

ANNOUNCEMENT

DS-03



Pennsylvania Office of Child Development and Early Learning
Bureau of Certificate Services, Bureau of Policy and Professional Development, Bureau of Early Intervention Services and Family Supports , and Bureau of Operations and Monitoring

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Subject: Inclusion of All Children in Early Childhood Education Programs in Pennsylvania
To: Pennsylvania Early Childhood Education Programs
From: *Tracey Campanini*
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PURPOSE

To provide guidance on strategies that promote inclusion for all children, set an expectation from the Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL) that high-quality early childhood education (ECE) programs are inclusive of children with disabilities, and identifies resources available to local ECE programs. This Announcement provides OCDEL's response to federal policy issued in 2015.

This Announcement and the Announcement on [Reduction of Expulsion and Suspension in Early Childhood Programs in Pennsylvania](#) are intentional companion Announcements authored by OCDEL to support high-quality ECE programs.

BACKGROUND

In September 2015, the U.S. Departments of Health and Human Services (HHS) and Education (ED) released a policy statement recommending states develop policies and practices to increase the inclusion of infants, toddlers, and preschool children with disabilities in high-quality ECE programs.

HHS and ED provide federal funding to a wide variety of Pennsylvania ECE programs and initiatives, including Child Care Works, Child Care Certification, Early Head Start, Head Start, Early Intervention, Home Visiting Programs, and Keystone STARS. This Announcement applies

ANNOUNCEMENT

DS-03



not only to federally funded OCDEL programs, but also state funded programs, including Head Start Supplemental Assistance Program, Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts, and Family Centers (which receive both federal and state funding).

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](#).

“The defining features of inclusion used to identify high-quality ECE programs and services are access, participation, and supports,” as 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).

For the purposes of this Announcement, OCDEL will utilize both aforementioned policy statements for defining inclusion.

In addition, there are many legal foundations for the inclusion of children with disabilities in ECE programs, policy statements related to inclusion, national association position papers on the inclusion of young children with disabilities, 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](#)
- [The Americans with Disabilities Act](#)
- [The Head Start Act and Head Start Performance Standards](#)
- [The Child Care and Development Block Grant Act](#)
- [Pennsylvania Act 212-1990: The Early Intervention Services System Act](#)
- [Pennsylvania Keystone STARS Performance Standards](#)

ANNOUNCEMENT

DS-03



- [PA Keys to Quality Professional Development System and Technical Assistance System](#)
- [Early Intervention Technical Assistance Training Initiatives](#)
- [Pennsylvania Learning Standards for Early Childhood](#)

While ensuring the inclusion of all children, it is also important to recognize equity in our ECE programs. The NAEYC position on equity states: “All children have the right to equitable learning opportunities that help them achieve their full potential as engaged learners and valued members of society. Thus, all early childhood educators have a professional obligation to advance equity. They can do this best when they are effectively supported by the early learning settings in which they work and when they and their wider communities embrace diversity and full inclusion as strengths, uphold fundamental principles of fairness and justice, and work to eliminate structural inequities that limit equitable learning opportunities.”

DISCUSSION

Pennsylvania ECE programs have worked for years to establish inclusive program policies and opportunities for all young children and increase the number of children with disabilities in ECE programs. OCDEL will continue building on the success of this work to ensure access to high-quality inclusive programming is available for all young children and their families.

The first option considered for a child with a disability for the delivering of their Early Intervention services on their Individualized Family Services Plan (IFSP) or Individualized Education Program (IEP) is the regular ECE program and/or natural environment. This means supports and services for children with disabilities are provided within the daily routines and activities of quality ECE programs.

