



# Providing Early Childhood Special Education Services in Community-Based Settings

Learnings from Six Communities Across the Country

**MARCH 2024**

# Table of Contents

<b>03</b>	<b>Introduction</b>
<b>03</b>	<b>The Case for Inclusion</b>
03	Inclusion is a Human Right
04	Inclusion is Good for Kids
04	Inclusion is Not Yet a Reality and Inequities are Pervasive
06	Inclusion is Possible!
<b>09</b>	<b>6 Key Considerations for Action</b>
09	Engage Families as Essential Partners
10	Develop a Shared Vision and Increase Leadership Commitment
11	Build Relationships and Connections
12	Start Slowly and Intentionally
14	Support Collaborative Professional Learning and Continuous Improvement
15	Increase Resources for Both ECSE Services and Community-based ECE
<b>16</b>	<b>Continue Striving for Full Inclusion</b>

## Authors

**MINA HONG**  
Director, Consulting

**EMILY POWERS**  
Former Senior Manager, Consulting

**REBECCA KLEIN**  
Director, Consulting

**NATALIE BREUNER**  
Senior UX Researcher, Early Learning Lab

## Acknowledgements

This report was prepared thanks to many individuals and organizations that generously provided time and expertise, research, consultation and other supports. Special thanks to Atlanta Public Schools (GA), Augusta County Public Schools (VA), Guilford County Schools (NC), School District of Palm Beach County (FL), Wake County Schools (NC), as well as Karen Berman and Kayla Goldfarb from Start Early's Illinois Policy Team.

Cite as: Hong, M., Powers, E., Klein, R., Breuner, N., (2024). *Providing Early Childhood Education in Community-Based Settings*. Chicago, IL

# Introduction

*“All young children with disabilities should have access to high-quality inclusive early childhood programs that provide individualized and appropriate support so they can fully participate alongside their peers without disabilities, meet high expectations, and achieve their full potential.”*

The 2023 federal [Policy Statement: Inclusion of Children with Disabilities in Early Childhood Programs](#) confirms that inclusion is not only a human right and an evidence-based practice, it also makes clear that inclusive early childhood special education (ECSE) services should be offered in the child’s least restrictive early care and education (ECE) environment including in community-based ECE settings (e.g., Head Start programs, child care centers, and family child care homes). In fact, the federal policy statement goes so far as to

state that “the first placement option considered [for services] is the current public early childhood setting the child is attending, even if the [Local Education Agency] operates an equally inclusive early childhood program [elsewhere]” – thereby increasing parent choice and equitable access for children with disabilities to high quality ECE programs.

Start Early Consulting conducted a national scan for a large urban school district in order to learn from other communities offering ECSE services in community-based settings. Start Early interviewed leaders from school districts implementing inclusive community-based ECSE services; six districts are profiled throughout this paper. This paper highlights how these school districts and others are making inclusion possible using different models and shares key lessons learned to inform communities seeking to make this critical shift.

## The Case for Inclusion

### I. Inclusion is a Human Right

The inclusion of young children with disabilities and developmental delays in early childhood programs is supported by a human rights framework. Being meaningfully included as a member of society is a right that all children have and should be able to exercise. As defined by the 2009 statement from the Division for Early Childhood (DEC) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), inclusion embodies the values, policies, and practices that support a child having full membership

in their classroom and community, regardless of their ability, resulting in a sense of belonging, positive social relationships and friendships, and learning and development to reach their full potential.<sup>i</sup> Inclusive practices yield benefits not only for individuals with disabilities but also for society at large. Starting from early childhood programs, building a culture of inclusion shapes lifelong attitudes, extending into schools, communities, and workplaces.

It is important to recognize that, from the beginning, systems have been designed from to deny the right of inclusion to people with disabilities. For much of the nation's history, people with disabilities were often housed in separate institutions because they were believed to not be able to be valuable, contributing members of society. It wasn't until the 1970s that children with disabilities and their families finally won a hard-fought battle for a right to a free appropriate public education, which is now enshrined in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). This right was not extended to preschoolers and children birth through age two until the 1980s. From this legislation, a new system of "special" education was created, still emphasizing the otherness of children with disabilities and delays; the result was that, most often, children with disabilities were placed in separate classrooms. Today, these laws are meant to ensure the rights of young children with disabilities and delays, including the right to an education in the "least restrictive environment" alongside children without disabilities. While policies now prioritize the enrollment of children with disabilities in publicly funded early childhood programs, true inclusion and belonging remain elusive.

