



# Virginia Guidelines for Early Childhood Inclusion

November 2023



## PREFACE

This guidance document is designed to assist Virginia’s school divisions and early childhood care and education communities in identifying, developing, and sustaining inclusive early childhood programs for children with disabilities. It should be used in conjunction with the [Regulations Governing Special Education Programs for Children with Disabilities in Virginia](#) as well as other guidance documents and resources located in [Appendix A](#).

“Almost 30 years of research and experience has demonstrated that the education of children with disabilities can be made more effective by having high expectations for such children and ensuring their access to the general education curriculum in the regular classroom, to the maximum extent possible.”

*Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004, Section 601*

The location and/or content of the website links may have changed since the publication of this document. Additional information and resources may be accessed by visiting the [VDOE website](#).

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# INTRODUCTION TO THE VIRGINIA GUIDELINES FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD INCLUSION

## Purpose

The purpose of this guidance document is to assist Virginia’s local school divisions and early childhood care and education communities in identifying, developing, and sustaining inclusive high-quality early childhood programs for children with disabilities. This guide addresses system and program related factors that impact the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) and appropriate service provision for two-, three-, and four-year-old preschoolers with disabilities eligible for special education services.

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*There is no longer a question about whether or not to include children with disabilities. The question is how and where to begin. (Devard, 2010)*

## User Guide

This guidance document is presented in three sections to assist users in developing, and sustaining inclusive quality early childhood programs for children with disabilities:

1. Why Inclusion?
2. What is Inclusion?
3. How to Implement Inclusion.

This guidance document may be used in conjunction with the *Improving Inclusive Practices and Outcomes for Preschoolers (IPOP) Manual* developed by the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) and the VDOE’s Training and Technical Assistance Centers (TTACs). The *IPOP Manual* provides a more thorough resource for engaging in systemic change to increase and improve inclusive practices in school divisions’ preschool programs. To learn more about IPOP see the [Preparing for and Sustaining Inclusive Services in Early Childhood](#) section of this document and [Appendix B](#).

Resources referenced in this document in addition to others that promote inclusive opportunities in early childhood and emphasize system and program related factors can be found in [Appendix A](#) at the end of the document. Please visit the [VDOE website](#) and the regional [TTACs website](#) for additional information and support.

## WHY INCLUSION?

Research indicates that high-quality inclusive services benefit preschoolers both with and without disabilities, families, teachers and other early childhood service practitioners, and communities.

### Preschool Defined

Preschool refers to the time before a child is old enough to attend kindergarten or elementary school. In Virginia, a child with a disability whose second birthday falls on or before September 30 is age eligible for special education and related services; therefore, in this document, a preschooler refers to a child two through five inclusive, who is not yet in kindergarten.

A preschool aged child who experiences a disability and is found eligible for special education and related services receives early childhood special education (ECSE). Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) are developed and implemented for those children. A child with an IEP must receive services from an individual qualified to provide specified services. The [Models of Inclusion in Early Childhood](#) section of this document provides information about staffing, classroom configurations, and service delivery.

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*Children with  
disabilities  
are children first.*

### School Readiness

Numerous studies show that children who enter school ready, with key early academic and social-emotional skills, are well poised to succeed in school and beyond. In Virginia, *School Readiness* means preparing all children for kindergarten by focusing on key classroom practices including the use of a high-quality curriculum, teacher-child interactions, individualized professional development, and strengthened family engagement.

The Virginia Kindergarten Readiness Program (VKRP) provides coordinated assessments of young children's school readiness skills. VKRP provides a snapshot of the state's school readiness landscape. Across the years VKRP has been administered, patterns in data show that children identified as having a disability are more likely to be unprepared in four key critical learning domains: literacy, mathematics, social skills, and self-regulation. A high-quality preschool program is critically important for young children with disabilities. For children with disabilities, this means meeting their needs to the maximum extent appropriate in inclusive early childhood programs.

### Rationale

Inclusion in early childhood programs is supported through years of research and reinforced by a strong legal foundation. In a joint policy statement, the U.S. Departments of Health and Human Services (USDHHS) and Education (USDOE) remind us that the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) supports equal educational opportunities for eligible children with disabilities birth through 21. The responsibility to ensure that young

children with disabilities and their families are included in high-quality early childhood programs is shared by federal, state, and local governments, early childhood programs and providers, local educational agencies, and schools. (USDHHS & USDOE, 2023, p.4) According to the policy statement:

- There is scientific evidence demonstrating the benefits of inclusion for both children with and without disabilities, yet data trends indicate inclusive services have remained largely unchanged.
- There is a legal foundation supporting the rights of children with disabilities to access inclusive early childhood programs.
- Building a culture of inclusion for individuals with disabilities begins at birth in early childhood programs and continues into schools, communities, and places of employment. Inclusion in early childhood programs can set a trajectory for inclusion across a lifespan.

## **Benefits of Inclusion**

### *Children with Disabilities*

- Demonstrate positive outcomes when in an environment with same-aged peers (Barton, E.E. & Smith, B.J., 2015)
- Experience greater cognitive and communication development than children with disabilities in separate settings (Green, Terry, & Gallagher, 2014; Nahmias, Kase, & Mandell, 2014; Rafferty, Piscitelli, & Boettcher, 2003).
- Are more socially competent than peers in separate settings. They have more social interactions and a larger network of friends (Katz & Miranda, 2002; Justice, Logan, Lin, & Kaderavek, 2014).

### *Children without Disabilities*

- Can show positive developmental, social-emotional, and attitudinal outcomes in inclusive settings (Diamond & Huang, 2005; (Noggle & Stites, 2017).
- Are capable of demonstrating greater compassion and empathy, and develop a better understanding of human diversity (Maine, McNeil, & Sira, 2018; Odom, et al., 2004).
- Benefit from the learning and developmental supports provided by teachers skilled in meeting the needs of individual students (Odom, Buysse, & Soukakou, 2011).

### *Families*

- Typically view early childhood inclusion positively (Barton & Smith, 2014).
- Desire friendships between children with special needs and peers who are typically-developing (Strain, 2014).
- Enjoy greater connections with other families and community resources and increased participation in their community (Delaware Health and Human Services, 2013).

### Teachers and Other Early Childhood Practitioners

- Partner with colleagues who bring new perspectives and skills into the classroom and demonstrate new instructional techniques (Louisiana Department of Education, 2012).
- Hold higher expectations for children with disabilities (Baglieri & Shapiro, 2012).
- Differentiate and consider each student’s instructional level, learning preferences and interests (Odom et al., 2011; Tomlinson, 2017).
- Agree that inclusive classrooms benefit both children with and without disabilities (Yu & Cho, 2021).
- Facilitate learning environments that reflect and respect the dignity of all children. (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010).

### Communities

- Understand that inclusion is not just a disability issue, but that all children and families have a right to participate in and be supported in their schools and community (Wolery & Odom, 2000).

### Common Misconceptions about Inclusion

- Children with disabilities need specialized classes in order to “get ready” for inclusive settings.  
High-quality inclusive programs “get ready” to serve all children. Preschoolers with disabilities best learn new skills in the settings where they are expected to use them (Barton & Smith, 2014).
- Classroom expectations will be lowered when children with disabilities are included.  
High-quality inclusive programs address the developmental needs of young children both individually and as a part of a group (Odom, et al., 2011). They set challenging and achievable learning goals for every child.
- All preschoolers with disabilities have challenging behaviors. Children without disabilities will learn misbehaviors from them.  
Challenging behaviors occur in children both with and without disabilities. Children without disabilities do not pick up challenging behaviors from children with disabilities, nor does the presence of a disability mean that a child will demonstrate such behavior (Louisiana Department of Education, 2012).
- Most preschoolers with disabilities require one-to-one support.  
Most children with disabilities can participate in preschool programs without one-to-one support (Strain, 2014).  
Some children may require support beyond that provided by one classroom-based teacher and paraprofessional.  
Additional support can be provided using a variety of models and strategies. For example, a second classroom-based paraprofessional may be provided to assist all students in the classroom.

Vivian Paley (1993) saw her students beginning the practice of excluding peers from games and classroom groups. Understanding the long-term liabilities for both the rejected and the rejecter, she posted a new classroom rule:

**“You can’t say you can’t play.”**

Over time, she helped her young students debate the fairness of exclusion ... Even at a young age, they found that it was not possible to simultaneously value and exclude a person or a group. They ultimately understood that if “different” meant you had to be somewhere else, then “different” wasn’t a good thing (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010, p.30).

