where they receive special education services, which involves bus rides and multiple transitions between classrooms in one day. In other instances, parents who rely on community-based settings (many of which offer full-day, year-round services in contrast to school districts) may forego the critical special education and related services their child needs because of the impact of these transitions.

Without access to the special education and related services to which they are entitled, children in community settings may experience barriers to healthy development, which poses added long-term challenges for school districts as they work to ensure kindergarten readiness for all students and to meet their obligations to provide a free appropriate public education (FAPE) to every child with a disability in their jurisdiction. Additionally, there are substantial equity implications involved as children who attend Head Start, state preschool, or child care centers in community-based settings are more likely to be low-income, Black, and Latinx.⁹ The lack of equitable access to special education and related services for these populations perpetuates longstanding disparities in access to equitable education opportunities and educational outcomes. Finally, though this grant is focused on children within district boundaries who attend community-based programs, and learning what districts need to support children in those settings rather than transporting children from their local child care or Head Start programs to classrooms in the school district, there are relevant intersections with challenges facing children enrolled in community-based settings including child care and Head Start outside of district boundaries. These children also face substantial barriers to receiving vital special education and related services, which in turn impacts school readiness when families return to the district for kindergarten.

Children with disabilities and delays are prioritized for enrollment in Preschool for All, Preschool for All Expansion, Prevention Initiative, child care (CCDBG), and Head Start,¹⁰ and these funding streams carry requirements to support children with disabilities in comprehensive, inclusive classrooms which necessitates collaboration with school districts to provide direct special education and related services. Head Start is a prime example of where a lack of state directive and formal collaborative models between LEAs and CBOs to serve children with disabilities and delays jeopardizes the program's vision of delivering comprehensive and inclusive services. Just as LEAs have an obligation to meet LRE requirements, the Head Start Act and its regulations include requirements to serve children with disabilities. Head Start programs must ensure at least 10 percent of total funded enrollment is filled by children eligible for services under IDEA, and children eligible for services under IDEA should be prioritized for the available slots in accordance with the program's selection criteria.¹¹ Head Start programs are equipped to do everything

needed to provide comprehensive services with the exception of delivering direct special education and related services; these services fall under a different funding stream and legal framework. Under Head Start rules and IDEA, LEAs are responsible for conducting evaluations and delivering special education services. Within local Head Start programs Disabilities Service Coordinators must partner with parents and the local agency responsible for implementing IDEA, as appropriate, to deliver the required special education and related services.

Given Head Start's priority for serving children with disabilities, it stretches logic and the spirit of Head Start to say that children with disabilities must leave their program to access their IDEA entitled services. Head Start programs must ensure enrolled children with disabilities, including but not limited to those who are eligible for services under IDEA, and their families receive all applicable program services delivered in the *least restrictive possible environment* and that they fully participate in all program activities. As HHS notes in guidance to programs, nearly half of the children with disabilities in Head Start and Early Head Start are diagnosed *after* they enroll in the program through regular screenings or the ongoing assessment and referral process.¹² So when children are pulled out of their regular Head Start classrooms to receive services at the LEA's preschool program, it violates the spirit of Head Start's comprehensive and inclusive programming in addition to burdening children with disabilities and their families. From the 2019 state Program Information Report¹³, a total of 3,283 children enrolled in Head Start programs in Illinois in 2019 had an IEP indicating they have been determined eligible by the LEA to receive special education and related services. Of this total, 1,316 or 40 percent of children with an IEP were determined eligible for special education services *during the enrollment year*, suggesting the Head Start classroom was the regular public preschool program the child would attend if the child did not have a disability and should therefore be the first placement option considered when planning arrangements to fulfil a child's IEP, consistent with the guidance from the 2017 OSEP DCL.¹⁴ While data is not collected in Head Start PIRs on the location in which special education and related services are provided, surveying by the Early Learning Council Inclusion Subcommittee in 2018 indicates the vast majority of children are not receiving these services in their Head Start classrooms in Illinois.

Additional information on requirements related to inclusion and children with disabilities in early childhood programs/settings outside of the child's home can be found in the Illinois systems scan summary created for the 2017 Inclusion Summit.¹⁵

Examples of successful models in other states

Illinois has made a commitment to developing the models and practices needed to ensure that inclusive early learning opportunities are available to each and every child with special needs across all settings, with goals of utilizing program design and resource allocation as key levers through which to ensure equitable access and full participation in all early childhood environments:

“Illinois commits to the inclusion of each and every child with special needs with typically developing peers in all early childhood environments.”

ILLINOIS EARLY CHILDHOOD INCLUSION VISION STATEMENT¹⁶

Nationally, there are few examples of state systems fully implementing collaborative models to ensure that children are supported in accessing special education services across the mixed delivery system. Still, as the state works to fulfill its commitment to inclusion, it is worth considering promising models of service delivery underway in other states. Some examples of states to further investigate include Virginia, Ohio, Maryland, New York, and West Virginia. Two particularly noteworthy efforts in New York City and West Virginia are profiled below. This list is not exhaustive and state leaders for inclusion should invest in further exploration of these and other models, including potential collaboration and cross-system learning opportunities with state Developmental Disabilities Councils and networks of community preschool providers like the Educare Learning Network, state Head Start associations, or networks of publicly funded family and center-based child care centers.