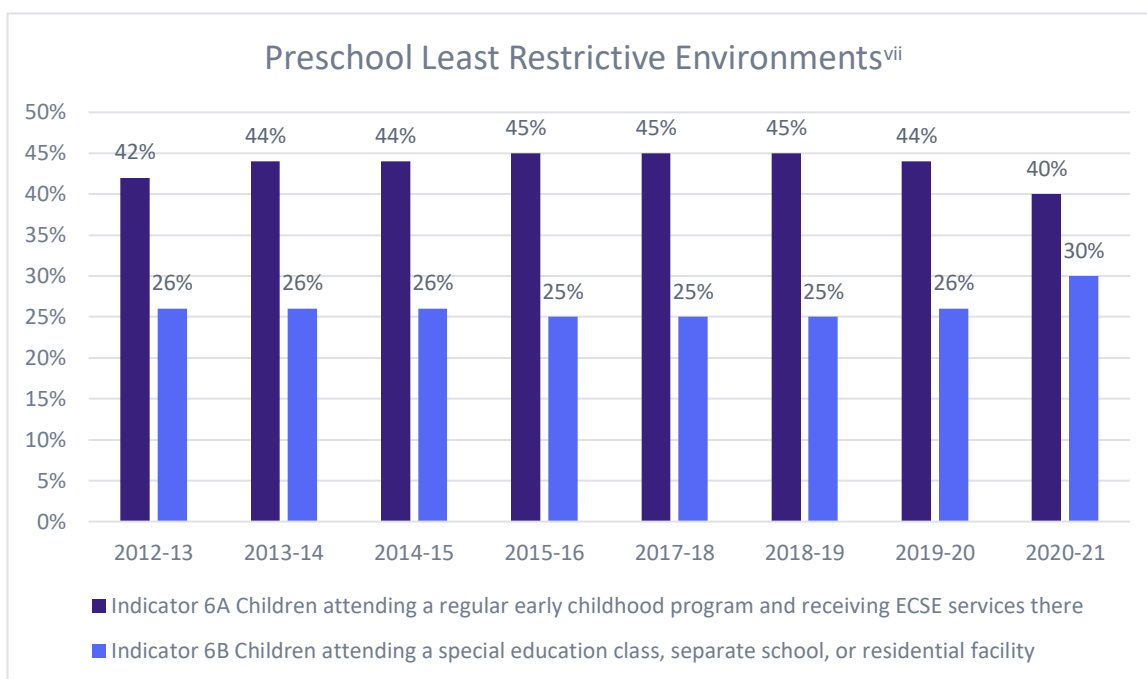
## II. Inclusion is Good for Kids

Extensive research highlights the benefits of early childhood inclusion for both children with disabilities and children without disabilities, as described in the recent federal policy statement.<sup>ii</sup> Studies show children with disabilities in inclusive settings make greater gains in communication, cognitive development, and social-emotional skills, and have larger friend networks than children in separate settings.<sup>iii</sup> They are more likely to practice new skills in inclusive rather than separate settings.<sup>iv</sup> Moreover, inclusive settings promote positive developmental and social outcomes for children without disabilities, as well as greater empathy and a positive perception of children with disabilities.<sup>v</sup> Additionally, with inclusion all children benefit from teachers who have the capacity to utilize a variety of teaching methods and provide individualized learning supports.

## III. Inclusion is Not Yet a Reality and Inequities are Pervasive

Despite children's legal rights and the strong scientific basis for inclusion, national data shows that young children with disabilities and their families continue to face challenges in accessing inclusive early childhood services. According to U.S. Department of Education data, the percentage of children receiving ECSE services in a regular early

childhood program has been nearly unchanged for the last decade, hovering around 45% (see “Preschool Least Restrictive Environments” chart with Annual Performance Report Indicator 6 data on Educational Environments). This means over half of young children with disabilities are not receiving most of their preschool services alongside their peers without disabilities. Further, one out of four young children with disabilities have a segregated early learning experience in a separate special education class, separate school, or residential facility. In other words, too many districts are not fully implementing inclusion as required by the federal IDEA law and the federal policy statement on inclusion.