- Children with more significant support needs should be served in self-contained classes.

Data does not indicate excluding young children with disabilities who need significant supports from inclusive placements (Strain, 2014). Children with intensive support needs can be included successfully and should be placed in more restrictive options only when the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily.

- Because services for children with IEPs may be funded through IDEA, they must be educated solely in special education classrooms.

On the contrary, IDEA requires that children be educated with their peers without disabilities to the maximum extent appropriate. Preschoolers may receive special education services in a wide variety of early childhood settings. Additionally, children with disabilities may be eligible to receive funding for participation in other early childhood programs such as the Virginia Preschool Initiative (VPI) or Head Start. Please see the [Funding Inclusive Services](#) section for more information.

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“Almost 30 years of research and experience has demonstrated that the education of children with disabilities can be made more effective by . . . having high expectations for such children and ensuring their access to the general education curriculum in the regular classroom, to the maximum extent possible.”  
(Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004, Section 601)

### Legal Support for Inclusion in Early Childhood

Just as *Brown v. Board of Education* established that separate was not equal in terms of race, a significant body of law supports equal educational opportunity for children with disabilities. Within Virginia’s schools, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, state law (*Code of Virginia*) and the *Regulations Governing Special Education Programs for Children with Disabilities in Virginia* govern placement for preschoolers with disabilities. For early childhood programs in the community, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the Head Start Act, and the Child Care and Development Block Grant Act (CCDBG) provide support for inclusion.

*The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Code of Virginia, and the Regulations Governing Special Education Programs for Children with Disabilities in Virginia*

In accordance with IDEA, Virginia law and regulations require school divisions responsible for providing a free, appropriate public education (FAPE) to offer a continuum of placement options in order to meet the diverse needs of children with disabilities. This requirement, known as the least restrictive environment (LRE), does not distinguish between school-aged and preschool-aged children. The regulations state:

Least restrictive environment (LRE) means that to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are not disabled, and that special classes, separate schooling or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational



environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily (34 CFR 300.114 through 34 CFR 300.120).

In Virginia, preschoolers (beginning at age 2 by September 30 of the school year) who are eligible for special education and related services are entitled to placement in the LRE alongside their peers without disabilities with supplementary aids and services.

### *Americans with Disabilities Act*

The Americans with Disabilities Act protects individuals from discrimination based upon disability. It creates opportunities for preschoolers with disabilities to attend the same community-based early childhood programs as their peers who are typically developing. The ADA applies to public entities and accommodations including family and center-based child care programs, public or private nursery schools, preschools, Head Start and Early Head Start. In general, children with disabilities are entitled to equal access to programs. Programs cannot create discriminatory eligibility standards to keep children from enrolling. Further, they must make reasonable accommodations to enable children with disabilities to participate in and benefit from the services offered (USDHHS & USDOE, 2015).

### *Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act*

Section 504 prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability in public or private programs that receive federal funds directly or through a grant, loan, or contract. Early childhood programs may not exclude qualified children on the basis of disability, and must ensure that aids, benefits or services are provided in the most integrated setting appropriate to the child's needs (USDHHS & USDOE, 2015).

### *Head Start Act*

Head Start is the nation's largest federally funded early childhood program. Designed to promote school readiness for children from low-income families, Head Start offers comprehensive services including education, health, mental health, dental, nutrition and other services. Head Start and Early Head Start serve children, families, and pregnant women. Children from birth to 36 months are served in Early Head Start, while three-, four- and five-year-olds (until school entry) are served in Head Start. Since 1972, the Head Start Program Performance Standards have required that at least 10% of its enrollment consist of children with disabilities who are eligible for special education and related services under IDEA (USDHHS & USDOE, 2015). The families of children with IEPs must meet the eligibility requirements for age and income, unless the recipient agency is able to implement additional allowances to enroll families with income above current eligibility requirements.

*Dear Colleague Letter on IDEA Services in Head Start and Guidance on Creating an Effective Memorandum of Understanding to Support High-Quality Inclusive Early Childhood Systems*

The U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Head Start authored a Dear Colleague Letter and guidance document. State and local educational agencies and Head Start programs have responsibility to implement IDEA to ensure children with disabilities enrolled in Head Start programs receive a free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment. This is to be a seamless system of early care and education with a coordinated approach to service delivery for infants, toddlers, and preschool children with disabilities and their families. This requires heightened and sustained levels of ongoing collaboration between the early childhood special education programs and Head Start programs (USDOE & USDHHS, 2022).

*Child Care and Development Block Grant Act*

The Child Care and Development Block Grant Act of 2014 mandates that states improve the quality and supply of child care services for preschoolers with disabilities. In addition, states must report on their plans to coordinate child care services with ECSE and early intervention (EI) services (USDHHS & USDOE, 2015).

*Virginia Appropriation Act and the Guidelines for the Virginia Preschool Initiative (VPI)*

The purpose of the VPI is to reduce disparities among young children entering kindergarten and to reduce or eliminate risk factors that lead to early academic failure. The legislative intent of the initiative is to establish a high-quality preschool education program for at-risk 3-year-olds, 4-year-olds, and for at-risk 5-year-olds who are not eligible to attend kindergarten, or who did not have access to a sufficient preschool experience and whose families request preschool as the most appropriate placement. VPI and Mixed Delivery classrooms (see [Mixed Delivery definition](#)) across the Commonwealth have specific requirements to include children with disabilities.

Children with disabilities or delays who are eligible for special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, regardless of household income are eligible for VPI. This eligibility applies to students aged 3- or 4-years-old on September 30 (5-year-olds are permitted under certain conditions). All VPI programs are expected to be inclusive of children with disabilities. Specifically, programs shall meet or exceed a target inclusion rate, such that 10 percent of all children participating in the VPI are children with disabilities.

## WHAT IS INCLUSION?

### Inclusion in Early Childhood Defined

The VDOE supports the definition of inclusion provided by the USDHHS and USDOE. Inclusion in early childhood programs is:

- 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, facilitated by individualized accommodations; and
- using evidence-based services and supports to foster their development, friendships with peers, and sense of belonging.

This applies to all young children with disabilities, from those with the mildest need, to those with the most significant need.

This definition builds on a vision for early childhood inclusion set forth by the Council for Exceptional Children's Division for Early Childhood (DEC) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) in their joint position statement.

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 (DEC & NAEYC, 2009, p.1).

### Inclusive Classrooms

The federal Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) and the VDOE define inclusive classrooms as those meeting the definition of a regular early childhood program. Per OSEP regular early childhood programs are those that include a majority (at least 50 percent) of children without IEPs. However, to produce the desired social and instructional outcomes for all the children in the classroom, there must be a sufficient number of peer models to enhance engagement, provide interaction, and develop friendships.

### Defining Features of Inclusion in Early Childhood

Inclusion in early childhood must involve effective, high-quality inclusion opportunities where children with disabilities belong as equal members. In their 2009 joint position statement, DEC and NAEYC describe the defining features of inclusion that may be used to identify and develop high-quality early childhood programs and services: access, participation, and supports.

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*It is not enough for children with disabilities to be present in an early childhood program. Inclusion is not just about access. It is about children with disabilities belonging as equal members of the classroom community with the accommodations and/or modifications necessary to ensure their full and active participation with typically developing peers.*

*(DEC & NAEYC, 2009)*

*All young children with disabilities should have access to high-quality inclusive early childhood programs that provide individualized and appropriate support so they can fully participate alongside their peers without disabilities, meet high expectations, and achieve their full potential. (USDHHS & USDOE, 2023)*

### Access

Access means providing a wide range of activities and environments for every child by removing barriers and offering multiple ways to promote learning and development. Often, simple changes such as rearranging classroom furniture to accommodate a child in a wheelchair result in increased access.

### Participation

Even when children have physical access to learning environments, they likely will need additional individualized accommodations and supports to fully participate in play and other learning activities with peers and adults. Adults intentionally use a range of instructional approaches to promote belonging, **participation** and engagement. For example, a child with autism may transition from activity to activity more readily if the daily classroom schedule is in pictorial form. A child with a hearing impairment will benefit more from story time when seated close to the teacher who is reading.

### Supports

In addition to access and participation, research demonstrates that a strong foundation of systems-level **supports** is necessary to achieve high-quality inclusion of children with disabilities. Effective inclusion results from ongoing professional development for staff members; well defined policies and procedures; and time for regular team meetings of teachers, assistants, therapists and families.