OCDEL monitors the quality of ECE programs through Keystone STARS, Pennsylvania’s Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), which rates programs from 1 to 4 STARS. For children birth to school age, regular ECE programs include OCDEL-certified child care programs, Head Start programs, including Early Head Start, and Pre-K Counts programs. Head Start, Early Head Start, and Pre-K Counts are deemed STAR 4 if they meet their program standards. To see the additional ECE programs deemed STAR 4, please refer to the [“STARS Standards Alternative Pathways to Designation.”](#) OCDEL-certified child care programs all participate in the STARS QRIS. Therefore, all these early learning settings are considered quality ECE programs and the

ANNOUNCEMENT

DS-03



first general educational environment for all children, including children with disabilities. As child care programs move through the STARS rating system, they have identified curricula, progress monitoring requirements, and family engagement frameworks to ensure high-quality programming.

The meaningful inclusion of all children requires thoughtful planning and partnerships at state and local levels, to ensure successful inclusive opportunities. Families of young children are one of those key partnerships. Families have many insights, perspectives, resources, and experiences to share with those who provide an ECE for their children. Family engagement, including providing information about quality ECE program options and supporting families through the decision making process, is integral to ECE practices. Establishing positive relationships with families requires ECE providers are culturally and linguistically responsive to all children and families. Additional information about family engagement can be found in the [Pennsylvania's Family Engagement Birth through College, Career, Community Ready Framework](#).

Community partnerships are also an important component for enhancing local, inclusive learning opportunities for all young children. ECE leaders play a key role in establishing partnerships with their counterparts across agencies within their communities. ECE leaders also set standards and a vision for sharing program goals, a culture of inclusion and promoting shared collaboration.

NEXT STEPS

OCDEL will take the following steps to promote practices that support the inclusion of all young children in ECE programs:

1. In collaboration with and input from stakeholders and families, provide high-quality professional development opportunities through The Pennsylvania Key, Early Learning Resource Centers (ELRC), Professional Development Organizations, and Early Intervention Technical Assistance.
2. Provide individualized support, including on-site coaching and consultation, to OCDEL-funded programs.

ANNOUNCEMENT

DS-03



3. In collaboration with stakeholders and families, identify examples of inclusive program policies, structures, and activities to provide models for dissemination and replication throughout Pennsylvania.
4. Through the ELRC's, identify opportunities for community partnerships to promote inclusion, including partnerships for providing individualized support, professional development and other capacity building resources.
5. Provide support and guidance through ELRCs to assist child care programs to progress in their Keystone STAR level rating.
6. Support child care programs, through the ELRCs, to understand their vital role in supporting inclusion.
7. Recognize quality ECE programs are the general education environment for children with and without disabilities as established in federal guidance and this Announcement.
8. In collaboration with stakeholders and families, provide written guidelines for implementing this Announcement.

Local ECE programs identified in the “Background” section of this Announcement must take the following steps to promote and implement practices that support the inclusion of all young children in the ECE programs within their local communities:

1. In collaboration with program staff and families, develop and implement a written program policy that focuses on actively including young children with disabilities in the ECE programs.
2. 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 in the ECE programs.

ANNOUNCEMENT

DS-03



3. In collaboration with program staff and families, develop resources for effective communication between families and ECE program staff to ensure families know the benefits of and their rights related to inclusion.
4. Assess ECE program staff competencies and implement professional development, which includes family perspectives, related to inclusion based on the needs of staff and families.
5. Seek assistance from ELRCs to identify examples of inclusive program policies, structures, and activities to provide models for dissemination and replication throughout Pennsylvania.
6. Develop and strengthen partnerships between ECE programs and Early Intervention programs so that supports and services for children with disabilities can be provided within the daily routines and activities of quality ECE programs.
7. Participate in ongoing opportunities for stakeholder input and professional development opportunities on additional OCDEL guidance related to the inclusion of all children.
8. Implement this policy in conjunction with the Announcement, Reduction of Expulsion and Suspension in Early Childhood Programs in Pennsylvania.
9. Implement any additional guidance related to the inclusion of all children.

RESOURCES:

[PA Keys to Quality Professional Development System and TA System](#)

[Early Intervention Technical Assistance](#)

[PA's Family Engagement Birth through College, Career, Community Ready Framework.](#)

[The Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center](#)

REFERENCES:

U.S. Departments of Health and Human Services and Education, Policy Statement on Inclusion of Children with Disabilities in Early Childhood Settings (2015).