

FAQs from Inclusion Essentials Question and Answer Session
 Amanda Schwartz, University of Maryland
 June 18



Question: How do you get started with creating and implementing a shared vision for inclusion? How do you bring people together and break down long-standing silos?

Answer:

Reflecting on what you have already done can often be the best way to begin. It helps build on what is already done and understand what might work best for your state or territory. As you reflect on previous work, think about:

- Roles and responsibilities related to inclusive practices including, but also beyond, government agencies, such as:
 - higher education, and
 - organizations within your state, such as your state’s subdivision of Division of Early Childhood of the Council of Exceptional Children.

Think about people that aren't normally at the table or don't know they should be at the table, like:

- family members,
- family child care providers, and
- health providers.
 - Pediatricians often screen and identify kids with disabilities through well child visits. They are accessible through the state chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics (<https://www.aap.org/en/community/chapter-websites/>).
 - Awareness of the guidance offered to families by pediatricians can help ensure children are properly screened, evaluated, and served in a collaborative way. Connecting to the state Bright Futures initiatives (<https://www.aap.org/en/practice-management/bright-futures/bright-futures-in-states-and-communities/>) can help broaden the reach of inclusive strategies and increase access for families.

Below are some resources to assist with identifying interested parties and conducting strategic planning:

Weaving Connections: <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/video/weaving-connections-health-services-advisory-committee>

While specific to Health Services Advisory Committee's in Head Start and Early Head Start, Weaving Connections offers important lessons about bringing a diverse group of people together to braid their work in meaningful, action-oriented ways. Offers a way to work smarter, not harder to create a vision together and build a plan off work that’s already in place without replicating each other’s work.

Community Toolbox: <https://ctb.ku.edu/en/toolkits>

A set of tools from University of Kansas on performing community-based strategic planning; contains useful, actionable tools to analyze plans and develop frameworks or models. This is useful when you get your partners together to think about how to work together and what kind of resources to bring to the collaborative work.

This model features a linking agent who cares and manages the change process. Unclear here, is this a model or tool, what is a linking agent?

Havelock’s Model of Change: <https://changeagentsguide.com/> and <https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/book/guiding-change-special-education>

Using a theory of change to guide your planning allows you to plan using an evidence-based strategy that has a proven track record of success. Havelock's Model of Change has been used successfully in several National, state/territory, and local planning efforts specific to inclusive practice.

Michael Fullan’s The Six Secrets of Change: <https://michaelfullan.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/2008SixSecretsofChangeKeynoteA4.pdf>

Michael Fullan's Theory of Change has served as a foundation for educational reform for at least the last two decades. Used often at the state/territory and local level, Fullan offers administrators steps to make change that respond to families, politicians, and the economy.

Question: How do you build the trust? How do you bring people together and make sure that the family is given a central role, ensuring that the people who are most affected by inclusion policies have their voices at the table?

Answer:

Building trust starts with bringing people to the table to have discussions about what matters to them most and uses strategies to achieve common ground. This is the hardest part of the process but the most important. This is a relationship-based field and the work done together is so much more important than what is done independently, so finding a way to create value and intention in the relationships built is essential.

Many people have equated early childhood programming to a quilt – a beautiful patchwork of systems that serve young children and families. While there are virtues to a quilt, PDG B-5 is all about weaving things together so that they are not separate systems. Things work better when they are collaborative and built on each other’s strengths. Trust also requires a depth of understanding of other folks’ perspectives. For example, The Ladder of Inference can provide a useful frame for finding common ground and building trust (see below).

Ladder of Inference (<https://thesystemsthinker.com/the-ladder-of-inference/>).

Each of us has our own ***ladder of inference***, a way of seeing the world. We all take in information, or data, have our own experiences, cultures, and lives that affect the way we interpret things, make assumptions, draw conclusions, and act, based on our beliefs about the world.

If we listen to each other while sharing our experiences, we have the benefit of gathering perspectives from other people and building on each other’s strengths. But we each must be open to hearing, understanding, and knowing that even though we won’t always agree, we can understand each other’s perspectives. The **Ladder of Inference** is the beginning of conversations; the stage is set that we're all going to have different understandings, but we need to hear and understand each other to build the necessary trust to move forward. It allows us to ask, what is your frame of reference? What do we have in common? And how can we build off each other?