## Why Inclusion in Early Childhood is Unique

While the LRE requirement in IDEA is the same for eligible students of any age, providing inclusive services at the preschool level is unique. Preschool inclusion differs from inclusive placements and practices in grades K-12 for the reasons listed below.

- Early childhood programs that offer opportunities for inclusion are less readily available than for K-12 students.
- Programs may differ based on the child’s age, particularly for two- and three-year-olds.
- Programs for preschoolers may be in settings outside of the public schools (e.g., Head Start, child care, community preschool programs).
- In early childhood settings wide-variability exists in teacher training, education, and expertise which may impact program quality.
- Many early childhood programs have distinctive teacher-child ratios and class size requirements that must be met.

- The curriculum in early childhood programs differs from the educational curriculum for older children. In early childhood, learning is a balance of child-initiated, teacher-facilitated, and teacher-directed activities and focuses on all developmental domains (communication, language and literacy, cognition, approaches to play and learning, health and physical, and social and emotional development) as opposed to the traditional K-12 curriculum which is academically oriented and teacher directed.
- There is less developmental discrepancy between young children with disabilities and their typically developing peers (Wolery & Odom, 2000). A four-year-old with a 25% delay is functioning like a three-year-old—a one year difference. At twelve years, a 25% difference in functioning is a difference of three years.

### Contexts for Inclusion in Early Childhood

The resources available in public school divisions and communities vary; thus, localities may offer inclusive early childhood services administered by any of the following:

- public schools,
- Head Start, or
- community-based entities.

Figure 1 provides examples of early childhood programs that may be offered within each of these three contexts. Preschoolers with IEPs may attend and receive their special education services within any of these early childhood programs.

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*The goal for children with disabilities and their peers without disabilities is to learn together in a setting that meets the developmental and learning needs of all the children.*

### Figure 1. Contexts for Inclusive Opportunities

#### Public School Programs

- Virginia Preschool Initiative (VPI)
- Preschool funded by Title 1
- Preschool funded by local funds
- Head Start operated by the public school
- Occupational child care programs

#### Head Start

- Head Start/Early Head Start operated by a community agency

#### Community-Based Entities

- Private for-profit preschool
- Private not-for-profit preschool
- Child care
- Virginia Early Childhood Foundation Mixed Delivery Program
- Community-based play groups
- Department of Defense Child Development Programs

Early childhood programs provided in the public school may not be the only context for inclusion of young children with IEPs. Early Head Start, Head Start and other community-based entities are viable options to be considered for preschool inclusion for several reasons:

- not all school divisions provide preschool classes for typically developing children, particularly two- and three-year-olds;
- programs outside of the public school may provide a more appropriate placement for some children with IEPs; and/or
- some children may be successfully participating in community-based programs prior to their eligibility for special education so may benefit from continuing in this regular educational environment and receiving their special education services there.

Brief descriptions of these programs follow. The eligibility and admission criteria vary considerably. Some programs require families to meet conditions related to income or other risk factors; however, a child with an IEP who does not meet the criteria may still be placed and receive services in this setting with careful accounting and braiding of funds. Please see the [Funding Inclusive Services](#) section for more information.

#### *Virginia Preschool Initiative*

VPI is a program for three- and four-year-old children who are at-risk for early academic failure and are not currently receiving services through Head Start. Costs are shared by local and state governments with state funds appropriated by the Virginia General Assembly. Children without an IEP are eligible primarily based on family income. Children with an IEP are eligible to enroll in VPI classrooms regardless of family income level. VPI services may be provided in a public-school setting or a private for-profit or not-for-profit community-based setting.

All VPI programs are expected to be inclusive of children with disabilities. Specifically, programs are required to meet or exceed a General Assembly target inclusion rate, so that 10 percent of all children participating in VPI are children with disabilities.

#### *Virginia Early Childhood Foundation Mixed Delivery*

The Virginia Early Childhood Foundation (VECF) administers the Mixed Delivery Preschool Grants funded by the Virginia General Assembly. The grants support public-private preschool delivery and permit communities to field-test strategies to overcome barriers that have prevented all eligible children from participating in the VPI. Families of children with disabilities are encouraged to apply. To learn more visit [VECF's Mixed Delivery Preschool Grant Program website](#).

#### *Preschool Funded by Title 1 Preschool Programs*

Federal Title 1 funds may be used to support preschool programs in public schools with a high percentage of children from low-income families. Title 1 funding may be used to serve preschoolers at risk of failing to meet the state's academic achievement standards.

### *Preschool Funded by Local Funds*

Local funds may be provided to deliver preschool programs in the public school. Eligibility criteria and admission requirements are determined by the locality.

### *Occupational Child Care Programs*

Some Virginia school divisions offer occupational child care programs to prepare high school students for entry-level positions in child care. These programs offer a laboratory training component providing high school students with hands-on experiences with young children. Eligibility criteria and admission requirements are determined by the locality.

### *Head Start and Early Head Start*

Head Start and Early Head Start are federally funded, comprehensive child development programs that serve children from birth to school entry at age five, pregnant women, and families. Early Head Start serves children from birth to 36 months, while Head Start serves children from three to five. Both programs focus on increasing school readiness for young children in low-income families. At least 10% of children enrolled are to be children with disabilities. Head Start may be administered by a public school or a community-based agency or organization. Eligibility criteria are primarily based on family income levels. Head Start may be provided in a public-school setting or a private for-profit or not-for-profit community-based setting.

### *Community-Based Preschool Programs and Child Care Centers and Family Day Homes*

Preschool programs, child care facilities, and family day homes are provided in many communities throughout Virginia. The programs are administered by private providers. Tuition fees apply and vary considerably across programs.

### *Community-Based Play Groups*

Some communities may have available organized play groups that provide the opportunity for young children and their families to engage in a play-based, social environment. Play groups are administered by a community-based agency or organization. Tuition fees may apply.

### *Department of Defense Child Development Programs*

Some Virginia military installations include child development centers which offer care to children of service members and Department of Defense civilian employees.

## **Accountability**

The U.S. Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) requires states to submit data regarding implementation of IDEA. States are required to evaluate their performance and make improvements annually. This requires states to submit a State Performance Plan (SPP) that includes baseline data, targets, and improvement activities for many data indicators. The annual performance on

this plan is reported through the Annual Performance Report (APR). While there are many data indicators collected and reported, states submit data regarding where preschoolers with IEPs are placed and receive their special education services. Known as Indicator 6, these data are collected as a part of the annual December 1 Special Education Child Count from school divisions and State Operated Programs in Virginia. Indicator 6 documents:

- The percentage of children, three through five years of age, who attend:
  - a. a regular early childhood program and receive the majority of special education and related services in the regular early childhood program;
  - b. a separate special education class, separate school, or residential facility; and
  - c. the home.

For Indicator 6a, for a child to be reported here and considered to be included, two criteria must be met. First, the child is to attend the classroom which means he or she is a member of the program and intentional teaching (either direct or embedded instruction) and promotion of the child's interaction with children without disabilities takes place. Second, the majority of the special education and related services are delivered in the inclusive setting, rather than pulling the child out for delivery.

In Virginia, children with a disability whose second birthday falls on or before September 30 are age-eligible for special education and related services. Placement data on two-year-olds is collected as well but is not reported to OSEP.

OSEP defines a regular early childhood program as one where at least 50% of the children are typically developing. OSEP's expectation is that states will increase the number of children who attend a regular early childhood program and receive the majority of special education and related services in the regular early childhood program and will decrease the number of students attending a separate special education class, separate school, or residential facility. Likewise, the VDOE has this same expectation for school divisions. To learn more about Virginia's SPP and APR visit the [VDOE website](#).





## HOW TO IMPLEMENT INCLUSION

### **Inclusion in Early Childhood and the Individualized Education Program Process**

The IEP process for preschool children is very similar to the process for students in grades kindergarten through 12 (K-12). IEP teams, including a child’s parents, follow a sequential process when developing an IEP. The child’s present level of academic achievement and functional performance is developed. For preschoolers, this includes how the disability affects the child’s participation in age-appropriate activities. From this statement, annual goals are written. The IEP team considers these goals as they determine services and placement.

There are a number of settings in which children may be placed and receive their special education and related services: home, separate classrooms, separate schools, residential settings, service provider location, and/or a regular early childhood program. It is the responsibility of the IEP team to consider the continuum of placement options and determine the setting appropriate for the individual child. When determining the child’s placement, it is important to remember that no single model for service delivery to any specific population or category of children with disabilities is acceptable. This determination is to be based on the needs of the child — not what placements are readily available.