New York City

- The New York City Department of Education (NYSED) offers guidance on the delivery of specialized individual or group instruction and/or indirect services to preschool students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) through a Special Education Itinerant Teacher (SEIT) model. SEITs travel to the childcare or educational setting where the child attends during the day, rather than transporting the child from the community setting to receive services. SEIT services are available to students in any District School, Pre-K Center, or New York City Early Education Centers Pre-K program.¹⁷
- Parent choice is built into the model. The IEP recommendation for the location of SEIS must specify the child care or regular early childhood program (approved or licensed prekindergarten or Head Start program) or hospital or facility where the child will be attending, as identified by the parent.¹⁸

West Virginia

- In 2002, legislation was passed requiring West Virginia’s 55 counties to provide a Universal Pre-K space to all 4-year-olds and all 3-year-olds with disabilities by 2012.¹⁹ West Virginia’s model aims to be sensitive to parent preferences in setting, and requires that a minimum of 50% of pre-k classrooms must be collaborative with community partners.²⁰ Per WVBE Policy 2419, Virginia Universal Pre-K classrooms, including special education, should to the extent possible, reflect the natural proportions of students with disabilities to those without disabilities within the school or community.²¹
- In 2001, West Virginia’s Early Childhood Transition Steering Committee issued a technical assistance document to accompany the West Virginia Key Legal Requirements of the

Participating Agencies Side by Side document, outlining strategies that community agencies can use in collaborating to address IDEA Part C, preschool special education, Early Head Start and Head Start legal requirements. The document outlines strategies to ensure services are delivered, to maximum extent possible, in natural settings typical for the age of the child and which educate children with disabilities along with children without disabilities, including addressing staffing options and co-location of school district and Head Start Programs. ²²

- Governance structures support West Virginia's implementation of high-quality, inclusive preschool programs and the implementation of West Virginia Universal Pre-K, which is operated across school and community settings. Each county is required to establish a collaborative early childhood team, which supports contracting & budgeting across ECE settings to eliminate competition, foster partnerships, and bring greater cohesion across LEA, special education, Head Start, and licensed child care partners.
- These local teams are supported by state level structures including West Virginia's Universal Pre-K Steering Team, comprised of a state Pre-K Coordinator, special education representative, Department of Health and Human Resources Specialist, and Head Start State Collaboration Director. This team provides direction, guidance, and technical assistance to county Pre-K teams, maximizes federal and state Pre-K funds and resources related to Head Start programs and other public and private programs, maintains guidance tools and aggregated data reports to support program implementation, and provides individualized county technical assistance to support the implementation of WV Universal Pre-K and county collaborative early childhood teams.

2021 ICDD Grant

Context for 2021 ICDD Grant

Start Early's efforts on this grant align with Illinois' robust history of work to improve inclusive early learning services for children birth through 5 years of age with delays and disabilities across the mixed delivery system.

TIMELINE OF INCLUSION WORK IN ILLINOIS

- **2009:** The [*Division for Early Childhood \(DEC\) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children \(NAEYC\) release a Joint Position Statement*](#) offering a clear definition of early childhood inclusion.
- **2014:** [*Early CHOICES*](#) receives funding through the Illinois State Board of Education using IDEA discretionary funds to provide training and technical assistance to LEAs and others to increase access to high-quality inclusive environments for preschoolers.

- **2015:** The United States Departments of Education (ED) and Health and Human Services (HHS) jointly release a [Policy Statement on Inclusion of Children with Disabilities in Early Childhood Programs](#).
- **2017:** The Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) releases an [updated Dear Colleague Letter \(DCL\)](#) to reaffirm the U.S. Department of Education's commitment to ensuring inclusive preschool education programs are accessible for children with disabilities and to clarify that LRE applies to 3-5 year olds, includes providing services in community-based settings and applies regardless of if the school district offers a general education preschool program.
- **2017:** In the Spring of 2017, *Early CHOICES* convenes Illinois' first [Early Childhood Inclusion Summit](#), with funding from the Illinois Council on Developmental Disabilities (ICDD).
- **2017:** [The All Families Served \(AFS\) and the Inclusion Subcommittees of the Early Learning Council \(ELC\) release a road map](#) for consideration by IDHS to address inclusion in the state Child Care Development Fund (CCDF) plan and state child care policy.
- **2018:** The Inclusion Subcommittee of the Illinois Early Learning Council conducts a survey of LEAs and CBOs on barriers to providing special education and related services by LEAs to children with disabilities in community settings.
- **2018:** Early CHOICES convenes the [2018 Early Childhood Inclusion Summit](#), with the financial support of ICDD.
- **2019:** Following work at the two Early Childhood Inclusion Summits, [the Illinois Early Childhood Inclusion Vision Statement](#) is concretized to establish a shared vision and guiding principles for advancing the inclusion of each and each and every child with special needs with typically developing peers in all early childhood environments.
- **2019:** Supported by the Illinois Governor's Office of Early Childhood Development as a part of Preschool Development Block Grant Birth through Five (PDG B-5) activities, Early CHOICES creates a [Strategic Plan Outline on the Inclusion of Young Children with Disabilities in Early Care and Education Settings](#).
- **2020:** Early CHOICES receives PDG B-5 funding to expand inclusion-focused work to birth through age 5.
- **2020:** Illinois begins work on the [Implementing, Sustaining, and Scaling-Up High Quality Inclusion](#) project, guided by the Illinois State Board of Education's Illinois Early Childhood Inclusion Vision Statement and Strategic Plan. The project includes technical assistance and training in Illinois to support the sustainable implementation of the ECTA and NCPMI Indicators of High Quality Inclusion at the State, district, and demonstration site levels.
- **2021:** [The Illinois Commission on Equitable Early Childhood Education and Care Funding](#) releases final [recommendations](#) to the Governor's office regarding the funding goals and