For those in a “regular early childhood program,” this data does not capture the setting – whether it was a school- or community-based program or whether children and their families had a choice about where the services were provided. In many districts across the country, ECSE services are only provided in school-based settings, forcing families to make tough decisions. If their children are already enrolled in a preferred community-based ECE program (e.g. Head Start), children and families may be forced to leave their preferred program to attend the school-based preschool option where districts will provide ECSE services, but they may not offer full-day, year-round care that best meets families’ working needs. Where transportation is provided, families may choose to keep their child at their preferred community-based program but have their child take a bus at midday to receive their ECSE services at the school district site – which is incredibly disruptive. Or, families may choose to forego ECSE services altogether to avoid midday disruptions and stay at their preferred community-based ECE program. All of these

options are incredibly difficult and are contrary to a child’s right to be served in the “least restrictive environment,” as defined in Part B of IDEA and reiterated in the 2023 federal policy statement.

Additionally, there are racial disparities in children’s access to inclusive environments. Black (56%) and Hispanic (52%) children with a disability are less likely than White (60%) children with a disability to attend a regular early childhood program and receive their ECSE services there, and are significantly more likely to be in a separate class than White children.<sup>vii</sup> Also, 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 more likely to be segregated from their classmates than children with other disabilities.<sup>viii</sup> The lack of equitable access to inclusive special education and related services for these populations perpetuates longstanding disparities in education opportunities and educational outcomes.<sup>ix</sup>

#### IV. Inclusion is Possible!

Despite the current national picture, many school districts across the country have made significant strides toward providing inclusive services for young children with disabilities and developmental delays in community-based early childhood programs. As illustrated in Table 1, school districts deliver inclusive ECSE using three primary models:

- The Co-Teacher Model - Both a general education pre-K teacher and an ECSE teacher share responsibility to teach students in the same class.
- The Individual Teacher Model - One licensed pre-K teacher, dually endorsed in ECSE and early childhood education, is responsible to teach all the students in the class.
- The Itinerant Teacher Model - ECSE teachers and specialists travel to provide direct services to children with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) at the sites where they are enrolled (e.g., community-based child care centers, Head Start, family child care homes, or even in children’s own home if they are home with a relative or a nanny during the day). In this model, the “push-in” approach is considered best practice where itinerant teachers and related service providers deliver ECSE services in the general education classroom alongside the child’s other classmates. (The approach of pulling children out of their classroom for their ECSE services is not considered an inclusive delivery method.) Itinerant teachers also provide coaching and teaming for general education teachers and assistants to help them understand how to support children’s IEP goals through classroom routines and activities.

**TABLE 1: Models and Examples of Inclusive Early Childhood Education**

	<u>Co-Teacher Model</u>	<u>Individual Teacher Model</u>	<u>Itinerant Teacher Model</u>
Example	Atlanta Public Schools (APS) in Georgia	Augusta County Public Schools (ACPS) in Virginia	Guilford County Public Schools (GCPS) in North Carolina
Partnerships, Settings, and Funding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• APS partners with Head Start (HS) to offer this model utilizing HS and ECSE funds.</li> <li>• At school-based sites, HS agency partners provide extended-day and wraparound services.</li> <li>• At HS sites, APS employs the ECSE teacher and pays for an extra paraprofessional in 3-year old classrooms.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ACPS utilizes ECSE, state pre-K, and local funds to offer this model in their fully inclusive, full-day preschool program.</li> <li>• ACPS also offers itinerant ECSE services for students in Head Start and other community-based and home settings.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• GCPS partners with a range of local providers, including public schools, Head Start, and child care centers to offer this model utilizing state pre-K, Head Start, child care, and ECSE funds.</li> <li>• ECSE funds the itinerant teachers and related service providers, while the community-based providers use a range of funds for their programs.</li> </ul>
Class Size, Ratios, and Caseloads	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Total class size - 18</li> <li>• 1 paraprofessional in 4-year-old or mixed age classrooms</li> <li>• 2 paraprofessionals in three-year-old classrooms</li> <li>• Includes a minimum of 5 and maximum of 8 children with IEPs in a classroom</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Total class size – most have 16, two have 17, some have fewer due to square footage of the classroom</li> <li>• 1 paraprofessional in a class with 3-5-year-olds</li> <li>• Includes up to 6 children with IEPs in a classroom</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Total class size and ratios vary by community-based provider and funding requirements</li> <li>• Caseload is ~25 children for each itinerant teacher<sup>1</sup></li> <li>• Caseload is ~30-40 children for speech &amp; language pathologists, occupational therapists, and physical therapists</li> </ul>