The LRE requirements under Part B of IDEA support the education of children with disabilities in regular classes alongside their typically developing peers. As described in the policy statement by the USDHHS and USDOE (2015, p. 1), this is a regular early childhood program that provides “early care and education to children birth through age five, where the majority of the children are typically developing.” Children considered to be typically developing are those not identified as having a disability and who do not have an IEP.

Before a preschooler can be placed outside the regular early childhood program, the IEP team must consider whether supplementary aids and services could be provided that would enable the education of the child to be achieved satisfactorily. If the IEP team determines that the nature or severity of the disability is such that this cannot be achieved, then the child could be placed in a setting other than the regular educational setting. Therefore, when the IEP team is determining placement options, it is important that the team considers the regular early childhood classroom and determines what accommodations, modifications, and supplementary aids and services are needed for the child’s success as a first priority.

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*A preschool child with a disability who is eligible to receive special education and related services and his or her parents are entitled to all the rights and protections guaranteed under Part B of IDEA. One of these guaranteed rights is the right to be educated in the least restrictive environment. (USDOE, 2017)*

## Models of Inclusion in Early Childhood

Special education and related services can be implemented in a variety of settings where preschoolers with disabilities are included with preschoolers without disabilities. Considerations for staffing, classroom configurations, and service delivery include the following:

- guidelines for class size and staffing standards in the early childhood program (see [Virginia’s Inclusion Class Size Information](#));
- regulations for the caseload for the ECSE teacher and paraprofessional;
- requirements for teacher licensure in each program;
- physical space in the classroom;
- students’ ages;
- other factors impacting teaching and learning such as children experiencing homelessness or those learning both English and their home language; and
- the needs of the children, individually and as a group. The class composition must ensure that all children’s needs are met and that a high-quality program can be provided. All decisions should be based on the individual classroom and the needs of all children including the unique needs of children with disabilities.

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*Special education  
is a service or set of  
services and not a  
place.  
(Center for Early  
Learning Professionals,  
2015)*

There are a number of classroom configurations and considerations for providing special education and related services in inclusive settings. Below is a list of common models with examples from Virginia school divisions. Each model requires collaboration among professionals and paraprofessionals, including related service providers. Collaboration is defined in the [Regulations Governing Special Education Programs for Children with Disabilities in Virginia](#) as, “Interaction among professionals as they work toward a common goal” (VDOE, 2010, p. 2). Each model requires consideration of how team members from different disciplines will work together to plan and implement an appropriate educational program for the child with an IEP.

### *Individual Teacher Model*

In this program model, one teacher has a classroom of children both with and without IEPs. The teacher is licensed and dually endorsed in ECSE and either early childhood for three- and four-year-olds (add-on endorsement), early/primary education PreK-3, or elementary education PreK-6 (all three endorsements collectively are referred to as PreK endorsed in this document). The teacher is skilled in meeting the needs of both groups of children. Careful consideration is given to the class size/caseload and the number of children with IEPs, including the level of support required.

- One dually endorsed teacher and two paraprofessionals serve 12 four-year-olds. All 12 preschoolers are VPI students; four of the children have IEPs and receive special education services. Two of the children with an IEP have significant support needs.
- A dually endorsed teacher and one paraprofessional serve 18 preschoolers in Head Start in a Virginia public school program. Three of the children have IEPs.

- A dually endorsed teacher and one paraprofessional serve 12 three-year-olds in a preschool classroom supported by local funds. Two of the children have IEPs and receive special education services. One of the children has significant support needs.

### Reverse Inclusion

In an ECSE classroom operated by school division special education personnel, typically-developing children are recruited to attend the preschool program so that children can learn together in an inclusive environment. This option provides a way for children with disabilities to accrue the benefits provided by having peers without disabilities as role models when quality early childhood settings are not available.

To qualify as a regular early childhood classroom, at least 50% of the children are to be typically developing; however, to produce the desired social and instructional outcomes for all the children in the classroom, there must be a sufficient number of peer models to enhance engagement, provide interaction, and develop friendships. Providing only a few children without disabilities may not result in the same opportunity for growth and development. Further, it is important for the peer models to attend the program on a regular basis, at least several days per week.

Implementation of this model is subject to the rules of the local education agency (LEA). The local school board attorney should be consulted prior to development of policies and procedures and implementation of this arrangement. Consideration must be given to establishment of a nondiscriminatory application and selection process to identify the peer models.

- A teacher endorsed in ECSE teaches a class of three-year-olds. One paraprofessional is assigned to the teacher. There are five students with IEPs, with one having significant support needs. Five children from the community are identified through a lottery process and attend the early childhood special education program to serve as peer models.
- A teacher endorsed in ECSE teaches four-year-old students. There are six students with IEPs, with two having significant support needs. Seven children from the community attend the program to serve as peer models. Two paraprofessionals are assigned to the teacher.

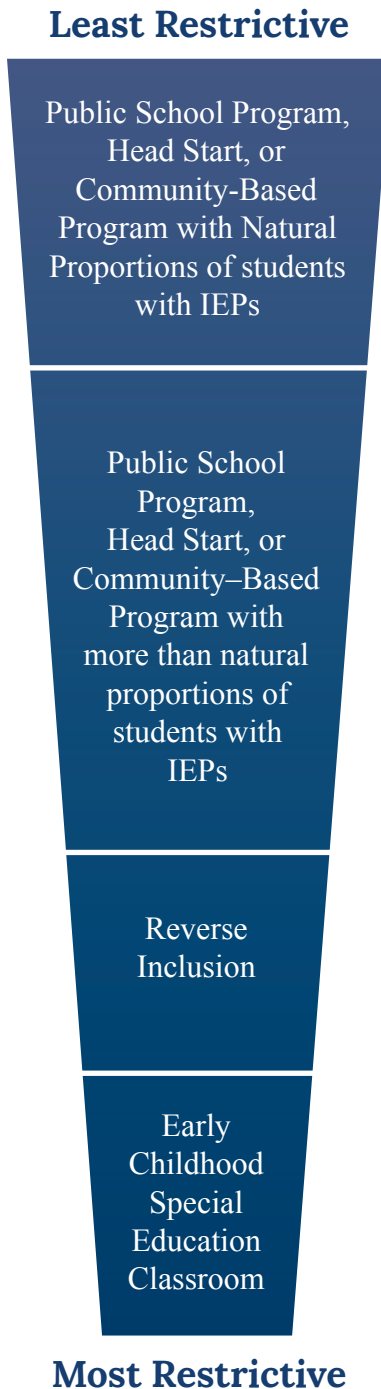
### Co-Teaching Model of Collaboration

In this model, a PreK teacher and an ECSE teacher share responsibility and combine their expertise to meet the need of all children in the classroom. The ECSE teacher may be in the classroom for all or some of the school day. The goal is for both teachers to share equally in the implementation of the educational program, including implementation of children's IEPs, thus co-teaching approaches are utilized.

- A VPI classroom of 18 preschoolers includes six children with IEPs. An ECSE teacher and a PreK teacher both support the classroom all day. There is one paraprofessional assigned to the classroom.

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*All decisions should be based on the individual classroom and the needs of all children including the unique needs of the children with disabilities.*

Figure 2:  
Least Restrictive to  
Most Restrictive Setting



- Eight children with IEPs are enrolled in two Head Start program classrooms that are co-located. An ECSE teacher and a paraprofessional are located full-time at the program and split their time between the two classes. One of them is in each classroom at all times.

### *Itinerant Model of Collaboration*

In an itinerant model, an ECSE endorsed teacher travels between classrooms or programs to consult with and coach PreK endorsed teachers and provide direct services to individual children as needed. The itinerant teacher’s focus is on building the knowledge and skills of the PreK endorsed teacher and teaching assistant so embedded instruction can be delivered across the school day. The ECSE teacher may serve a caseload of up to 12 students.

- Three-year-old children are enrolled full-time in a variety of early childhood settings in the community including Head Start and two community-based preschool programs. The ECSE teacher serves eight to 12 children depending on the number of hours of direct and consultative support services that are specified on the children’s IEPs. The teacher travels from program to program to provide direct support as needed and to consult with the PreK teachers and paraprofessionals.
- One public school program enrolls 12 children with IEPs full-time in five VPI classrooms. One ECSE teacher and three paraprofessionals provide support to these sites. ECSE paraprofessionals are based full-time in three of the classrooms where children who have significant support needs are enrolled and provide support to all children with IEPs in the classroom. The ECSE teacher travels from class to class to provide direct services as needed and consult with the PreK teachers and paraprofessionals.