funding mechanisms that provide equitable access to high-quality early childhood education and care services for all children birth to age 5. Early childhood inclusion across school and community-based settings is identified as a key priority for the Commission.

See Appendix for additional timeline details.

The Funding Commission's efforts allowed for some examination of how Illinois' early childhood system and early childhood special education funding currently works to support children ages 3-5 to access to high quality inclusive services. This work included interviews with a small group of school district leaders about how districts currently budget for preschool special education and related services within schools and documentation of existing flaws within the evidence-based funding formula related to preschool special education.

However, the Commission did not have an opportunity to have intentional conversations with school district leaders and their management organizations about their understanding of early childhood inclusion or what they might need to serve preschoolers with disabilities in inclusive early childhood programs across settings. As the Early Childhood Transformation Team moves forward with implementing the Funding Commission recommendations, and the state prepares to implement expanded child care and universal preschool through the Build it Back Better Act, there is added urgency to understand what LEAs and their community-based partners would need from the state, and each other, to build and scale models to serve all 3-5 year olds with IEPs across a continuum of settings.

Seeing this window of opportunity, the Illinois Council on Developmental Disabilities funded Start Early to engage in key informant interviews and focus groups with a range of school district leaders including management organizations special education directors, early childhood/bilingual coordinators, principals, and superintendents to gather information about key considerations to effectively bring special education and related services out to students in community settings. Start Early additionally partnered with Early CHOICES to record video stories with family members and early childhood providers who have experiences supporting children aged 3-5 with IEPs who attend both a community-based program and a school-based program to receive their special education and related services. These videos serve as evergreen educational tools to communicate the importance of supporting young children with IEPs in the early care and educational environments in which they are already enrolled, rather than transporting children to the school district for services.

Activities & Methods

Through key informant interviews and targeted focus groups, Start Early explored what school district leaders would need by way of guidance, resources, and collaboration with CBO partners to effectively bring special education and related services out to students in community settings.

Key contributors included special education directors, early childhood/bilingual coordinators, principals, school board members and superintendents. School district management organizations and leaders engaged in focus groups and interviews included:

- DuPage Regional Office of Education
- Illinois Federation of Teachers
- Illinois Association of School Boards
- West40 Intermediate Service Center
- Illinois Principals Association
- The Illinois Association of Regional Superintendents of Schools

Start Early also partnered with Early CHOICES to create storytelling videos and elevate the voices of family members and early childhood providers who have experiences supporting children aged 3-5 with IEPs who attend both a community-based program and a school-based program to receive their special education and related services. These videos can serve as evergreen educational tools to communicate the importance of supporting young children with IEPs in the early care and educational environments in which they are already enrolled and that they choose, rather than transporting children to the school district for services.

Key Findings

Key barriers to supporting children with disabilities enrolled in community-based settings have been documented in prior research and engagements with LEAs on this topic, including the 2018 Inclusion Subcommittee survey and ongoing conversations with the three district sites involved in the *Implementing, Sustaining and Scaling-Up High-Quality Inclusion* project. Start Early asked LEA focus group participants to indicate the extent to which seven key domains would be significant considerations if they were to partner with community programs around a new model of service delivery, bringing school district special education and related services to community child care settings rather than transporting children mid-day. The seven major domains included:

1. Data on how many children are being served in a district region and an understanding of where children are served and who their community partners are
2. Funding/use of funding
3. Staff training and skills
4. Staffing of teachers
5. Staffing of related support staff