<sup>1</sup> These caseloads were difficult to manage given the time needed for travel, planning, a lunch break, etc. When itinerant teachers in this district were asked what their ideal caseload would be, most felt that 14-16 children would be appropriate.

Most of the school districts highlighted in Table 1 and in the districts interviewed employ multiple inclusion models, with adjustments made annually based on student needs and family input. Navigating these considerations remains an ongoing learning process for districts shifting towards these models, necessitating continual evaluation and adaptation to effectively meet the needs of all students. A spectrum of service delivery models is worth considering, as more than one approach might be successful to address different needs and to leverage strengths and opportunities. For example, community-based HS sites could be leveraged to serve 3-year-olds in inclusive settings when school districts don't have publicly funded pre-kindergarten options for that ages.

With multiple possible models of delivering inclusive ECSE services, districts should consider implementing a flexible mixed-model approach to fit their context and student needs that complies with the requirements of community-based programs. Establishing guidelines for class size, staff-to-child ratios, proportion of students with IEPs in a classroom, and/or caseload size for itinerant teachers and specialists is important. However, it's essential to recognize that the individualized nature of special education demands flexibility within these parameters to effectively address the needs outlined in children's IEPs. Factors such as children's age, required support services, and specified hours of ECSE service influence decisions regarding the classroom parameters to ensure comprehensive support. In the itinerant teacher model, adaptable caseloads are also imperative, considering variables like travel time and the intensity of student needs. While some districts limit itinerant services to students requiring less intensive support, others are expanding this model to children with more complex needs, guided by family preferences and an evolving perspective on inclusive service delivery possibilities.

### *Atlanta, Georgia*

Atlanta Public Schools (APS) has been offering inclusive ECSE in community-based settings for over two decades and continues to strengthen its models of inclusion. In addition to the co-teacher model described in Table 1, they also offer an itinerant model of ECSE services with itinerant teachers serving children at community-based EC sites. Services are predominantly offered using a push-in approach unless otherwise indicated on the child's IEP. Children typically receive one to three hours of services per week including related services – typically for speech and occupational therapy.

Half-day, self-contained classrooms continue to exist in Atlanta, though APS has always met its state target goals for the percentage of children served in least restrictive environments. For children in self-contained classrooms, APS strives to transition them to an inclusive setting within a year. The district is also aiming to expand inclusive service options, though resources are a challenge.



## Six Key Considerations for Action

For communities aiming to provide or expand inclusive ECSE services in community-based settings, consider the following six key lessons learned from other districts.

### 1. Engage Families as Essential Partners

Engaging families as essential partners in shifting towards more inclusive and community-based ECSE is crucial for systemic change. Families are powerful advocates in describing the aspirations they have for their children, in helping to shape a shared vision for an inclusive society, and in holding leaders accountable to provide inclusive services in line with children's rights. Families can offer firsthand experiences navigating existing services and provide invaluable insights into the shortcomings of the current system. For example, families may describe how part-day ECSE services at the local school do not meet their needs, and how transitioning from the school to a community-based provider is negatively impacting their child. Other families may describe how they cannot even find a child care provider who will accept their child. As a result, many families are facing difficult choices, forgoing ECSE services or declining work.