### **Measuring Quality of Inclusive Programs**

#### *Quality Improvement*

To maximize their potential, all of Virginia’s young children need the opportunity to access early childhood experiences in public and private settings that support them to grow, learn and thrive. Research has identified many short- and long-term benefits of early learning experiences. These positive effects are larger, and more likely to be sustained, when programs are high-quality.

Virginia has established, as required by Code of Virginia, a unified quality rating and improvement system for all publicly funded birth-to-five providers including early childhood special education services provided by school divisions. This system is formally named Virginia Quality Birth-5 (VQB5).

Virginia selected two nationally recognized quality standard measurements, Interactions and Curriculum, to measure quality and inform improvement as a part of the VQB5 system.

- Interactions - This standard measures the quality of teacher-child interactions and instruction in a developmentally-appropriate way, and

is evaluated by the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS™). All children benefit socially and academically from being in classrooms with high-quality teacher-child interactions, including children from diverse settings, dual language learners (DLLs) and children with disabilities. The CLASS™ Toddler is for children ages 15-36 months and CLASS™ PreK is for children ages 3-5.

- The CLASS™ is the most researched and validated observation measure of early childhood teaching and classroom quality. Over [200 published studies](#) show that students who attend classrooms with higher CLASS™ scores have better social and academic outcomes.
- All children benefit socially and academically from being in classrooms with high quality teacher-child interactions as measured by CLASS™, including classrooms and family day homes with diverse populations: Dual Language Learners (DLL), children from migrant families, tribal communities, children with special needs and children from diverse cultural backgrounds. (Teachstone®, 2021)
- Interactions, when measured by CLASS™, promote incremental improvement that motivates educators at every level in the system. CLASS™ provides actionable feedback for every classroom and can be used with all educators, regardless of background, setting or credential.
- Curriculum - This standard measures the use of a comprehensive curriculum in alignment with Virginia's [Early Learning and Development Standards: Birth-Five Learning Guidelines](#) to ensure that all areas of learning and development are being covered in developmentally appropriate ways. Curriculum should support interactions, learning experiences, and learning materials that support responsive early learning experiences for all children and families. Curricula implemented in Virginia's early childhood care and education programs must be approved by the VDOE and must meet standards for high-quality.

VDOE-approved curricula are comprehensive, integrated and aligned to the Virginia's [Early Learning and Developmental Standards](#) among other [baseline criteria for quality early childhood curriculum](#). These are inclusive of criteria specific to children with disabilities:

- **Individualization for Children with Disabilities, Suspected Delays, or other Special Needs:** The curriculum provides guidance on how to individualize for children with disabilities, suspected delays, or other special needs.
- **Individualization Based on Interests, Strengths, and Needs:** The curriculum offers guidance on how to individualize based on children's interests, strengths, and needs.

To learn more about VQB5 visit the Virginia Department of Education’s [Quality Measurement and Improvement website](#).

### *Inclusive Classroom Profile (ICP™)*

The Inclusive Classroom Profile (ICP™) is a comprehensive, field-tested observational tool for inclusive classrooms serving children ages 2–5. It assesses 12 key practices with the strongest research base for supporting the education and development of children with disabilities in inclusive settings. Ratings indicate the extent to which classroom practices intentionally adapt the classroom’s environment, activities and instructional support in ways that encourage access and active participation in the group, through adjustments that might differ from child to child.

The ICP may be used to assess the quality of classroom practice in inclusive settings by program administrators and practitioners who want to improve the quality of inclusive practices. Results can then be used to inform models of professional development that can support those involved in meeting the individualized needs of children with disabilities in inclusive settings.

The ICP complements the Pre-K CLASS™ by providing a more in-depth look at the strategies that support young children with disabilities in inclusive settings. For more information see the following correlation documents:

- [Correlation Between the ICP and Pre-K CLASS Pre-K](#); and
- [Correlation Between the ICP and Toddler CLASS](#).



## Funding Inclusive Services in Early Childhood

Allocation of resources to fund inclusive services is an important consideration. In the past, local education agencies used most of their financial resources to support self-contained classrooms for preschoolers with IEPs. This practice, however, has been modified to support inclusion. Research reported in the *Preschool Inclusion Finance Toolkit 2018* documents that inclusive preschool models can be less expensive for school divisions than segregated models.

The special education and related services named in a child’s IEP may be funded through a variety of sources. The IDEA Part B provides general special education funds (Section 611) and preschool specific funds (Section 619). The State Education Agency (SEA) provides funding appropriated by the Virginia General Assembly. Further, LEAs may contribute funds. In some situations, special education funds may be used to pay for all costs associated with the child’s education in a regular early childhood program. For example, if a public-school division does not have a preschool program, then the division may contract with a community-based private preschool and use special education funds to pay for tuition in addition to the special education services. In other situations, the special education funds may be used to pay only for the special education and related services. For example, when a child is placed in a VPI classroom, the special education funds only support the supplemental special education services.

As noted in the [Contexts for Inclusion](#) section, early childhood inclusion may be in (a) public schools, (b) Head Start, or (c) community-based entities. Regardless of the context for inclusion, collaboration across programs is required since the program funding sources, regulations, and accountability requirements vary considerably. Collaboration will require creation of funding agreements where programs clearly define the agreed upon costs each funding source will pay to support the program.

When funds from two or more programs or funding sources pay a portion of the total classroom cost, it is done through braided funding. The term *braided* is used when multiple funding streams or sources support an inclusive classroom. The funding streams are used to create a high-quality inclusive classroom for all children while simultaneously maintaining careful accounting procedures to address the requirements for each source.

When different funding streams are braided together to create one program, the requirements for each must be met. The allocation and accounting of funds must match the intended purpose of the funding source without duplication. Funds must only be used for the allowable costs, as defined by the funding source at federal, state and/or local levels, as appropriate.

The following strategies from the *Preschool Inclusion Finance Toolkit 2018* describe how two or more programs may braid funds. Examples are provided. When braiding funds, it is important to consult the school division’s finance office and those knowledgeable of funding requirements.

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*In a study of the costs of inclusive programs, “lower costs [were] associated with more inclusive programs across public schools, community and Head Start programs. Furthermore, the inclusive models were less expensive for school districts than segregated models.” (Barton & Smith, 2014, p. 5)*

### Cost Sharing

Cost sharing occurs when each funding source contributes a specific dollar amount to an inclusive program. The contribution of each program may be equivalent to each program's cost per child or another agreed upon amount.

With cost sharing, there are two considerations for the child with an IEP: (a) when a child with an IEP is eligible and enrolled in the program, special education funds would not pay the cost per child, but pay only the excess costs of supplemental special education services required, (b) when a child with an IEP is not eligible for the program (e.g., family is over income), special education funds may be used to pay the cost per child in addition to the excess costs of supplemental special education services required.

- A school division serves 18 VPI eligible students in a single classroom. Two of the students have IEPs. The total cost per child is determined and that amount is charged to VPI funds. The total cost for the special education and related services is calculated. That amount is charged to special education funds.
- A school division serves eight VPI and four Head Start students in a single classroom. There are also four children with IEPs who are not eligible for Head Start. The classroom has a PreK endorsed teacher and two paraprofessionals. An ECSE teacher provides itinerant services for the children with IEPs in collaboration with the classroom teacher. The cost for the classroom is calculated then divided by the number of children. Special education funds pay one fourth of the classroom cost and for any additional supplemental special education services required, including the cost of the ECSE teacher.

### Specific Cost Funding

Specific cost funding occurs when the commitment of funds is made for expenses or functions within a program by a specific fund source, according to guidelines of each source. Each source agrees to pay a specific cost rather than paying a portion of the total operating expenses.

- A school division serves 18 VPI and 18 Head Start students in two classrooms. Four of these children have IEPs. Each classroom has a PreK endorsed teacher and a paraprofessional. An ECSE teacher provides itinerant services. Head Start funds a teacher and a paraprofessional. VPI funds one teacher and paraprofessional. Special education funds pay for the supplemental special education services required, including the cost of the ECSE teacher.
- A dually endorsed teacher and paraprofessional support a Head Start classroom of three-year-old children. There are three children who have IEPs and significant support needs. An additional paraprofessional ensures the participation and engagement of the three children with IEPs and is paid for with special education funds.

