

ANNOUNCEMENT

Subsidized Child Care Services - S-17 #04
Child Care Certification Services- C-17#03
Early Intervention Services - EI-17#01
FC/PRF- 17#02
Early Learning Services – KS-17#03
ELS-17#02

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SUBJECT: Inclusion of All Children in Early Childhood Programs in Pennsylvania

TO: Pennsylvania Early Learning Programs

FROM: Suzann L. Morris, MPA 
Deputy Secretary, Office of Child Development & Early Learning

PURPOSE:

The U.S. Departments of Health and Human Services (HHS) and Education (ED) released a [policy statement](#) recommending that states develop policies and practices to increase the inclusion of infants, toddlers, and preschool children with disabilities in high-quality early childhood programs (2015). This policy statement provides the Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL) response to this federal policy. It also incorporates key principles and recommendations for implementing family engagement across systems and within programs as outlined in the Policy Statement on [Family Engagement From the Early Years to the Early Grades](#) (2016). This Announcement and the *Reduction of Expulsion and Suspension in Early Childhood Programs in Pennsylvania* are intentional companion Announcements to support quality early childhood programs.

The purposes of this announcement are to:

- Promulgate the HHS and ED policy statement,
- Provide guidance to OCDEL programs regarding strategies that promote inclusion for all children,
- Provide guidance to OCDEL programs in how to support family engagement in an inclusive manner that respects the cultural and individual preferences of families,
- Identify resources available to local programs, and
 - Specify next steps to be taken at the local and state levels.

BACKGROUND:

HHS and ED provide federal funding to a wide variety of Pennsylvania early childhood programs and initiatives, including Child Care Works; Child Care Certification; Early Head Start; Head Start; Early Intervention; Home Visiting Programs; and Keystone STARS. As a recipient of these federal funds, OCDEL is acting on the recommendations to develop and disseminate a program policy statement to early

childhood programs that are recipients of these federal funds through OCDEL. This OCDEL announcement also applies to programs receiving state funding, including Head Start Supplemental Assistance Program, Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts, and Family Centers (which receives both federal and state funding). Programs are encouraged to share the resources found within the announcement with their community and early learning networks.

HHS and ED define inclusion as including children with disabilities in early childhood programs, together with their peers without disabilities; holding high expectations and intentionally promoting participation in all learning and social activities; facilitating individualized accommodations; and using evidence-based services and supports to foster development (cognitive, language, communication, physical, behavioral, and social-emotional), friendships with peers and a sense of belonging. This applies to all young children with disabilities, from those with the mildest disabilities to those with the most significant disabilities ([HHS/ED Policy Statement, 2015](#)).

Pennsylvania has a long-standing commitment to support the inclusion of children with disabilities as active members in early childhood programs and community settings. Family engagement, including providing information about quality early childhood program options and supporting families through the decision making process, is integral to our practices.

Research indicates that family involvement in children's learning and development impacts lifelong health, developmental, and academic outcomes, that families are children's first and most important teachers, advocates, and nurturers. The term "family" is inclusive of all adults who interact with early childhood systems in support of their child, to include biological, adoptive, and foster parents; grandparent; legal and informal guardians; and adult siblings. Family involvement also includes processes for families to participate in the development of policies and procedures of an organization as well as in the individual educational planning for their child.

For the purposes of this announcement, the definition of inclusion as set forth in the [joint position statement](#) from the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the Council for Exceptional Children's Division for Early Childhood (DEC) will be utilized and is as follows:

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 (2009).

In addition to OCDEL's support for the inclusion of all children, there are many legal foundations for the inclusion of children in typical early childhood settings, policy statements related to inclusion, national association position papers on the inclusion of young children, and statewide initiatives supporting inclusive opportunities. Many of these resources also provide guidance on the engagement of families. These include:

- The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Part B and Part C
<http://idea.ed.gov/>
- The Americans with Disabilities Act
http://www.ada.gov/2010_regs.htm
- The Head Start Act and Head Start Performance Standards
<http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/standards/law>
- The Child Care and Development Block Grant Act
<http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/occ/ccdf-reauthorization>
- Federal U.S. Departments of Health and Human Services and Education Policy Statement on Inclusion of Children with Disabilities in Early Childhood Programs
<http://www2.ed.gov/policy/speced/guid/earlylearning/joint-statement-full-text.pdf>
- Division for Early Childhood and National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) Joint Position Paper on Inclusion
http://www.naeyc.org/files/naeyc/file/positions/DEC_NAEYC_EC_updatedKS.pdf
- Pennsylvania Act 212-1990: The Early Intervention Services Systems Act
<http://www.education.pa.gov/Documents/Early%20Learning/Early%20Intervention/Laws%20Regulations%20and%20Announcements/Act%20212.pdf>
- Pennsylvania Keystone STAR Performance Standards
http://www.pakeys.org/pages/get.aspx?page=programs_stars
- PA Keys to Quality Professional Development System and Technical Assistance System
https://www.pakeys.org/pages/get.aspx?page=Programs_STARS_PD
- Early Intervention Technical Assistance Training Initiatives
<http://www.eita-pa.org/>
- Pennsylvania Learning Standards for Early Childhood (Partnerships for Learning)
https://www.pakeys.org/pages/get.aspx?page=career_standards

DISCUSSION:

OCDEL's vision is to support families and their children, from prenatal through school age, by using data, research, and stakeholder guidance to assure high-quality services. Through our mission, OCDEL is committed to providing families with access to high-quality services and the supports needed to participate in play and learning activities that will prepare children for school and life success.

