

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Equity and Inclusion for Children with Disabilities

Federal policy recommendations to advance equity and inclusion for young children with disabilities and developmental delays

Equitable inclusion for young children with disabilities and developmental delays in early childhood opportunities is supported by both a human rights framework and evidence-based research. Being meaningfully included as a member of society is a human right that all children deserve and should be able to access. Additionally, there is clear research on the benefits of inclusion for both young children with disabilities and their typically developing peers in early childhood programs and services. Despite this, it is well documented that nationally, young children with disabilities and delays and their families continue to face challenges with accessing inclusive early childhood services individualized to their needs in all settings, particularly young children of color.

To address this, the Alliance for IDEA Policy Initiative and other national partners identified these federal policy recommendations to advance equity and inclusion for young children with disabilities and developmental delays across the early childhood system. The development of these recommendations included:

- 1) a comprehensive review of research and other publications on what has already been elevated as policy priorities to support young children with disabilities and delays
- 2) dissemination of a comprehensive survey to families and the field that garnered over 1500 responses
- 3) hosting fifteen feedback sessions with over 120 families and direct service providers in English and Spanish

The following highlights the policy recommendations identified through this process to better support young children with disabilities and delays across five key areas:

- 1) Adequate and Robust Funding
- 2) Stable and Diverse Workforce

- 3) Governance that Enhances Coordination and Collaboration
- 4) Family- and Child-Centered Screening, Eligibility, and Evaluation
- 5) Equitable and Inclusive Services

Adequate and Robust Funding

All parts of the birth-to-five early childhood system including home visiting, Early Head Start and Head Start, childcare, preschool, and public-school systems need to have adequate financial resources so they can support the needs of young children with disabilities and developmental delays in all settings. Funding should allow for stable programs with reduced caseloads and ensure programs have physical spaces to support young children with disabilities in their programs. And Congress needs to fully fund and make all Individuals with Disabilities Education Act programs permanent including Parent Training and Information Centers, and ensure that funds are permanently available, are distributed equitably with no family fees, and are simple for programs to access and leverage.

Stable and Diverse Workforce

Federal funding must help stabilize the workforce and support a strengthened pipeline of early childhood professionals with dedicated funds to recruit, retain, and adequately compensate a diverse workforce; and ensures the well-being of the workforce. And cross-sector, cross-disciplinary, compensated professional development that leads with cultural humility, addresses implicit and explicit bias, and integrates collaborative practices must be incentivized. The Early Intervention (EI) and Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) workforce specifically needs to be bolstered through expanded dedicated funds to IDEA to increase the EI and ECSE workforce wages, build a strong pipeline that includes expansion of federal scholarships and grant programs for individuals pursuing higher education to serve in EI and ECSE, and a simple pathway towards elimination of student loans for EI and ECSE professionals.

Governance that Enhances Coordination & Collaboration

The federal government must incentivize and promote opportunities for collaboration across the multi-sector early childhood system to ensure all families have access to high quality inclusive birth-to-five services regardless of geographic, cultural, linguistic, or economic circumstances. This includes better coordination and collaboration within and across agencies and better aligned policies, guidance, data collection, and professional development to create seamless systems of support. Funding needs to be available for states to strengthen their data collection – disaggregated across race, ethnicity, primary language, and other key demographics – to better understand how children with disabilities and delays are connected to services, and how the EI and ECSE workforce is faring. Governing bodies must also include diverse and authentic representation of service providers and families of young children with disabilities and delays, with the necessary supports and accommodations so they can meaningfully participate and share power.

Family- and Child-Centered Screening, Eligibility and Evaluation

Across the comprehensive early childhood system, children should routinely be screened for developmental delays to determine their need for services and supports, and states should be adequately funded to maintain integrated data systems that track this screening and referral data across all early childhood programs. As families navigate screening, eligibility and evaluation for services, the early childhood workforce needs to have the skills to effectively partner with and support parents with cultural humility throughout the process. States need to be incentivized to ensure their eligibility criteria is clear, aligned across systems within their state (e.g., from Part C to Part B 619, across school districts), and well-communicated to families and providers who can play the critical role to connecting families and children to services.

Equitable and Inclusive Services

Children with disabilities and delays have the right to receive high-quality, inclusive, and equitable services that are individualized to their needs. Federal policy must define inclusion explicitly to state that children should receive their services in the environment in which they would have been educated had they not had a delay or disability and alongside their typically developing peers. Federal policy must also emphasize that inclusion means ensuring that supports, such as access to Infant Early Childhood Mental Health consultants, are in place to encourage children's social-emotional development and prevent exclusionary discipline practices that disproportionately impact children with delays and disabilities. Federal policy must also center families' experience of service delivery. Families report delays and gaps in receiving services, particularly at transition points, feeling like their voices and preferences are not heard, and incidents of bias and cultural insensitivity. The federal government must incentivize state systems that systematically capture families' experiences and design responsive improvements. Finally, the federal government must require states to collect data that better informs equitable and inclusive service delivery, including data that better identifies if services are delivered in an inclusive environment, disciplinary practices, family satisfaction with services, and data consistently disaggregated by race, ethnicity, disability category, and other key demographic characteristics.