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*The term braided is used when multiple funding streams or sources support an inclusive classroom.*



- A VPI classroom of 18 preschoolers includes six children with IEPs. An ECSE teacher and a PreK teacher both support the classroom all day. There is one paraprofessional assigned to the classroom. Special education funds pay for the ECSE teacher.

### *In-kind Sharing*

In-kind sharing is payment in the form of goods, resources, or cash outlays that are not directly charged to a program.

- A school division creates a contract with a community-based private preschool. The school division provides a physical classroom for the private preschool. In exchange, the private preschool provides five slots for children with IEPs.

### *Funded Enrollment*

Funded enrollment is the use of special education funds to pay for an individual child's placement including enrollment or tuition costs.

- A school division uses special education funds to pay tuition to a community-based private preschool. Additionally, these funds are used to support an ECSE teacher providing itinerant services.



## Characteristics of Inclusive Schools

Over the last 30 years, essential characteristics exhibited by schools that successfully implement inclusive practices have been identified. Figure 3 provides a list of the characteristics repeatedly recognized. These characteristics are also outlined in the *Enhancing Inclusive Practices for Students with More Significant Academic and Behavior Needs (PK-12) Resource Guide* and are included here because they are critical to expanding and improving inclusive early childhood programs.

### Figure 3. Characteristics of Inclusive Schools

- The school community (school personnel, families, students) has a common understanding of disability and inclusive education, creating a culture that values openness, acceptance, respect, equality, collaboration, and a celebration of diversity.
- Democratic schooling is the core of a school's approach to planning, instruction, learning, and discipline. Self-determination skills are valued and promoted, with the expectation that both school personnel and students are responsible for the welfare of the school.
- Leaders (administrators/teacher leaders) within the school are change agents, valuing inclusion and taking an active and accountable role in creating an inclusive climate that is collaborative, open, and supportive of risk-taking, building a professional learning community within the school.
- Teachers and support personnel have accountable and collaborative roles, frequently within non-traditional teaching arrangements (e.g., co-teaching, itinerant), that maximize student success through the implementation of an engaging, challenging, and age-appropriate curriculum.
- Instruction is engaging, evidence-based, and data driven, using the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), differentiation, and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) to teach academic and social/behavioral skills to all students. Accommodations, modifications, technology, and an array of related services are incorporated within the general education setting to meet the learning and social/emotional/physical needs of students.
- Students are taught to be self-determined and are held to high expectations for learning defined through clearly outlined educational outcomes. Student learning experiences are flexible, authentic, meaningful, accessible, and developmentally appropriate.

*Source: Ryndak, Jackson, & Billingsley, 2000; Janney & Snell, 2013; Kluth, 2017; Kurth, Lyon & Shogren, 2015; Villa & Thousand, 2003; 2016*

## Preparing for and Sustaining Inclusive Services in Early Childhood

The changes necessary to prepare for, implement, and sustain high-quality inclusive practices in early childhood require systemic planning. To increase the quantity and quality of inclusion for preschool children with IEPs, the Virginia Department of Education has developed Improving Inclusive Practices and Outcomes for Preschoolers (IPOP). IPOP outlines a systems-change approach and is designed to help Virginia’s school divisions meet federal and state mandates requiring young children with disabilities to be educated in the LRE, as well as to implement the evidence-based practices that lead to developmental and educational gains for all children. IPOP was developed by the VDOE’s TTACs. The *Improving Inclusive Practices and Outcomes for Preschoolers Manual* provides a planning guide and accompanying resources to support school divisions in providing high-quality inclusive practices at the preschool level. The manual outlines the steps which may be taken to plan for and initiate or expand high-quality inclusive programs for preschoolers within a local school division.

The IPOP planning steps were developed over years of literature review, implementation, evaluation, and revision with stakeholders. They include professional development, policy and procedural changes, and administrative practices that are necessary to implement and sustain high-quality inclusive service delivery. All of the IPOP planning steps can be found in [Appendix B](#). In this section, many of the steps are provided along with a short description. These steps will prepare teams to investigate preschool inclusive opportunities and develop a plan of action.

As with any new initiative, it is important to first determine where the division is now regarding inclusion in early childhood. Prior to implementing the steps below, review division-level data and determine:

- the number/percentage of children placed in regular early childhood programs;
- the number/percentage of children placed in regular early childhood programs and receiving special education and related services in these programs;
- the type of inclusive opportunities available for children with IEPs in the school division, Head Start, and the community;
- the staff available across programs; and
- the number of children who will be eligible for ECSE services in the upcoming school year and their ages.

Additionally, it will be beneficial to disaggregate the data by age. A thorough understanding of the school division’s data as well as the division and communities’ strengths, needs, and assets is essential for identifying, developing, and sustaining inclusive opportunities within high-quality early childhood programs.

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*Equal opportunity is one of America’s most cherished ideals. Being fully included as a member of society is the first step to equal opportunities throughout life and is every person’s right—a right supported by our laws (USDHHS & USDOE, 2023)*

*Step 1. Form an early childhood inclusive practice planning team.*

The first step in planning for inclusive practices is to form a team of representatives from all groups of key stakeholders, including teachers and families, who can make recommendations regarding increasing and improving inclusive programs and develop and carry out a plan of action. Participation of teachers and family members is essential. At a minimum, a team should also consist of:

- an administrator who can commit to the process of expanding and sustaining inclusive opportunities (this includes a person who has policy and funding knowledge and authority)
- a school division leader who acts as the program administrator for ECSE programs, and
- a school division or local agency leader who acts as the program coordinator for Early Childhood (e.g., Virginia Preschool Initiative, Head Start, Title I).

*Step 2. Educate the team about inclusive practices.*

Beginning a quality inclusive preschool program is a challenging task that involves change. For changes to be implemented system wide, team members must not only understand their local strengths, needs, and assets, but must have a strong belief in the value of inclusion. It will be beneficial for the team to develop a vision.

*Step 3. Visit high-quality inclusive early childhood programs.*

A picture is worth a thousand words. Seeing inclusive practices in action is a critical step in planning. By visiting different programs offered by other school divisions, team members will gain perspective of potential placement options.

*Step 4. Increase and improve inclusive early childhood programs.*

Following visits to quality sites with inclusive practices, the team will determine potential high-quality inclusive placement opportunities to best meet the diverse needs of children and families in the school division.

- Identify potential high-quality early childhood sites offered within the school division (e.g., Title I, VPI).
- Identify any potential community-based sites.
- Determine if additional inclusive sites are needed and if reverse inclusion may be appropriate to offer.
- Make recommendations regarding inclusive placement opportunities to initiate.

*Step 5. Gain administrative support for the proposed plan.*

The next step is to draft a proposed plan to increase and improve inclusive programs. The team will present the proposed plan to school division leadership for approval and support. Once approval is granted, the team will further outline steps to address barriers, identify solutions, and ensure the success and longevity of the program.

*Step 6. Identify barriers and solutions to initiating approved inclusive placement opportunities.*

It will be important to determine the current attitudes and beliefs around inclusion of general and special education early childhood teachers as sometimes, this can be a barrier that needs to be addressed immediately. Identify any other barriers that may exist (e.g., transportation) as well as any strengths that will lead to success (e.g., co-located VPI and ECSE classrooms).

*Step 7. Review and determine current staff structures.*

Identify the current staffing that exists across programs and positions to support inclusion, including staff licensure. Determine what additional competencies or endorsements may be needed.

*Step 8. Determine onboarding activities to implement high-quality inclusive placements.*

Implementing inclusive programs will involve much consideration. Consider:

- Improving the IEP team process for making LRE decisions.
- How to educate families on the value of inclusion.
- How to introduce new initiatives and/or pilots to teachers, staff, and families.
- Providing a system for joint professional development between early childhood staff in early childhood programs.
- Developing a model for evaluating classrooms and providing internal coaching.

To provide high-quality inclusive early childhood programs, this guidance document should be used in conjunction with the *Inclusive Placement Opportunities for Preschooler Manual*. Additionally, the VDOE's TTACs offer support in planning for, implementing, and evaluating inclusive early childhood services. Please visit the [VDOE website](#) and the regional [TTACs website](#) for additional information and support.

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## APPENDIX A

### Resources

Below are resources referenced in this document in addition to others that promote inclusive opportunities in early childhood and address system and program related factors.

#### State Resources

##### [Improving Inclusive Practices and Outcomes for Preschoolers \(IPOP\) Manual](#)

IPOP is developed by the VDOE's Early Childhood Special Education Network and is a systems approach to increasing the quantity and quality of inclusion for preschool students with IEPs. It provides a planning guide and accompanying resources to support school divisions' preschool programs in implementing inclusive practices across the Commonwealth.