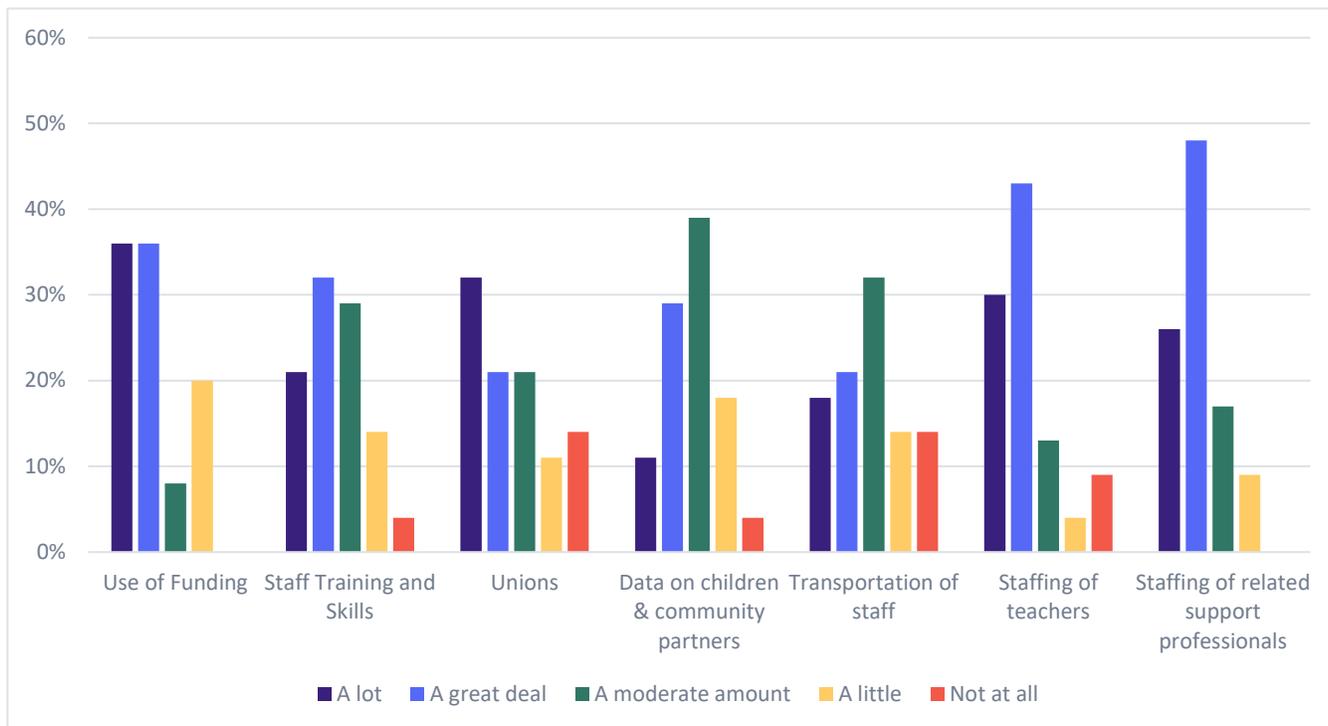
6. Union considerations

7. Transportation of staff

As illustrated in the polling results chart on the following page, the majority of LEA respondents ranked all considerations as at least moderately significant factors if they were to plan to deliver special education and related services to children enrolled in community settings, including child care and Head Start. **Use of funding** (including blending and braiding of state and federal funds to support services to young children with special needs), **staffing of teachers**, and **staffing of related support professionals** were among the top ranked key considerations, with nearly three-quarters of respondents ranking these issues as ones with a lot or a great deal of significance.

Considerations on **unions**, **transportation of staff**, and **data on children and community partners** were most often ranked as considerations of little or no significance, suggesting that LEAs feel confident in operationalizing staff contracts with unions, transportation agreements, and identification of community partners if larger barriers like use funding can be supported with additional guidance from the state.

CHART 1: PARTICIPANT RANKING OF KEY LEA CONSIDERATIONS



A Need for Increased Awareness of Early Childhood Inclusion & the Preschool Mixed Delivery System

Conversations and focus groups with school district leaders suggest a need for knowledge-building about early childhood inclusion and the early childhood landscape in their communities.

- Numerous participants indicated a need to better understand whether they had community-based preschool programs in their district boundaries, including child care and Head Start and state funded preschool, and if children with IEPs or delays/disabilities attended those programs. Some were not aware that there were children with delays and disabilities being served in settings outside of the school district boundaries or outside of their schools.
- Many were unaware of the state’s inclusion priorities and the Funding Commission recommendations. Several participants expressed appreciation for the information shared on early childhood inclusion and the opportunity to inform the implementation of the Commission’s recommendations.
- Most participants were focused on building inclusive classrooms in their schools and not as aware of the issues related to supporting children in community-based programs.

- Some participants thought their obligations to preschoolers with delays and disabilities outside of their district classrooms were limited to Child Find screenings.
- Management organization leaders shared an openness and strong interest in raising issue awareness for their membership through articles, webinars, and/or conference presentations.

“Our districts don’t know half of what you described. The majority think of it [obligations to 3-5 year olds with delays and disabilities] as Child Find screenings.”

REGIONAL SUPERINTENDENT

“It seems everyone is working in silos. They don’t know what is out there – expanding inclusion in schools and communities.”

SPECIAL EDUCATION COORDINATOR

“It is very siloed. Most districts wouldn’t know most of what you shared.”

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING SPECIALIST

As focus group participants emphasized, there is a clear need to increase the knowledge of early childhood inclusion and address perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs among district leaders. Echoing research indicating that attitudes and beliefs are often the biggest barrier to inclusion, focus group discussions emphasized a continued need for coordinated education and engagement on the issue with school district leaders responsible for partnering with community-based providers to serve young children with delays and disabilities.

