

# Executive Summary: Advancing Equity and Inclusion for Young Children with Disabilities and Delays State Policy Opportunities

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**Equitable inclusion for young children with disabilities and developmental delays in early childhood opportunities is rooted in a human rights framework: being meaningfully included as a member of society is a human right that all children deserve and should be able to access.**

As public sector leaders and advocates seek to advance this right for young children across state early childhood systems, their efforts are also supported by evidence-based research and federal law.<sup>i</sup> The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) seeks to protect the rights of children with disabilities and ensure that they have access to free and appropriate public education in inclusive, least restrictive environments (i.e., in classrooms with children without disabilities) through IDEA Part B including Part B, Section 619. This is commonly referred to as Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE). Additionally, IDEA Part C ensures infants and toddlers with disabilities, developmental delays, or a high probability of experiencing a developmental delay receive Early Intervention (EI) services in natural environments.

When IDEA first passed in 1975, Congress promised to cover 40% of the extra cost of providing special education, with support for children with disabilities intended to be a shared responsibility across federal, state, and local governments. However, federal funding currently covers less than 15% of those costs, and states and communities struggle to resource EI and ECSE adequately.<sup>ii</sup> Exacerbated by inadequate funding, it is well documented that 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 and children who are Dual Language Learners.<sup>iii, iv</sup>

**To aid state public sector leaders and advocates in advancing equity and inclusion for young children with disabilities and developmental delays, the full report articulates key state policy opportunities.** These policy opportunities address Early Intervention (EI), Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE), and the intersection of EI and ECSE with other early childhood programs. These are actions that can be taken by either state legislative bodies or government agencies overseeing early childhood programs and are organized across five areas:

- I) Adequate and Robust Funding
- II) Stable and Diverse Workforce
- III) Governance that Enhances Coordination and Collaboration
- IV) Family- and Child-Centered Screening, Eligibility, and Evaluation
- V) Equitable and Inclusive Service Delivery

## I. ADEQUATE & ROBUST FUNDING

All parts of the birth-to-five early childhood system including home visiting, Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation, Early Head Start and Head Start, child care, 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*. This requires state legislatures provide increased state funding for birth-to-five early learning programs, family support programs, economic security programs, local and regional education agencies, as well as EI and ECSE. Funding for EI and ECSE must be equitable and adequate with clarity on how to leverage multiple funding streams – including Medicaid – to support high quality, inclusive services.

## II. STABLE & DIVERSE WORKFORCE

The cross-sector birth-to-five early childhood workforce needs to be stabilized and continue to grow. Because young children with disabilities and developmental delays are in all early childhood programs and services, the cross-sector early childhood workforce must be adequately prepared to support them while being competitively compensated. Thus, state funding must support a strengthened pipeline of early childhood professionals with dedicated funds to recruit, retain, and adequately compensate a diverse workforce that reflects the communities in which they serve, while also ensuring the wellbeing of the workforce.

Additionally, states should provide scholarships and grants for individuals pursuing higher education to become professionals in EI and ECSE. Additionally, there should be opportunities for compensated professional learning that addresses bias and integrates developmentally appropriate and collaborative practices to support young children in all early childhood settings, programs, and services. And, a state-level professional development registries that include the EI and ECSE workforce should be developed and/or expanded that includes demographic data about the workforce.

## III. GOVERNANCE THAT ENHANCES COORDINATION & COLLABORATION

State 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 facilitated by adequate staff time and capacity to strengthen governance, reduce fragmentation, and break down silos; and to better align policies, guidance, data collection, and professional learning to create seamless systems of support for young children with disabilities and delays. Governing bodies must also include more diverse and authentic representation of the families of young children with disabilities and delays and the providers who serve them, bolstered by investment to support their participation through shared governance structures and processes.

## IV. FAMILY- AND CHILD-CENTERED SCREENING, ELIGIBILITY & EVALUATION

Across the comprehensive early childhood system, young children should be routinely screened for developmental delays and medical conditions and experience seamless referrals to EI or ECSE evaluations when needed – aka strengthening Child Find. This means bolstering supports to the cross-sector early childhood workforce – from pediatricians to home visitors to child care teachers to family child care providers and everyone in between – so they can effectively partner with parents to screen young children and know when and how to refer families to services with cultural humility. Additionally, clarifying eligibility for EI and ECSE is essential.

## V. EQUITABLE & INCLUSIVE SERVICE DELIVERY

Across the holistic birth-to-five early childhood system, young children with disabilities and delays have the right to be in early childhood programs and services alongside their peers without disabilities or delays while receiving the individualized supports they need. All early childhood programs must be prepared and have adequate resources to accommodate and proactively include young children with disabilities and delays, including children with special health care needs. This includes removing exclusionary discipline practices that may target young children with disabilities and delays as well as partnering and collaborating with EI, ECSE, and IECMH consultants so young children, particularly children of color, can receive the inclusive and equitable supports they need to thrive. Additionally, states should routinely examine systems to identify disparities in access to EI and ECSE services and implement strategies to reduce the disparities.

## CONCLUSION

The state policy opportunities shared above and in the [full report](#) represent important steps that state leaders can take to advance equity and inclusion for young children with disabilities and developmental delays. Public sector leaders and advocates, together with families and providers – particularly families and providers of color – can leverage this report to identify their state’s most urgent policy priorities to improve services and program delivery. Doing this work well will involve meaningfully including families and providers in the identification and advancement of policy priorities, continuous improvement efforts of program implementation, as well as ensuring feedback loops through ongoing engagement.

## ABOUT START EARLY

[Start Early](#) is a nonprofit public-private partnership advancing quality early learning and care for families with children, before birth through their earliest years, to help close the opportunity gap. Bringing expertise in program delivery, research and evaluation, professional development and policy and advocacy, Start Early works in partnership with communities and other experts to drive systemic change so that millions more children, families and educators can thrive.

[Start Early Consulting](#) is a deeply experienced, mission-driven team with a long history of driving change within the early childhood field. The pursuit of high-quality, equitable early childhood systems is the heart of our consulting practice. We help systems evolve with highly customizable support, inviting leaders to leverage our consultants as strategic advisors or to develop and execute implementation plans. We expand the bench wherever support is needed, bringing seasoned, practical experience to leaders, advocates, and their teams. For more information, please visit [www.startearly.org/consulting](http://www.startearly.org/consulting) or email [consulting@startearly.org](mailto:consulting@startearly.org).

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<sup>i</sup> U.S. Department of Education Individual with Disabilities Education Act (2023). Statue and Regulations.

<https://sites.ed.gov/idea/statuteregulations/>.

<sup>ii</sup> Congressional Research Service (August, 2019). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Funding: A Primer.

<https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R44624>.

<sup>iii</sup> Friedman-Krauss, A. H., & Barnett, W. S. (2023). [The State\(s\) of Early Intervention and Early Childhood Special Education: Looking at Equity](#). New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research.

<sup>iv</sup> U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education. (2022). [OSEP Fast Facts: Students with disabilities who are English Learners \(ELs\) served under IDEA Part B](#).