



# EXPANDING INCLUSIVE LEARNING

FOR CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES:  
WHAT WE KNOW, WHAT WE DON'T KNOW,  
AND WHAT WE SHOULD DO ABOUT IT

START WITH EQUITY: FROM THE  
EARLY YEARS TO THE EARLY GRADES  
DATA, RESEARCH, AND AN ACTIONABLE  
CHILD EQUITY POLICY AGENDA

CHILDREN'S EQUITY  
PROJECT

  
Bipartisan Policy Center

# EXPANDING INCLUSIVE LEARNING

## FOR CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES: WHAT WE KNOW, WHAT WE DON'T KNOW, AND WHAT WE SHOULD DO ABOUT IT

This policy brief reviews the data, research, and policy landscapes of the inclusion of children with disabilities in general learning settings, and provides a robust policy agenda to expand access to such opportunities.

This is part of a broader effort launched in 2019 by the Children's Equity Project and the Bipartisan Policy Center with support from the Heising Simons Foundation to better understand the equity data, research, and policy landscapes in learning systems across three key policy areas: discipline, inclusion, and dual language learning. This effort brought together over 70 experts to discuss the state of these issues across the United States and culminated in a report titled, [\*Start with Equity: From the Early Years to the Early Grades\*](#). The full report provides a policy roadmap for building more equitable learning systems.

The consequential nature of both the early years and the early grades cannot be ignored. Early learning experiences in these years can have long-lasting, life-changing effects on children. Unfortunately, data and research clearly indicate that the systems charged with providing those experiences are not living up to their promise. All our children have the right to reach their full potential. To do that, the learning systems that serve them must remove obstacles and expand opportunity equitably.

Although this brief and the more extensive report were completed before COVID-19 reached our shores, the social vulnerabilities exposed and exacerbated by this pandemic make it especially important to prioritize equity in learning and to align policy with research now. More

than ever, our country and the world are dependent on the next generation thriving. Nationwide protests in response to the murder of George Floyd and systemic racism, make it clear that the American people will accept nothing less.

## WHAT WE LEARNED

Since the passage of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) nearly 50 years ago, federal law has been clear: All eligible school-aged children with disabilities are guaranteed a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment.

### **Inclusion of children with disabilities works.**

Children with disabilities in high-quality, inclusive early learning programs make larger gains in their cognitive, communicative, and social-emotional development than their peers with disabilities in segregated settings.<sup>1</sup>

**Despite a robust foundation that is both legal and evidence-based, progress has been slow.** The number of children receiving educational services in inclusive settings has not substantially increased in decades. This is especially true in the preschool years: Data shows the number of children with disabilities ages 3 to 5 who received special education services in inclusive settings has only inched up by about 5% since the 1980s. Today, **more than half of preschoolers with disabilities still receive their services in segregated settings.**<sup>2</sup>

**Public Pre-K is an underused lever to increase inclusion.** States with strong public Pre-K systems should have a higher percentage of children with disabilities receiving services in inclusive early learning settings, given the greater number of slots. However, our analysis found that access to Pre-K in states was not proportionally related to the number of children with disabilities receiving services in inclusive settings.

**States' efforts to increase inclusion for school-aged children with disabilities have been minimal.**

- States with the highest rates of enrolling school-aged children with disabilities in regular classes are Alabama, Nebraska, Vermont, Colorado, Indiana, and Florida.
- States with the lowest rates of school-aged children with disabilities in inclusive classes include Hawaii, New Jersey, New Mexico, Montana, Arkansas, and Maine.

**There are large disparities when it comes to who gets access to inclusive learning.** Children with certain disability categories are less likely to be served in inclusive settings.

Only 14% of children identified with multiple disabilities, 17% of children identified with intellectual disabilities, and less than half of children with emotional disturbances spend the majority of the day in regular classes, compared to about two-thirds of all other children with disabilities.

In preschool special education, younger children are the least likely to receive their services in inclusive settings.