Concerns About Collaborating with Community Based Providers

- LEAs may view CBO partners as competitors both for limited state preschool dollars and for enrollment.
- LEAs may view school district classrooms as the only avenue for providing a high-quality learning environment for children with delays and disabilities. Participants expressed concerns that CBOs may lack the appropriate curriculum, staff supports, and culture to offer children a high-quality inclusive environment or to welcome LEA staff coming in to deliver itinerant services.
- Participants expressed doubts as to whether children with mild to substantial delays and disabilities would be better served in self-contained classrooms.
- Some participants shared concerns about whether CBOs would be adequately equipped with access to specialized equipment that related service providers may need to support children.
- Participants suggested it may help for the state to clarify existing Head Start and child care obligations as current practices create burdens on children and jeopardize grantee funding by

requiring children to be dually enrolled in a separate LEA program to receive their special education services.

- Several focus group participants expressed that they did not see the value or necessity of the mixed-delivery service system. LEAs may need additional support to understand that child care and Head Start programs in the community are a potential solution to facilities constraints and challenges enrolling enough typically developing children to operate fully inclusive classrooms.

Workforce Supply & Preparation Issues

- Workforce supply issues, including the recruitment and retention of qualified early childhood professionals and the well-documented shortages in staff, were consistently cited by LEAs as key barriers to standing up new models for itinerant service delivery.
- Providers need to be a “triple threat” and hold licensure across early childhood, special education, and bilingual services. Licensure requirements across these domains are onerous, contributing to the short supply of staff with credentialing across all three areas.
- There was also a desire for more creative workforce development pathways and strategies to increase the supply of qualified professionals that meet the triple threat of early childhood, special education, and bilingual credentialing. Suggestions included aligning coursework requirements, and establishing apprenticeship models to support completion of licensure requirements.
- Students may not be able to afford to participate in unpaid student teaching opportunities and we miss the opportunity to support existing professionals to enter the workforce. As elevated by focus group participants, even though a cohort of bilingual paraprofessionals received support in completing coursework required for the Early Childhood Special Education licensure, students were unable to afford to take time off work to student teach, and were not permitted to use their existing positions to complete this requirement.
- Compensation issues, and issues of parity between community-based teacher salaries and school district salaries, will continue to drive and perpetuate workforce shortages.

Considerations for Staffing a New Model of Inclusion

Focus group participants also offered concrete recommendations for a new service delivery model for LEA-CBO collaboration.

- Participants were optimistic that union and contracting considerations would not necessarily be prohibitive to the itinerant model. Defining the role of the itinerant professional and ensuring that caseloads, supervisory supports, and professional development are tailored to the unique function of this role is vital for LEAs looking to bring special education services into community child care and Head Start classrooms. A number of focus group respondents indicated their district would need additional consultation support or strong leadership from the state on how to define and support this new itinerant role.
- Caseloads must be adjusted and cannot be as high as they would be for an early childhood special education or related service provider working exclusively within school district classrooms.
- Relationship building with the staff within community settings is an important component to successful service delivery. There may be a maximum number of classrooms/sites that an itinerant professional can support, and additional work with LEA and CBO leaders is necessary to determine the staffing patterns and associated funding necessary to support this model.

“Our clinicians have large caseloads... I would hope it isn't so overwhelming so they can provide adequate services, adequate staffing of teachers and clinicians... taking into account bilingual students that have IEPs because language needs are often overlooked.”

FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

- Several participants flagged the need for additional support regarding LEA liability for any accident or injury to staff working out in the community.
- Early childhood and special education coordinators flagged the need for a new model to detail lines of supervision for the itinerant professional. Additional strategies to support LEA accountability in meeting the IEP service plan would be useful to detail in guidance from the state.
- Focus group participants shared that early childhood special education coursework may not sufficiently prepare staff to work with other ECE providers, including the other teachers within the CBO environment. Participants highlighted the need for additional training for itinerant staff on how to support CBO providers to embed best practices into their classrooms.
- Embedded professional development is a necessary support for staff in early childhood special education roles; additional coaching and consultation need to be available to support itinerant

staff, but also within community settings to ensure child care and Head Start teachers can translate the work of the itinerant into classroom activities.

- Participants elevated the need to create a model that specifically builds in time beyond direct service minutes, including follow-up and discussion with classroom teachers.

“I find that the contracts are really restrictive as far as when I can have time to [follow up on] services. I don’t pull out, I usually am pushing in when I’m in a classroom, and a lot of times there is not enough time to follow up afterwards [with staff] and say ‘hey, did you see what I was doing?’ to make sure the therapy sessions are extended beyond the time that I’m there twice a week.”

EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT SPECIALIST/ BEHAVIOR ANALYST

Openness to Building & Implementing New Models of Inclusion

Participants were open to continuing to engage on this issue, including learning about more effective and equitable models of inclusion to serve children across settings.

- Participants reflected that asking families to bring their children to the district for special education services has been viewed as default, and that it would require a significant shift in thinking from LEA leadership to reframe what it means to serve children with delays in the settings most appropriate to them.

“You know, I think we’re probably missing the boat on this and not all the kids are getting served in the way they could or should be [...] One, that we’re identifying all the students that we should be and two, that we’re really serving them and meeting their needs. I think in order to do that we’re going to have to really think outside the box and get out of our comfort zone of ‘this is our program, this is our center, this is our physical building and, therefore, if [special education services] is a need, you come here. “

DIRECTOR OF SPECIAL EDUCATION

- Noting that long-time staff members may be wary to take on new challenges of working in community settings, some LEA leaders cautioned that the state will need to be intentional about building buy-in to successfully scale new models of inclusion.
- Participants flagged that the state may need to think about a separate funding formula and for delivering special education and related services in community settings to ensure its adequacy.

