



CREATING AN INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENT: BIRTH TO FIVE

“She excelled in our class, made many friends, and taught us more than we taught her.” –
Ashley’s teacher, classroom of 3 to 4-1/2 year olds¹⁰

“Inclusion is a right, not a special privilege for a select few.” – *Federal Court, Oberti v. Board of Education*

policy brief

“Early childhood inclusion embodies the values, policies, and practices that support the right on 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 desire results of inclusive experiences for children with and without disabilities and their families include a sense of belonging and membership, positive social relationships and friendships, and development and learning to reach their full potential. The defining features of inclusion that can be used to identify high quality early childhood programs and services are access, participation, and support.”
DEC/NAEYC, 2009

Missouri’s Special Education Profile

In 2012, Missouri had approximately 120,000 students, grades K-12, receiving special education services, and approximately 11,500 students (ages 3-PK) were eligible to receive early childhood special education services⁹. Thirty-two percent of children ages 3-5 receiving special education services were placed in separate classrooms or schools in 2012⁹.

Benefits of inclusion for children, families, and communities

“Inclusion communicates something more than “integration”. It means people participating in families, schools, classrooms, work places, and community life.” – TASH Newsletter (June, 1990)

Inclusion positively impacts all children of all abilities. Some of these benefits include^{1,2,7}:

Children
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrate gains in early learning skills, social skills, self-regulation, language development, and cognition • Age appropriate skills and behaviors are modeled by typically developing peers • Typically developing children experience increased learning opportunity • Typically developing children have friends with different abilities, which helps them interact better with all peer. • A sense of belonging for every child

Families
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learn more about child development • Opportunity to teach children about individual differences • Access to education • Feel a sense of belonging to their society • Opportunity to visit with other families experiencing similar challenges and share concerns and desires for their children • Increase parent participation

Community
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Become more aware, accepting, and supportive of all people • Increase value of diversity • Increase in diversity leading to more opportunities, possibilities and participation • Support adults with disabilities better prepare for responsibilities and opportunities in life • Reduce fear of human differences, accompanied by increased comfort

A Glance at Other States

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires states to establish procedures for ensuring that children with disabilities are educated, to the maximum extent possible, with children who do not have disabilities; suggesting a preference for inclusion⁶. At the state level when considering policy changes appropriate for Missouri, it is necessary to review our existing position and explore how other states have addressed the issue of inclusion or steps taken to establish an inclusive environment. Missouri does not have explicit language or policies regarding inclusion, but does broadly suggest inclusive environments for young children. Below are a few policies other states have adopted related to inclusion^{2,11,12}:

Missouri	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young children with disabilities should participate with non-disabled peers in community and school settings. • When possible, early intervention services are provided in settings in which children without disabilities participate.
Pennsylvania	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inclusion guidelines recognize, "inclusion is not defined as a location where services are provided; it is active participation with supports and everyone benefits from inclusion."
New Jersey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Pre-K regulations mandate teaching supports to facilitate inclusion." • Guidelines recommend districts provide certification for inclusion specialists.
Kentucky	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Makes no distinction between Pre-K programs serving children with and without disabilities. • Programs must be "designed to include and meet the needs of children across a wide range of abilities in an inclusive setting."
Georgia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One of their state programs "employ an Inclusion Coordinator who works closely with the Department of Education's Division of Exceptional Students to ensure that Pre-K children with special needs receive appropriate services."

Policy Recommendations^{2,3,5}

- ∅ Create and disseminate an explicit policy of inclusivity, with the purpose of promoting acceptance of inclusive practices. Pennsylvania has such guidelines that include a comprehensive philosophy of inclusion. Other states that have created inclusion policies include Nebraska and West Virginia.
- ∅ Encourage blending of funding streams to provide more comprehensive services to all children. Both Kansas and Kentucky attempt comprehensive inclusivity by combining children and resources and making no distinction between children with and without disabilities.
- ∅ Promote an integrated system of high quality professional development to support the inclusion of young children with and without disabilities and their families. Professional development efforts should focus on the specific intervention and instructional approaches that have been validated through research and have been found effective at addressing the needs of diverse learners. Support should also be provided to assist professionals in using such approaches.
- ∅ Influence state accountability systems. Consensus on the meaning of inclusion could influence state accountability standards related to increasing the number of children with disabilities enrolled in inclusive programs. Currently, states are required to report annually to the US Department of Education the number of children with disabilities who are participating in inclusive early childhood programs. A shared definition of inclusion could be used to revise accountability systems to address both the need to increase the number of children with disabilities who receive inclusive services and the goal of improving the quality and outcomes associated with inclusion.

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