**There is an overrepresentation of Black children in special education but not in early intervention or preschool special education. This is particularly disturbing given the established benefits of early intervention to long-term outcomes.**

**Inclusion of young children with disabilities works. But despite a robust foundation of evidence and legal precedent, progress has been slow.**

## Key Facts: Inclusion of Young

### Children with Disabilities

- ✓ States with the **highest rates** of providing services to preschool children with disabilities in regular early childhood programs are **Colorado, Nebraska, Wyoming, Vermont, Ohio, Connecticut, and Kentucky.**
- ✓ States with the **lowest rates** of providing preschool children with services in inclusive settings are **Louisiana, Alaska, South Dakota, Washington, and Idaho.**
- ✓ In 13 states, the percentage of children of color served in inclusive settings is lower than the average state inclusion rate. Those states include **Idaho, Ohio, Mississippi, Virginia, Indiana, New Hampshire, Texas, Connecticut, Alaska, Missouri, New Jersey, and Kentucky.**

Black children are at least twice as likely to be identified with an intellectual disability or emotional disturbance than all other racial/ethnic groups combined; and children with these disabilities are most likely to be segregated from their classmates with other disabilities. In some places, the result is segregated special education placements that tend to mirror racial segregation patterns of the past.<sup>3</sup>

Other major barriers to inclusion include ableism, which affects teacher and administrator attitudes and beliefs around inclusion; educator training to guide the use of practices that support inclusion; and the need for meaningful state reforms and funding increases.<sup>4</sup>

# SOLUTIONS BEGIN WITH POLICY CHANGE.

## CONGRESS SHOULD:

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- Request Government Accountability (GAO) reports to examine
    - a. the true cost of providing sufficient and high-quality services to children with disabilities in inclusive settings;
    - b. the effects of IDEA underfunding on inclusion placements and practices, and on children’s outcomes and development; and
    - c. federal, state, and local implementation of the significant disproportionality regulation.
  - Fully fund its portion of IDEA and increase funding for Parts C and D to ensure that monitoring, technical assistance, and professional development efforts are robust enough to implement the law, especially the provisions of the law concerning inclusion.
  - Give the U.S. Department of Education (ED) authority to hold states accountable for funding their share of IDEA services, in line with findings from the GAO report referenced above.
- Change ED’s definition of “regular early childhood program” to programs that have “natural proportions” of children with and without disabilities.
  - Disaggregate ED’s IDEA data collection for Part B 619 by system so that kindergarten data can be examined separate from preschool data.
  - Incentivize inclusion through all ED and HHS federal grants, including the Preschool Development Grants, by awarding more points to states that propose meaningful, structural inclusion reforms.
  - Encourage states to invest child care quality set aside funding to support inclusion.
  - Use IDEA Part D funds to incentivize states to develop, test, and scale coaching and itinerant teaching models.
  - Use ED technical assistance centers to provide more training, including regional trainings, on personnel models that enable inclusion.
  - Incentivize, monitor, and enforce coordination efforts between child care, early intervention, and special education preschool programs in both ED and HHS.
  - Release joint ED-HHS guidance to states to reiterate the importance of including children in the general early childhood system, as opposed to creating and maintaining dated parallel and segregated systems of learning.
  - Require that all state reported data, for every indicator, are disaggregated by race, ethnicity, and English learner status.
  - ED should submit an annual report to Congress, states, and the public on implementation of the Equity in IDEA regulation that includes state status and progress on racial disproportionality in identification, placement and discipline of children with disabilities.

## FEDERAL AGENCIES SHOULD:

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- Include the least restrictive environment—in both preschool and K-12—as a factor for determinations in monitoring by ED.
- Form a partnership between the Health and Human Services (HHS) and Justice Departments to ensure that early childhood programs are informed about Americans with Disabilities Act requirements, supported in ensuring compliance, and held accountable for violations.