COVID-19 Related Considerations

Though Start Early's grant with ICDD did not specifically aim to capture pandemic-related barriers to delivering services to all preschool children with IEPs regardless of setting, challenges created by the public health crisis were consistently surfaced during focus groups.

- LEA leaders were concerned that an itinerant model would place staff working across multiple CBO settings at a higher COVID risk. Some expressed concern over the lack of control of safety policies in community child care settings, which may not align with school district rules.
- With the rise in the Delta variant over the summer and vaccinations not yet available to young children, preschoolers remain at an elevated risk for COVID. Parents may be less willing to dually enroll their children in both the community-based and school-district programs given the added risk of COVID exposure children face with two sets of classrooms, two sets of teachers, and additional bus rides. Families may opt out of special education services at a higher rate given the risk to young children who have to travel to the district for these services.
- COVID exposure and related quarantine requirements pose a logistical challenge for any students currently dually enrolled in a CBO and LEA program. Focus group participants noted a need for detailed MOUs on quarantine policies with CBO partners, and potential restrictions on the number of CBO classrooms served by an LEA itinerant service provider.
- The pandemic has created new workforce shortages for districts, including a national bus driver shortage.²³ Facing transportation resource restrictions, focus group participants acknowledged the need to build models to let itinerant service providers drive to CBO classrooms, rather than bussing children from these programs to the district.

Opportunities for Further Engagement & Policy Implications

To build on the clear and urgent findings from this exploratory grant, additional resources and attention from systems leaders are necessary to build LEA capacity and infrastructure necessary to reach children aged 3-5 with delays and disabilities across settings. As new federal investments continue to emerge – including the potential expansion of universal preschool and child care through the Build Back Better plan and pandemic relief funds – there is added urgency and unprecedented opportunity to ensure state systems use these new federal dollars effectively to advance models of inclusion. Additionally, as potential federal investments in childcare and universal preschool are making clear, these solutions must consider the mixed delivery system, and support improved collaboration between LEAs and CBOs on issues of inclusion and special education service delivery.

This grant has lifted up some of the critical considerations that state leaders must address as they advance the transformation and expansion of our early childhood system in partnership with stakeholders from across the state. Notably, school district leaders surveyed through this grant demonstrated significant levels of interest in continued engagement in future consultation or other activities to build creative models for collaboration with CBO partners to expand options for service delivery that extend beyond their school walls. Survey results below demonstrate interest across several potential school district activities:

- Engaging in consultation to help your district increase the number of children ages 3-5 with IEPs attending community programs to receive services and supports in their community setting: **20% of respondents were interested.**
- Participating in the planning and implementation of a demonstration project using ARPA dollars and new IDEA funds to design and pilot a model to increase the delivery of your district's special education services and supports in community settings to children ages 3-5 with IEPs: **90% of respondents were interested.**
- Exploring or developing partnerships with local child care and Head Start programs to increase the number of children ages 3-5 with IEPs who receive services and supports in those community programs: **100% of respondents were interested.**

- Additional opportunities such as participating in future focus groups or an advisory body to inform the State's plan for improving and expanding inclusion: **100% of respondents were interested.**

With strategic investment and technical support, the State has an opportunity to build on this interest and engagement from LEAs. Additional resources, including funds to support staffing and technical assistance, are critical to equip school district stakeholders to make meaningful progress on service delivery to children with delays and disabilities within community settings. LEA leaders were interested in how ARPA and other funds could be used to support these efforts. If the preschool IDEA ARPA dollars have been distributed to school districts, ISBE can still offer guidance to LEAs about how to advance these models for inclusion using those funds. Additional federal resources including new Child Care and Development Funds (CCDF) and Governor's Emergency Education Relief Funds (GEER) could also be strategically directed by the state to fund capacity-building within CBOs around inclusion or to build on the work of the ongoing *Implementing, Sustaining and Scaling-Up High-Quality Inclusion* project. Furthermore, ISBE could look for additional opportunities to apply IDEA discretionary funds to support Goal 3 of the state's Strategic Plan Outline on the Inclusion of Young Children with Disabilities in Early Care and Education Settings,²⁴ including providing guidance, incentives, and accountability to support LEAs in providing special education services within the mixed delivery service model. And, of course, the Build it Back Better Act may provide the greatest opportunity and demand for our attention to expanding inclusion across our early childhood system.

Beyond these opportunities, lessons learned from this short-term grant point to several avenues of action for early childhood systems leaders to prioritize inclusion. Specifically, the state should consider investments to:

- 1. Establish an advisory board of school district and CBO leaders, including those involved in the administration and delivery of special education services, to support the work of the Early Childhood Transformation Team, Governor's Office of Early Childhood Strategic Planning efforts through PDG-5, or other systems initiatives.**
 - While the Early Childhood Funding Commission consulted with school districts to document the costs of serving children with IEPs within high-quality, inclusive classrooms within the school districts, additional research and analysis is necessary to understand the quality components and funding adequacy necessary to support LEAs in delivering special education services within CBO settings.
 - Consider investment in a consulting firm with expertise in this area to do a deeper analysis of the necessary considerations for funding adequacy, funding mechanisms and governance to ensure that the transformation of the state's early childhood system is designed to support children with disabilities across settings.