Inclusion of young children begins at birth and continues throughout a child's life in early childhood programs, school, and adulthood. Inclusion for young children addresses their participation in home, school, or community environments. This policy statement addresses inclusion for young children in those environments as well as preparation to become adults who are actively participating and contributing members of their communities. OCDEL's goal is for children with disabilities to participate and succeed in the same learning environments as their same age peers. Research supports the

benefits of inclusion, demonstrating that including children with disabilities in the same activities and educational settings as their typically-developing peers benefits all children.

Pennsylvania early childhood programs have done a tremendous amount of work over the years to establish inclusive program policies and opportunities for all young children and increase the number of children with disabilities in typical early childhood environments. OCDEL will continue to build on the success of this work to ensure that access to high-quality inclusion is available for all young children and their families.

Meaningfully including all children requires thoughtful planning and partnerships. Many individuals and programs, at both the state and local levels, must partner together to ensure successful inclusive opportunities are available. Partnerships between families and professionals are critical. All families of young children have many insights, perspectives, resources, and experiences to share with those who provide early childhood education to their children. These family insights are especially important when children have disabilities or delayed development. Professionals must draw from the wide array of resources on evidence-based practices to educate and engage families. Families, in turn, need to have positive experiences for their children early on to set affirming expectations for their children throughout life.

Establishing positive relationships with families requires that providers are culturally and linguistically responsive to the children and families they serve. Culture refers to integrated patterns of human behavior that include the language, thoughts, communications, actions, customs, beliefs, values and institutions of racial, ethnic, religious, or social groups. When families are invited to share information about their children and their experiences, providers gain a better understanding of children's cultural and linguistic backgrounds and learning preferences. Cultural and linguistic responsiveness also requires that systems, programs and personnel recognize their own cultures and biases, and work to value differing cultures and languages.

Community partnerships are also an important component in enhancing local, inclusive learning opportunities for all young children. Leaders play a key role in establishing partnerships with their counterparts across agencies within their communities. Sharing program goals and a culture of inclusion to promote shared collaboration for the benefit of all children and families is essential.

OCDEL, with stakeholders, must identify examples of inclusive program policies, structures, and activities in order to provide models for dissemination and replication throughout Pennsylvania. Optimally, these program policies would be evidence-informed and supported by positive outcome data at various levels such as the child, family, classroom, program, community levels. OCDEL must identify and address both facilitators and barriers to ensure all children, families, and staff are supported in achieving the goal of inclusion of all children in OCDEL early childhood programs.

NEXT STEPS:

OCDEL shall take the following steps in order to promote practices that support the inclusion of young children with disabilities in the early childhood programs:

1. Enhance existing OCDEL professional development systems to emphasize inclusion.
2. Provide individualized support, including on-site coaching and consultation to OCDEL funded programs.
3. Enhance social emotional and behavioral supports at the state level.
4. Strengthen accountability and create technical assistance incentive for inclusion.
5. Leverage the Early Learning Council and the State Interagency Coordinating Council for Early Intervention to include a focus on inclusion.
6. Provide written guidelines for implementing this announcement.

Local programs identified in the “Background” section of this announcement shall take the following steps in order to promote and implement practices that support the inclusion of all young children in the early childhood programs within their local communities:

1. In collaboration with program staff and families, develop a program philosophy that emphasizes the benefits of inclusion for all children.
2. In collaboration with program staff and families, develop and implement a written program policy that focuses on actively including young children with disabilities.
3. In collaboration with program staff and families, review and modify existing policies, practices, and procedures to ensure barriers are removed that would prevent including children with disabilities.
4. In collaboration with program staff and families, develop resources for effective communication between families and early childhood program staff to ensure families know the benefits of and their rights related to inclusion.
5. Assess program staff competencies and implement professional development, which includes family perspectives, related to inclusion based on the needs of staff and families.
6. Establish and refine local partnerships with other early childhood programs, families, advocates, practitioners, schools, and community leaders to develop local community plans on the shared responsibility of the learning, participation and belonging of all children.

7. Participate and engage in ongoing opportunities for stakeholder input, professional development opportunities and additional guidance related to the inclusion of all children.

RESOURCES:

PA Keys to Quality Professional Development System and Technical Assistance System https://www.pakeys.org/pages/get.aspx?page=Programs_STARS_PD

Early Intervention Technical Assistance Training Initiatives
<http://www.eita-pa.org/>

The Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center
<http://ectacenter.org/topics/inclusion/default.asp>

REFERENCES:

U.S. Departments of Health and Human Services and Education, (2015). *Policy Statement on Inclusion of Children with Disabilities in Early Childhood Settings*.
<http://www2.ed.gov/policy/speced/guid/earlylearning/joint-statement-full-text.pdf>