##### [Virginia Department of Education, Early Childhood Standards, Curriculum & Instruction](#)

The VDOE website provides information and links to resources on topics related to standards, curriculum, and instruction for early childhood care and education settings. Virginia's new standards Virginia's Early Learning and Development Standards (ELDS), Birth-Five Learning Guidelines are posted on this website.

##### [Virginia Department of Education's Training and Technical Assistance Centers](#)

There are seven TTACs that support professionals who teach students with disabilities across the eight Regions in the Commonwealth of Virginia. The TTACs provide training and technical assistance.

##### [Leadership in Effective and Developmentally-appropriate Services \(LEADS\) Indicator 6 Topic Page](#)

This website supports the Virginia Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) leaders responsible for administrative oversight of local ECSE programs. The primary focus is to provide consistent information statewide to improve the collection, reporting, and use of ECSE indicator data; and connect, support, and empower local leaders to build capacity and provide high-quality programs and services throughout the state for young children ages two-five years with IEPs.

## National Resources

### [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Education Policy Statement on Inclusion of Children with Disabilities in Early Childhood Programs](#)

In November 2023, the USDOE and the USDHHS issued a joint policy statement on promoting inclusion in early childhood programs to set a vision on this issue and provide recommendations to States, local educational agencies (LEAs), schools, and public and private early childhood programs.

### [Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center Inclusion in Least Restrictive Environments Topic Page](#)

The Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center (ECTA) provides a number of resources to support early childhood inclusion. Tools include documents related to developing policy and guidance; strategies for collaborative funding, including braided funding, and self-assessments.

### [Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center Inclusion Finance Toolkit 2018](#)

This document outlines strategies and guidance on collaborative funding strategies and mechanisms, including braided funding, to create and sustain high-quality inclusive regular early childhood settings that are inclusive of preschool children with disabilities.

## Other Resources

### **The Preschool Inclusion Toolbox: How to Build and Lead a High-Quality Program** by Erin E. Barton and Barbara J. Smith (2015). Available from [Brookes Publishing Co.](#)

This how-to book and supporting materials are for administrators, school district leaders, child care directors, and faculty and provide a step-by-step process to improve early childhood inclusion through systems-level change.

### ***First Steps to Preschool Inclusion: How to Jumpstart your Program-wide Plan*** by Sarika S. Gupta with William R. Henninger, IV and Megan E. Vinh (2014). Available from [Brookes Publishing Co.](#)

This introductory guide provides information to improve inclusive opportunities in early childhood and provides strategies to motivate staff and get critical buy-in.

## APPENDIX B

### **Improving Inclusive Practices and Outcomes for Preschoolers (IPOP) Planning Steps**

1. Form an inclusion planning team.
2. Educate the team about inclusive practices.
3. Visit quality Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programs with inclusive practices.
4. Expand inclusive placement opportunities.
5. Gain administrative support for proposed plan.
6. Identify barriers and solutions to initiating approved inclusive placement opportunities.
7. Recommend job revisions and develop sample roles and responsibilities descriptions to use for staff selection.
8. Share information about the inclusive placement opportunity, elicit concerns, and gain support from key stakeholders.
9. Develop a philosophy and goals for the inclusive practices.
10. Provide ways for ECSE, ECCE, and related service staff to learn about each other's programs.
11. Plan for and conduct a series of in-service training sessions on recommended practices.
12. Develop contracts (if applicable) and policies to support the philosophy and goals for the inclusive placement opportunity.
13. Develop and use a process for making individualized placement decisions in the least restrictive environment.
14. Plan for and conduct ongoing evaluations and use results for program improvement.
15. Recommend orientation activities to begin the inclusive placement opportunities.
16. Sustain and expand inclusive opportunities.

### *STEP 1: Form an inclusive practice planning team*

The first step in planning for inclusion is to form a team of representatives from all groups of key stakeholders who could be affected by early childhood inclusive programming (e.g., families, teachers, administrators) in order to make recommendations regarding inclusive placement opportunities that the school division could offer and conduct the necessary planning steps to provide these options.

- Determine the procedures within your school division for forming a team and obtain permission from school division administrators.
  - Prepare written materials regarding the purpose of forming a team, the rationale for and benefits of preschool inclusive programming, and the steps the team will take to plan for the practices.
  - Make a formal presentation to the school board or schedule an informal meeting with your superintendent.
- Obtain approval to appoint members to serve on the planning team.
- Once approval is obtained, develop a list of potential representatives (e.g., Head Start, Title I preschool programs, Virginia Preschool Initiative, family day home child care providers, community-based programs). It is strongly recommended that an administrator be included on the inclusive practices planning team.
- Determine what method to use to invite key stakeholders to the first meeting.
- Select and use a structured collaborative team meeting process; identify monthly meeting times.

### *STEP 2: Educate the team about inclusive practices*

Beginning a quality inclusive preschool program is a challenging task that embraces the process of change. In order for the changes to be implemented system-wide, team members must not only have a strong belief in the value of inclusive practices but also understand the significance of their involvement on the team. Team members must understand and acknowledge the importance of planning for program(s) with inclusive practices and be willing to learn about and endorse recommended inclusive practices in early childhood programs.

- Review the rationale behind preschool inclusive practices, including educational, philosophical, legal, and cost effectiveness research.
- Provide an overview of the planning steps and the team's purpose.
- Review the potential placement opportunities for preschoolers.
- Review recommended practice guidelines for use in inclusive early childhood programs that merge recommended ECSE and early childhood education practices.
- Review information about the process of change and the specific organizational and programmatic changes required to develop inclusive practice option(s) for preschoolers.

- ❑ Conduct a needs assessment with staff to gain consensus about potential changes.
- ❑ Determine how many stakeholders are willing to be active team members now that they have a better understanding of their potential role.

### *STEP 3: Visit quality inclusive early childhood programs*

A picture is worth a thousand words. Seeing inclusive practices in action is a critical step in planning. By visiting different programs offered by other school divisions, team members will gain perspective of potential placement opportunities.

- ❑ Select a variety of programs with inclusive practices to visit and determine which team members will visit which program.
- ❑ Schedule and observe classrooms and team meetings and ask program participants to identify the benefits of the program as well as the challenges they encountered and how they addressed these.
- ❑ Collect written program materials (e.g., program descriptions, contracts or interagency agreements, job descriptions).
- ❑ During a regularly scheduled team meeting, ask team members to describe the programs they visited.

### *STEP 4: Expand inclusive placement opportunities*

Following visits to quality sites with inclusive practices, the team will determine potential inclusive placement opportunities to best meet the diverse needs of children and families in the school division.

- ❑ Identify potential early childhood sites offered within the school division (e.g., Title I, VPI, Head Start).
- ❑ Identify any potential community-based sites.
- ❑ Determine if additional inclusive sites are needed and if reverse inclusion may be appropriate to offer.
- ❑ Decide how to contact potential sites to determine their receptivity to collaboration.
- ❑ Decide how to determine the quality of the interested sites.
  - Consider visiting early childhood programs in the area, talking personally with program directors, and using an observation guide to assess program quality.
  - Consider limiting contacts of programs to only those that are accredited by the NAEYC National Academy of Early Childhood Programs or are part of the Virginia Quality initiative (VQ).
  - Consider conducting a survey or using a Request for Proposal process to identify interested sites that meet specific standards of quality set by your locality.
- ❑ Observe programs to rate program quality and collect specific program

information.

- Determine the number of children who will be eligible for ECSE services in the upcoming school year.
- Contact families to determine interest in and share information about *potential* inclusive placements (e.g., letter, survey, home visit, phone call). Decide which team members will make these contacts.
- Develop a matrix of support.
- Make recommendations regarding inclusive placement opportunities to initiate next year. Recommendations for the long-range plan for inclusive practices should be incorporated into the school system's long-range plan.

#### *STEP 5: Gain administrative support for proposed plan*

The next step is to obtain administrative approval and support to provide inclusive placement opportunities for preschoolers with disabilities.

- Determine your LEA's existing procedures to obtain approval to initiate new or expanded programs. Tailor the following tasks to fit these procedures.
- Request time to meet with administrators and revised proposed inclusion plan.
- Prepare the overview of the summary that will be presented to the administrators.
- Identify administrators' questions and concerns and take them back to the full planning team to develop solutions.
- Share your team's next planning steps upon approval of the proposal, including expanding the team, if needed, to include representatives from additional collaborating ECCE programs.