- Examples of strong analyses include an independent evaluation by the Public Consulting Group of State of Maine’s early childhood special education systems and services. ²⁵
 - Consider avenues to leverage school district management organizations in advocacy or coordinated messaging on the importance of LEA/CBO coordination to serve young children with delays and disabilities.
- 2. Explore innovative pathways to support students to complete Early Childhood, Early Childhood Special Education, and Bilingual/ESL Endorsement coursework and licensure requirements.**
 - 3. Establish an advisory table or build cross-agency capacity to prepare to act on incoming additional IDEA investments and federal expansion of child care and universal preschool.**
 - The state should invest in the development of shovel-ready projects on early childhood inclusion and early childhood special education, including developing recommendations on what the state would need to do to make use of added IDEA funds.
 - Identify models to pilot LEA / CBO collaboration, and identify communities interested and ready to launch a demonstration project if additional IDEA funds are available. Consider linkages to the three communities – Collinsville, Mannheim, and Springfield – involved in the Implementation of *Implementing, Sustaining and Scaling-Up High-Quality Inclusion* project.
 - Noting the possibility of additional investments in Part D of IDEA, conversations with higher education stakeholders around the work needed to change licensure requirements for early childhood special education professionals will need to start before large grant opportunities are made available. Senior leaders at the Illinois State Board of Education will need to be at the table and involved in these discussions.
 - 4. Leverage school management organizations/associations to build issue awareness and cohesive messaging among members (principals, special education administrators, superintendents, ROEs etc.)**
 - Awareness building efforts should focus on the benefits of inclusion, the implications of the requirements of serving children aged 3-5 in the least restrictive environment, and their role in supporting preschool aged children with delays and disabilities.
 - Through a more coordinated campaign, management organizations could help member stakeholders understand that supporting children in community settings is a necessary and beneficial strategy as LEAs work to meet the needs of these students while facing facilities and resourcing constraints to serving typically developing preschoolers in school district programs.

- Among potential strategies, additional private or public investment could support the development and implementation of webinars for management associations, lunch and learn talks, presentations at conferences, and the publication of articles in management association newsletters and journals.
- 5. Invest in TA, consultation, or other support to LEAs to clarify the array of funding sources available to support young children with disabilities, with an eye toward strategies to blend and braid funding streams and potential cost-share with CBOs to maximize the reach of services.**
- LEAs and school district associations would benefit from guidance on how to design and operationalize models for inclusion in and out of school settings, as well as consultation on financing models for service delivery through expanded capacity in Early CHOICES.
- 6. Develop cross-state, cross-system learning opportunities to build on states with examples of collaborative models between LEAs and CBOs, leveraging state Developmental Disabilities Councils investment.** We have been fortunate in Illinois to have the support of the Illinois Council on Developmental Disabilities long-standing investment in building a vision, commitment and action to expand access to inclusive early childhood education across our early childhood system. As each state has a developmental disability council, there are opportunities to leverage shared investment and learnings across the country. We can look to connect this work to existing early childhood networks including the Educare Learning Network, Head Start Collaborations, and center based and family child care networks.

Conclusion

Building on Illinois' robust history of work to improve inclusive early learning services for young children with delays and disabilities, Start Early leveraged an exploratory grant from ICDD, to engage school district leaders and management organizations in listening and focus group discussions to learn about their concerns and considerations for how to better support the inclusion of 3-5 year olds with disabilities within community-based settings including child care and Head Start programs. These efforts align with the goals of the Illinois Early Childhood Inclusion Vision Statement, Illinois' Strategic Plan for Inclusion of Young Children with Disabilities in Early Care and Education Settings, and, most recently, the Governor's Commission on Equitable Early Childhood Education and Care Funding recommendations. As we anticipate the passage of the Build it Back Better Act, Illinois' longstanding commitment and strategic planning for inclusion across its early childhood system, makes us poised to transform our policies and practices, funding mechanisms, and governance to build and scale models of high-quality inclusion across all settings in our early childhood system.

Key findings from this grant indicate a range of opportunities to address the needs and concerns of school districts to be able to better support children aged 3-5 with delays and disabilities across settings. Notably, there is a general openness among focus group participants to building and implementing new models of inclusion, and a strong willingness to participate in an advisory body to inform the State's planning process for improving inclusion. There is also a need and desire to raise issue awareness and messaging among school district leaders and management associations about early childhood inclusion and the preschool mixed delivery system. For example, management association leaders are very interested in leveraging their platforms to uplift this issue for their membership through articles, conference presentations, and webinars. Concerns about workforce supply and preparation issues indicate a need for the State to explore and address barriers to licensure requirements, compensation issues, shared professional development opportunities, and innovative workforce development pathways. There is also a need to be thoughtful about defining the role and functions of both the special education and related service professionals and community-based professionals to ensure that the staffing models promote best practice and to ensure adequate funding.