Families are also essential partners in developing solutions. They can provide their expertise and ideas to help develop strategies for greater inclusion, and they can provide ongoing feedback to help continuously improve the system. System leaders and advocates must develop structures and strategies to intentionally partner with families – including families of color, families whose primary language is not English, and parents with disabilities. This should go beyond conducting surveys, focus groups, or interviews to gather perspectives, and include strategies to ensure strong family influence and power in decision-making, such as forming a parent committee to influence policy and programming decisions, and/or including family leaders on a community inclusion team to support implementation. To enable family leadership in these efforts, supports such as stipends, travel reimbursement, and interpretative services should be provided.

#### *Chicago, Illinois*

In the fall of 2022, Chicago Public Schools (CPS), in partnership with Start Early and other Head Start (HS) grantees, began planning for the delivery of itinerant ECSE services in community-based HS programs that would begin in fall 2023. Prior to this effort, children were being bussed midday between their HS program and CPS sites for their special education services.

To plan for implementation, the Early Learning Lab, Start Early's innovation lab specializing in human-centered design, was tasked with convening a family advisory

committee to elevate family experiences, perspectives, and ideas to co-design recommendations for improving services for children with disabilities. The family advisory committee was comprised of English- and Spanish-speaking families of currently or previously enrolled HS children with an IEP, representing each of the HS sites where itinerant model implementation would begin. Each parent/caregiver received a stipend for participation. Families shared their experiences with not receiving ECSE services within their HS setting, and of how they were only offered the options of bussing to the CPS sites or leaving the HS program. Some parents/caregivers even chose to forego services due to concerns over disruption and safety. They also shared their vision for the future and ideas for the pilot. When implementation began, a second family advisory committee was convened to learn about the experiences of participating families from across the HS sites. The families provided positive feedback and suggested solutions toward continued improvement. In-depth family interviews provided additional insights before and during implementation.

This valuable feedback informed modifications to the itinerant model to best serve children and families currently enrolled and those in the future. Overall, families felt empowered by the equitable practices of human-centered design in which their voices – the voices of those directly impacted by the policies – were brought to the table early and often, and were truly heard.

## 2. Develop a Shared Vision and Increase Leadership Commitment

For communities to provide young children with ECSE services in settings that honor their least restrictive environment and that fit families' needs, developing a shared vision and increasing leadership commitment are essential. In each of the school districts profiled here, every school leader firmly believed that serving young children with special education services in community-based settings was not only possible, but also a best practice and a foundational expectation. Regardless of the intensity of any child's needs, all school district leaders believed that it was the responsibility of the school district and the community-based early childhood partners to work collaboratively to ensure that children are able to learn alongside their peers without disabilities while receiving their individualized services and supports. Leaders were champions of inclusion and key drivers of change towards their vision.

In communities where ECSE services are only provided in schools, a first step may be building knowledge among school and community-based leaders. School district leaders may be unaware that children with disabilities are being served in ECE settings outside of their schools or district boundaries, and unaware of their obligations to preschoolers with disabilities outside of their district classrooms beyond Child Find screenings. School

and community-based EC leaders may have concerns about delivering ECSE services in community-based settings. However, when engaged around the benefits and possibilities, they may have recommendations on how to make it work.<sup>x</sup>

### *Wake County, North Carolina*

In the Wake County Public School system, the Office of Early Learning (OEL) was founded over a decade ago with a combination of multiple funding sources, including Title I, Title III, special education, general education, and state PreK dollars. Prior to the creation of OEL, children with disabilities were served through part-day or full-day self-contained classrooms or in a few Title I classrooms, all run by the school district. The formation of OEL and the convergence of diverse funding streams enabled the department to develop an itinerant teaching and coaching model that provides hundreds of students with specially designed instruction in their community-based and home-based early learning programs.

The push for developing an itinerant model came from OEL's charge to increase the number of students generally participating in early childhood programs statewide. They considered opening new classrooms but could not secure the necessary funding, staffing, space, and equipment. When pushed to think creatively, Wake County realized that developing an itinerant model would expand their capacity to support children in existing early childhood programs.

The political momentum to expand access and the support from the Wake County School District, board, and the public were important enabling factors and helped OEL build a strong foundation for inclusion. Over time, leadership support from very informed and engaged parents, strong advocacy groups, and key agencies have helped their program flourish.