A strategy for finding common ground: With all members at the table, ask each to write key ideas or outcomes to accomplish the work on sticky notes and then post them on a wall. In small groups of 2 or 3, begin to categorize everyone's thinking into "buckets" or common groups. This will help the group members see where they share common ground and gain a broader understanding of the work ahead. Because it also involves movement and teamwork, it also supports engagement in trust building and relationship building in more subtle ways.

Because getting everyone to the table is the first step, it is important to know where to go to find and begin building those trusted relationships. Often, agencies within states are already working together on inclusive practices as mandated by Federal law. Yet, early childhood special education is family-centered work. Families need to be present to make decisions for their children that fit them best. There are several organizations that focus on families of young children with disabilities. Connecting directly to the organizations that work with families is one of the best things you can do:

Center for Parent Information and Resources:
<https://www.parentcenterhub.org/find-your-center/>
 The Parent Training and Information Center in your state or territory is a central resource for families of children with disabilities. They focus on the needs of a wide range of family members including mothers, fathers, uncles, aunts, grandparents, legal guardians, foster parents, and others who are within a child's family.

Mom's Rising Together: <https://www.momsrising.org/campaigns/early-care-education>
 State Divisions of Moms Rising organize family members in their states to advocate on issues most impactful to their children. The organization has been particularly engaged in supporting the rights of families of children with disabilities through partnerships with organizations such as Start Early.

Family Voices: <https://familyvoices.org/>
 A long-standing family-focused organization with a particular focus on children with disabilities and special health care needs. Family Voices has been part of national efforts to make education, health, and community services more accessible and inclusive for everyone.

PACER Center: <https://www.pacer.org/>
 Formerly a nationally funded Technical Assistance Center for the Office of Special Education Programs focused on families of children with disabilities, the PACER Center based out of Minnesota continues to provide high quality, evidence-based resources for families and individuals working with families focused on special education services and inclusion.

Question: How can I help facilitate the visioning process? How do we create a vision, come to consensus and agree on a vision, and move forward?

Answer:
 There are many resources available to help states and territories strategize for their vision and mission using evidence-based research and surveying populations impacted by inclusive services. The resources that follow are an excellent starting point for teams.

Council for Exceptional Children. (2024). Position on Promoting Positive and Equitable Outcomes for All Children and Youth with Disabilities in All Educational Settings.
<https://exceptionalchildren.org/sites/default/files/2024-05/Promoting%20Positive%20Outcomes%20-%202024.pdf>

This Council for Exceptional Children Position Statement provides guidance in the context of the historical evolution of special education services. It guides teams to think about the context of special education services within their states throughout history and sets the stage to prioritize Universal Design for Learning, accountability practices, and workforce initiatives to enhance inclusive practices within states.

Beilmann, S., Fisher, K., Hong, M., Klein, R., Richardson, T. (2023). Advancing Equity and Inclusion for Young Children with Disabilities and Delays: State Policy Opportunities. Start Early: Chicago, IL.
https://www.startearly.org/app/uploads/2023/11/NOV_Branded-IDEA-State-Policy-Opps.pdf Using survey data and a thorough review of the literature, Start Early presents recommendations for priorities states can use to plan. The guide focuses on five key areas: adequate and robust funding, stable and diverse workforce, governance that enhances coordination and collaboration, family- and child-centered screening, eligibility, and evaluation, and equitable and inclusive service delivery.

SpecialQuest. <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/children-disabilities/inclusion-children-disabilities-training-guide/inclusion-children-disabilities-training-guide> SpecialQuest, a public/private partnership between the Office of Head Start and the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, conducted a multi-year project to support states in developing strong birth to five inclusive services in several states. The tools used by the project continue to be useful in building partnerships.

Creating Bright Futures Through Collaboration and Teaming
<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/children-disabilities/inclusion-children-disabilities-training-guide/creating-bright-futures-through-collaboration-teaming> This portion of the Inclusion of Children with Disabilities: Training Guide serves as a training tool for teams working in inclusion and offers strategies and relationship-building exercises for teams as they get started in their work.

Agencies in many states and territories have already engaged in the Memoranda of Understanding (MOU) or Interagency Agreement (IAA) process regarding disability, family, and health services. This formal process helps to shift vision and mission into an actionable living document. To establish an MOU or IAA, teams consider:

- The diverse representation within the group and reasons for collaboration; and
- Needs and strategies for collaborative work. For example, we need to
 - find the children who need services (**screening, early identification, Child Find, and referral**);
 - engage them in the evaluation process (**evaluation and eligibility**);
 - ensure those children have an **IFSP or IEP**; and
 - understand timing and process of **transition** between IFSP and IEP.