Above all, school district leaders have affirmed that for the state to be successful in achieving its vision for early childhood inclusion, attention to the funding, governance and models for inclusion are critical and must be informed by engagement of school district leaders throughout its design and implementation.

Appendix

DETAILED TIMELINE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD INCLUSION POLICY WORK IN ILLINOIS

- **2009:** The [Division for Early Childhood \(DEC\) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children \(NAEYC\) release a Joint Position Statement](#) offering a clear definition of early childhood inclusion.
- **2014:** [Early CHOICES](#) receives funding through the Illinois State Board of Education using IDEA discretionary funds to provide training and technical assistance to LEAs and others to increase access to high-quality inclusive environments for preschoolers. Prior to 2014, Early CHOICES was a part of a larger Project CHOICES grant focused on the 3–21-year-old population, but new funding in this standalone grant allowed Early CHOICES to focus on preschool aged children.
- **2015:** The United States Departments of Education (ED) and Health and Human Services (HHS) jointly release a [Policy Statement on Inclusion of Children with Disabilities in Early Childhood Programs](#). The joint Policy Statement clarifies requirements under Part B of the IDEA that special education and services are to be made available to all children with disabilities ages three through 21, to the maximum extent appropriate, in the least restrictive environment (LRE) factoring in an individual child's unique strengths and needs. Specifically, the statement specifies that IDEA's free appropriate public education (FAPE) and LRE requirements to non-public school settings, such as child care and Head Start early childhood programs.
- **2017:** Noting a concerning lack of expansion in inclusive early learning opportunities across school and community settings, the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) released an [updated Dear Colleague Letter \(DCL\)](#) to reaffirm the U.S. Department of Education's commitment to ensuring inclusive preschool education programs are accessible for children with disabilities and to clarify that LRE applies to 3-5 year olds, regardless of if the school district offers a general education preschool program and includes community-based settings.
- **2017:** In the Spring of 2017, [Early CHOICES](#) convenes Illinois' first [Early Childhood Inclusion Summit](#), with funding by the Illinois Council on Developmental Disabilities. Building upon the priorities the United States Departments of Education (ED) and Health and Human Services (HHS) jointly released Policy Statement on Inclusion in Early Childhood Programs from 2015, the Summit aims to create a shared awareness of the state of early childhood inclusion policy in Illinois and develop priorities for improving policy to support inclusion of young children across all agencies and stakeholders in Illinois.
- **2017:** [The All Families Served \(AFS\) and the Inclusion Subcommittees of the Early Learning Council \(ELC\) release a road map](#) for consideration by IDHS to address inclusion in the state Child Care Development Fund (CCDF) plan and state child care policy.

- **2018:** The Inclusion Subcommittee of the Illinois Early Learning Council conducts a survey of Local Education Agencies (LEAs) and Community Based Organizations (CBOs) on the experiences, barriers, and promising practices surrounding the provision of special education and related services by LEAs to children with disabilities enrolled in community settings.
- **2018:** Early CHOICES reconvenes the Summit in June 2018, with the financial support of ICDD. The [2018 Early Childhood Inclusion Summit](#) builds on the state vision statement for inclusion drafted in 2017, and further organizes progress across major areas of investment in inclusion, including 1) Strengthening and Supporting a Competent Workforce; 2) Improving Access to Inclusive Early Childhood Settings; and 3) Systems Collaboration and Alignment.
- **2019:** Following work at the two Early Childhood Inclusion Summits, [the Illinois Early Childhood Inclusion Vision Statement](#) is concretized to establish a shared vision and guiding principles for advancing the inclusion of each and every child with special needs with typically developing peers in all early childhood environments. The Vision Statement is endorsed by The Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, Early CHOICES, the Illinois State Board of Education, the Governor's Office of Early Childhood Development, and the Illinois Head Start Association.
- **2019:** Supported by the Illinois Governor's Office of Early Childhood Development as a part of Preschool Development Block Grant Birth through Five (PDG B-5) activities, Early CHOICES creates a [Strategic Plan Outline on the Inclusion of Young Children with Disabilities in Early Care and Education Settings](#). Importantly, Goal #3 of the Strategic Plan aims to provide "guidance, incentives, and accountability to support Local Education Agencies (LEAs) to ensure that special services are provided to young children with disabilities within the mixed delivery service model."
- **2020:** Early CHOICES receives PDG B-5 funding to expand inclusion-focused work to birth through age 5.
- **2020:** Illinois begins work on the [Implementing, Sustaining, and Scaling-Up High Quality Inclusion](#) project, guided by the Illinois State Board of Education's Illinois Early Childhood Inclusion Vision Statement. The project includes technical assistance and training in Illinois to result in the sustainable implementation of the ECTA and NCPMI Indicators of High Quality Inclusion at the State, district
- **2021:** [The Illinois Commission on Equitable Early Childhood Education and Care Funding](#) releases final [recommendations](#) to the Governor's office regarding the funding goals and funding mechanisms that provide equitable access to high-quality early childhood education and care services for all children birth to age 5. Recommendations include an analysis of the cost of providing high-quality, inclusive services, and early childhood special education services, within school district settings.

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