Once your team has gained administrative approval to begin your recommended options, there are ten additional steps to complete concurrently as you continue planning. Review these next steps and their associated tasks during regularly scheduled team meetings. Prioritize the order in which they will be completed based on your local needs and concerns.

#### *STEP 6: Identify barriers and solutions to initiating approved inclusive placement opportunities*

To avoid possible roadblocks to inclusion, it is important to address the team's concerns about the placement opportunities before the concerns become realities.

- Identify questions/issues/barriers about initiating the approved placement opportunities and prioritize the most urgent barriers to resolve first.
- Brainstorm solutions for each prioritized question/issue/barrier.
- Reach consensus on solution(s) for each question/barrier/issue.



- Discuss issues and potential solutions in more detail as you decide which solutions to implement.
- Contact stakeholders who are not part of the team to gather more information prior to selecting solutions.
- Continue to identify questions/concerns/barriers from the team as well as all participants in the inclusive program and bring to subsequent team meetings to resolve.

*STEP 7: Recommend job revisions and develop sample roles and responsibilities description to use for staff selection*

In order to identify the most qualified, appropriate, and interested staff to serve children in the new placement sites, develop or modify job descriptions to include the duties associated with the new inclusive practices.

- Ask appropriate administrators what procedures to follow to make changes to job descriptions and obtain permission for the team to make recommendations regarding job revisions.
- Gather current direct service staff job descriptions and modify as needed based on the staff roles and responsibilities required in the inclusive placement. Elicit suggestions about job revisions from the staff who may work in the inclusive program.
- Develop a description of the roles and responsibilities and include general specifications (e.g., flexibility, an ability to work cooperatively with other adults, etc.) as well as specific criteria for each staff position (e.g., competency in using a push in, integrated therapy approach for related service staff).
- Develop sample job announcements, letters eliciting staff interest in inclusive practices, and sample interview questions.
- Share recommended job descriptions and the sample roles and responsibilities description with person(s) within your school division and with collaborating ECCE administrators (if applicable) responsible for hiring/selecting staff.
- Share the revised job description with interested staff. Encourage them to visit an inclusive program like the one you plan to initiate.
- Interview appropriate personnel and select the most qualified staff.

*STEP 8: Share information about the inclusive placement opportunities, elicit concerns, and gain support from key stakeholders*

It is important to identify and address stakeholder concerns prior to beginning the placement(s).

- Generate a list of stakeholders in need of information about the inclusive practices opportunities and select method(s) for sharing information (e.g., individual or group meetings, phone calls, written information, videos).
- Determine what information to share (e.g., the rationale and benefits for inclusive practices, a description of the option, etc.), identify person(s) responsible, and set deadlines for accomplishing these tasks.
- Designate team representatives to contact stakeholders to share information about the placements with inclusive practices, elicit concerns, and gain support for the option(s).
- Address all stakeholder concerns in regular team meetings. It is important to share information regarding all actions taken to address particular concerns.

*STEP 9: Develop a philosophy and goals for the inclusive opportunities*

Having a shared vision will guide the team as they make future decisions.

- Determine how to develop a philosophy statement and goals.
  - Involve representatives from all stakeholder groups in the development of the philosophy and goals.
  - Include the development of a philosophy statement and goals as an agenda item for team meetings that occur prior to initiating the inclusive placement option(s).
- Invite all families, staff, and administrators who are directly involved in the placement option to these meetings to provide input.
- Use the philosophy and goals during team meetings to guide decisions, develop/revise policies, and inform activities.
- Refine the philosophy and goals, if needed, following the completion of in-service training and firsthand experiences with inclusive practices.
- Use the refined philosophy and goals to develop collaborative agreements or contracts, revise policies (if needed), and make future decisions about the inclusive placement opportunities.

*STEP 10: Provide ways for ECSE, early childhood care and education, and related service staff to learn about each other's programs and practices*

In order to foster collaboration among staff in programs getting ready to implement inclusive practices, it is critical for staff to learn about each other's practices. Once staff understands each other's practices, they can decide how these practices can complement each other to provide the best services for all children.

- Identify important practices for the programs' staff to learn. Ask those regularly involved in the classroom, such as the early childhood and ECSE teachers and paraprofessional, related service staff, and volunteers, to identify what they want to learn about each other's practices and what they feel is important to share about their practices.
- Recommend ways for staff to learn about each other's programs.
- Ask staff to identify preferred methods of learning and identify team members responsible for collecting this information.

*STEP 11: Plan for and conduct a series of in-service training sessions on recommended practices*

Training on how early childhood and ECSE practices may be used in complement will furnish staff with a common foundation regarding quality early childhood programs with inclusive practices.

- Identify who will be involved in the inclusive program and participate in in-service training.
- Select methods to identify in-service training needs, preferred times/ locations for training, and preferred training methods. Assign persons responsible for collecting this information:
  - Conduct a needs assessment and/or a self-study related to implementation of recommended practices.
  - Generate a list of potential training methods (e.g., workshops, videotapes, reading).
- Select topics for training and variety of training methods based on the results of a needs assessment or self-study. Contact your regional TTAC for training materials related to inclusive practices or use the training modules included in this manual.
- Prepare for follow-up technical assistance to assist staff in applying the information presented at in-service training. Identify persons responsible for facilitating these activities.
  - Consider using checklists, peer coaches, and/or mentors to assist with implementation.
  - Schedule regular team meetings for staff to discuss classroom issues and encourage use of in-service training materials to select strategies and solutions to issues.

*STEP 12: Develop contract(s), if applicable, and policies to support the philosophy and goals for the inclusive placement opportunities*

Establishing policies to support the inclusive placement opportunities will clarify the responsibilities of the ECSE and collaborating early childhood program (if applicable) staff and administrators.

- Identify appropriate procedures to use to develop/revise contracts and policies. Obtain permission to do so.
- Develop a formal contract (if applicable) between the collaborating program(s) specifying each program's responsibilities related to accomplishing the philosophy and goals.
- Obtain approval for the agreement or contract from LEA and early childhood officials as needed (e.g., the superintendent, director of special education, school board, school attorney, early childhood director).

*STEP 13: Develop and use a process for making individualized placement decisions in the least restrictive environment*

It is important to develop a process for IEP committees to use to make individualized placement decisions in the LRE.

- Develop written guidelines for IEP teams to use to make placement decisions in the LRE.
- Gain approval for the use of this decision-making process in IEP team meetings.
- Determine strategies to use if more children qualify for the program than the number of spaces that are available:
  - Pilot the option in one geographical area of the division and provide access to children who live in that area.
  - Give priority of placement based on child and family needs (e.g., those families needing full day care would have the priority of placement in a day care setting).
  - Explain this dilemma to families and involve them in developing creative solutions. Inform them of the team's goal to develop additional options so all children will be served in the least restrictive environment.

*STEP 14: Plan for and conduct ongoing evaluations and use results for program improvement*

Programs are most successful when ongoing improvements are based on informed decisions.

- Determine the overall evaluation purpose. Ask families, staff, and administrators what information they would like to have about the program's impact.
- Identify evaluation participants.

- Select evaluation methods and instruments (e.g., interviews, questionnaires, cost-benefit analyses, standardized tests, portfolios, etc.) and assign staff to collect or develop them.
- Select staff or ask college/university students to conduct evaluation activities.
- Develop an evaluation timeline.
- Conduct evaluation activities and summarize evaluation results. Use the results to make program improvements and to provide feedback to program participants.

*STEP 15: Recommend orientation activities to begin the inclusive placement opportunities*

Orientation activities may be helpful for children with disabilities and their families at the onset of the new placement opportunities.

- Determine what information to share about the children with disabilities (e.g., children's strengths, preferences, use of adaptive equipment, etc.) prior to their beginning the program, when it will be disseminated, and who will do this.
- Share information with early childhood staff about the children with disabilities.
- Develop guidelines to facilitate ongoing communication among families, staff, and administration in the programs.
- Recommend pre-enrollment activities to facilitate a smooth transition to the inclusive opportunity (e.g., family and child visits the program).

*STEP 16: Sustain and expand inclusive opportunities*

- A systemic plan exists for the consistent continuation of the inclusive opportunities.
- A process is in place to guide new administrators and teachers in policies and procedures related to inclusive opportunities.
- Program procedures and policies handbook is updated as needed.
- Job descriptions are updated as necessary to reflect roles related to inclusive practices.
- Joint in-service training continues.
- A process is in place that systematically expands the inclusive placement options.



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