Because special education is a service rather than a setting, one key component of collaborative work is ensuring agreements focus on how each child will receive services in any setting. Any MOU or IAA should include representation from the following partners:

- Families and family advocacy agencies,
- Community-based settings,
- Early Head Start or Head Start,
- Early Intervention and Preschool Special Education,
- Family child care,
- Home-based services, and
- Health care providers.

Specific focus within any MOU or IAA should include children with both low- and high-incidence disabilities, children with special health care needs, and children without IEPs or IFSPs but suspected of concerns or receiving services through Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. The resource below offers some guidance:

Guidance on Creating an Effective Memorandum of Understanding to Support High-quality Inclusive Early Childhood Systems:

<https://sites.ed.gov/idea/files/Guidance-on-Creating-Effective-MOU-to-Support-Early-Childhood-Systems-10-05-2022.pdf>

This guide offers states and territories key components of MOUs and IAAs specific to inclusive practices; reference to the “why” and “what” sections of this guide can help understanding the role of the formal MOU/IAA process and how it can support their work.

Collaboration in strategic planning **sets the stage for inclusion at the state level, while modeling it for the program level.** With meaningful relationships in place, children with disabilities are more likely to access early childhood settings, participate in successful transitions between settings, and receive high quality, individualized services. One of the biggest challenges highlighted by both early childhood and special educators is the lack of options for children with disabilities in these early years. In recent years, the decline in the number of educators and early education programs available has led to a crisis for families of young children with disabilities. Yet, access to high quality inclusive programming has always been an issue, particularly for infants and toddlers. Consider the following:

Key Idea: When creating a vision and plan, consider funding for program readiness rather than just the amount of program slots available. Settings need to be ready for any child. The DEC and NAEYC Position Statements on Inclusion talk about access, participation and supports.

- Access is ensuring children have a wide variety of programs in their community they can attend.
- Participation involves ensuring they are engaged in high-quality instruction with their peers.
- Supports are the resources and preparation we offer programs to guarantee that any child within the program can achieve important developmental milestones.

Inclusion is about more than getting children into a program and teaching them; rather it is about creating programs that are ready to guide children in becoming successful. It's our responsibility to create the doors for them to open and walk through.

Question: Along with the childcare educator crisis is a specialist crisis, those who are trained to have inclusive classrooms and specialists who are able to bring services into settings as they are needed. What do we do when we don't have the specialists along with not having the teachers?

Answer:

The Division of Early Childhood for the Council for Exceptional Children (DEC) acknowledges the critical staffing shortages in both early childhood and early childhood special education. To increase the recognition of the skills and knowledge professionals need, DEC has created professional standards for early childhood special education and early intervention that are being integrated into higher education programs (<https://www.dec-sped.org/ei-ecse-standards>). These standards are intended to be integrated into professional development programs and higher education programs throughout the country.

The Office of Special Education Programs has also invested in more personnel preparation programs for early childhood special education and early childhood education. Through investments in state professional development and higher education degree programs, federal and state governments are preparing the workforce to create high quality inclusion in early childhood programs. Some examples of workforce supports include:

Personnel Development to Improve Services and Results for Children with Disabilities (CFDA 84.325) <https://osepideasthatwork.org/resources-grantees/program-areas/personnel-development-improve-services-and-results-children> offers a list of activities the Federal Government has invested in to promote the special education workforce.

The **University of Maryland Early Childhood/Special Education Dual Certification Program** offers students instruction that helps them complete their Bachelor of Science degree with both a special education and an early childhood teaching credential. Through state collaboration with higher education institutions, dual certification programs are becoming more prevalent throughout the country. States are building coursework to meet the professional standards for early childhood and early childhood special education, then creating funded opportunities for students who might not otherwise be able to enter into the profession.

Registered Apprenticeship Programs (RAPs) are another frequently used mechanism for creating alternate pathways to the profession. The **University of Maryland Early Ed Corp Registered Apprenticeship Program** is an example of a new RAP seeking to diversify the workforce and expand the number of high-quality teachers in early childhood programs. Apprentices can become early childhood educators prepared for inclusive classrooms or special education partners providing services in any setting. There are two Registered Apprenticeship Industry Intermediaries that are funded by the US Department of Labor to help create RAPs: <https://ecwconnector.org/> and <https://ecepts.org/>. To learn more, visit <https://www.apprenticeship.gov/investments-tax-credits-and-tuition-support/registered-apprenticeship-industry-intermediaries>.