## STATES SHOULD:

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- Monitor districts on adherence to the least restrictive environment provision of IDEA in preschool and in K-12, and develop accountability structures tied to funding, accompanied by the provision of technical assistance, to remediate deficiencies.
- Ensure individual education and individual family service plan teams are trained and held accountable for making high quality inclusive placement decisions, aligned with the natural and least restrictive environment provisions in the law.
- Align early learning systems with the Head Start Program Performance Standard that requires 10% of enrolled children have disabilities or delays.
- Encourage Parent Training Information Centers to prioritize inclusion.
- Use existing infrastructure to build and deploy inclusion teams that work at the community level to expand inclusive learning. Teams should prioritize communities with high rates of segregated learning and work with them to adjust funding approaches, staffing structures, and personnel training, in addition to connecting public and private child care settings to expand inclusive slots.
- Review and confirm that all written early childhood state policies have inclusion of children with disabilities throughout, including quality rating improvement systems, early learning guidelines, Pre-K standards, state child care subsidy policy, early care and education licensing standards, and early childhood personnel standards and credentialing/certification.
- Ensure that all early childhood coaches—including quality, behavior, and inclusion coaches—are trained in inclusion practices and work explicitly to advance the success of children with disabilities in inclusive settings.
- Assess all programs on inclusion practices as a part of classroom quality monitoring and include results in accountability frameworks.
- Use federal funding, such as Title I or child care quality funds, to transition self-contained classrooms to inclusive classrooms across systems.

## DISTRICTS/LOCAL COMMUNITIES SHOULD:

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- Make meaningful reforms to expand access to inclusive learning for children with disabilities, including
  - a. restructuring budgets;
  - b. modifying staffing structures to shift to co-teaching;
  - c. developing formal agreements with high-quality community-based early childhood programs;
  - d. training IEP teams on IDEA and the expectation of least restrictive environment placements;
  - e. providing joint training opportunities for early childhood and elementary school teachers, early interventionists, and special educators; and
  - f. conducting internal reviews to ensure that the least restrictive environment is always the first option considered, and that segregated settings are never the default.

**Read the full report and complete equity policy agenda [here](#).**

# ENDNOTES

- 1 Guralnick, M. J. (2001). A developmental systems model for early intervention. *Infants and Young Children*, 14(2), 1-18; National Professional Development Center on Inclusion. (2011). Research synthesis points on quality inclusive practices. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, FPG Child Development Institute, Author; Strain, P. S., Bovey, E. H., Wilson, K., & Roybal, R. (2009). LEAP preschool: Lessons learned over 28 years of inclusive services for young children with autism. *Young Exceptional Children Monograph Series No*, 11, 49-68; Wolery, M., & Wilbers, J. S. (1994). Introduction to the inclusion of young children with special needs in early childhood programs. *Including children with special needs in early childhood programs*, 6, 1-22.
- 2 Individuals with Disabilities Act, Section 618 Data Collection. <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/osepidea/618-data/index.html>
- 3 Artiles, A. J., Harry, B., Reschly, D. J., & Chinn, P. C. (2002). Over-identification of students of color in special education: A critical overview. *Multicultural perspectives*, 4(1), 3-10; Fierros, E. G., Conroy, J. W., Losen, D., & Orfield, G. (2002). Racial inequity in special education; Oswald, D. P., Coutinho, M. J., & Best, A. M. (2002). Community and school predictors of overrepresentation of minority children in special education. *Racial inequity in special education*, 1-13; Skiba, R. J., Poloni-Staudinger, L., Gallini, S., Simmons, A. B., & Feggins-Azziz, R. (2006). Disparate access: The disproportionality of African American students with disabilities across educational environments. *Exceptional Children*, 72(4), 411-42.
- 4 Avramidis, E., & Norwich, B. (2002). Teachers' attitudes towards integration/inclusion: a review of the literature. *European journal of special needs education*, 17(2), 129-147; Forlin, C., Jobling, A., & Carroll, A. (2001). Preservice teachers' discomfort levels toward people with disabilities. *The Journal of International Special Needs Education*, 4, 32-38; Shippen, M. E., Crites, S. A., Houchins, D. E., Ramsey, M. L., & Simon, M. (2005). Preservice teachers' perceptions of including students with disabilities. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, 28(2), 92-99.