States and territories are using a wide range of free resources to support professional development that improves inclusion. Some of these resources include: **The IRIS Center:** <https://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/stories/iris-in-alabama-an-alternative-certification-route-for-teachers/>; **The National Center for Professional Development on Inclusion:** https://npdci.fpg.unc.edu/resource-search/results/taxonomy_34.html and <https://npdci.fpg.unc.edu/sites/npdci.fpg.unc.edu/files/resources/NPDCl-WWH-PD-Planning-Matrix-7-2011.pdf> and **The Early Childhood Personnel Center:** <https://ecpcta.org/>

Finally, states and territories are also thinking about how to use their workforce registries to integrate professional development for inclusive practices into professional requirements. These registries ensure that early childhood educators have access to high quality experiences that guide them in serving all young children with disabilities in any setting.

Equity Issues:

Ideally, all children who need special education services would receive timely assessment, referral, and service delivery. This requires teams to consider out-of-the-box solutions to workforce gaps. Teams can consider strategies to engage **private providers to donate “in-kind” time** to early childhood programs. Additionally, engaging national organizations in conversations about the challenges can pull professionals into problem-solving.

Question: How can we support early childhood educators and protect special educators from burnout?

- One key way to support teacher retention is to take a deep look at how we compensate professionals in the field. Wage and compensation studies often show that we underpay teachers and we use contract-based special education services

to reduce public costs. Focusing on how we value teachers means ensuring they make a meaningful wage and have benefits that demonstrate they are valued.

- Teachers who feel prepared and capable in their work are more likely to stay in the profession. States and territories need to ensure all teacher candidates have preparation to support any child that might be in their caseload or classroom.
- Look deeply at professional development systems, working with higher education and training organizations within states to think about how they integrate inclusive practices into everything they do. It shouldn't be siloed, we should be teaching how to teach all children together.
- Workforce registries should include inclusive practices, professional development and competencies focused on how anybody who's teaching a gen ed classroom can support a child with disabilities.

Question: What can we do about funding?

- Head Start programs are important partners, as 10% of children in Head Start programs are mandated to be children with disabilities. But it is important to remember that they are the “payor of last resort”.
- Medicaid is a major funder of special education services for children who qualify. They need to be at all tables to share what they can pay for and help strategize ways to support broader inclusion practices.
- Understanding the current state of services is important and that means understanding the number of children receiving specific services. An unduplicated count of children served is essential because children with disabilities are often served by multiple programs and may be counted 5 to 10 times when there's only one child receiving services. Understanding these numbers can help reduce duplication of services and streamline funding.
- Federal dollars to states are not sufficient to pay for services. “Full funding” for the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is only 40% of the cost of services and Congress has not included “full funding” ever. It is necessary to figure out how all funding sources can work together and pay for services. The team can determine the “payer of last resort” for each service offered to help streamline spending. Often states and territories would like to identify a “per child cost” for services, but because special education services are very individualized and services vary widely, this amount is often nearly impossible to quantify. To learn more about financing strategies & funding, visit:

Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center, Financing Strategies and Collaborative Funding for Inclusive Programs:

<https://ectacenter.org/topics/inclusion/funding.asp>

Preschool inclusion finance toolkit, including a per-child inclusion cost worksheet.

Children’s Funding Project Federal Funding Streams:

<https://childrensfundingproject.org/resource/federal-funding-streams-for-children-and-youth-services/>

Question: How can we think about sustainability?

When doing strategic planning, start thinking about sustainability from the beginning. It should be part of your thinking about the partners you bring to the table and the vision you set for your team. When you are thinking about the funding sources and data sources, sustainability should also be integrated into the discussion, as well. Sustainability is about more than just funding; however, using multiple funding sources that are blended, layered, and braided together to support services is essential. Data is a necessary component to building sustainability. To sustain progress, partners need data that tell the story of the

work, guide shifts and changes in planning, and are malleable to the needs of new partners and funders as they join the work.

Additionally, finding ways that you can connect work within multiple divisions, agencies, and partners is the essence of PDG B-5 work. Inviting people to the table brings their contacts, funding sources, and voices to be able to share the work with audiences who may be able to further the work in sustainable ways. The challenge is to create a system that is relationship-based and human-centered so that everyone feels part of it.

Finally, relationship building is exciting, so make it fun!