### 3. Build Relationships and Connections

Building and maintaining relationships across special education, early childhood, and community-based partners is critical to the success of inclusive ECSE services in community-based settings. At the school district level, the relationship between the office, department, or leader of early childhood and the office, department, or leader of special education is important to ensure shared goals and alignment around what inclusive services in least restrictive environments entail. This is also important to ensure shared understanding around the roles and responsibilities of each. This includes supporting the intake and placement process in a coordinated way, staffing, professional

learning, and supporting community-based teachers and the ECSE teachers and related service providers serving in community-based settings.

At the program level, with the co-teacher or itinerant teacher model, relationships between general education teachers and special education teachers are also critical to success. These teachers need to have shared understanding about the what, why, and how of inclusion: what inclusive services should look like, the roles and responsibilities of each member of the teaching team, how they can best support each other, what a classroom environment and schedule should look like, etc. Getting to know each other, determining communication preferences, and agreeing on times to meet are important for successful collaborative and inclusive teaching, particularly with the itinerant model. Relationships between leaders of community-based early childhood sites and school district leadership are also particularly critical in supporting collaboration and success.

### *Guilford County, North Carolina*

Guilford County Schools (GCS) is the third largest school district in North Carolina. Guilford County's ECSE model has evolved over the years to offer a continuum of services including the co-teacher model and itinerant teacher model to serve children in community-based settings where they are enrolled.

With the itinerant model, GCS believes they have been most successful with “push-in” services when itinerant teachers are able to support children alongside the general education teacher and students without disabilities, and they become part of the classroom culture. However, GCS found some programs and teachers welcomed the itinerant teachers into the classroom while others wanted them to “pull-out” students. It is thus important for itinerant teachers to establish strong buy-in and relationships with administrators and teachers from the beginning to ensure they are seen as “part of the team” and not as an outsider. It is a “careful dance” creating relationships between these teachers to collaborate to support IEP goals and objectives.

## 4. Start Slowly and Intentionally

Given the importance of cultivating relationships and shifting mindsets, starting slowly and intentionally to build buy-in among key partners on the what, why, and how of providing ECSE services in community-based settings is essential. School district and community-based leaders should take time to collectively identify a shared, equitable vision for the long-term goals of inclusive ECSE services and include diverse groups of teachers, related service providers, and families in the process. Understanding the history and the current system of services can be informative. However, it is important to

encourage these partners to imagine new possibilities beyond the current system. They should explore the different models of inclusion and identify shared realistic steps to take in the near-term to begin this programmatic and culture shift toward their shared vision.

While it may not be feasible to implement at full-scale in the first year, it may be helpful to consider starting at a place of strength. For example, Head Start programs are already serving children with disabilities and developmental delays as this is prioritized in the federally required performance standards. Plus, some Head Start programs may already have strong relationships with the school district, or particular strengths to build on such as teachers with special education experience and strong family partnerships. Starting at a smaller scale also allows partners the opportunity to learn about what works, build on successes, and then expand the offerings.

### ***Palm Beach County, Florida***

The School District of Palm Beach County began providing ECSE services in community-based settings in the 2018-2019 school year. Prior to this, many children were bussed from local Head Start programs to district-run sites to receive their special education services. The district spent a year planning and preparing to implement community-based ECSE. In that time, they worked to identify HS programs that would be good partners through many one-on-one conversations and identified HS Directors who were interested and willing to try having itinerant push-in ECSE services. The district then worked with them to identify specific teachers within their programs who were willing to participate. The district then offered training in the first year to HS teachers to ensure a shared understanding of IEPs, push in ECSE services, and what it would look like in the classroom with a sample schedule. They asked teachers what support they needed and were responsive to their requests.

The district started in 2018 by hiring one itinerant ECSE teacher who firmly believed in the model to serve children at five HS sites. At the start of the 2023-2024 school year, they had expanded to eight itinerant teachers, all ECSE certified, serving in community-based settings. The itinerant teachers are serving their students with individualized needs while also providing the community-based general education teachers with curriculum support, coaching, and modeling. The district is still working on expanding this model to more sites in the community.

## **5. Support Collaborative Professional Learning and Continuous Improvement**

As part of intentionally building this new type of service delivery, school and community-based leaders should plan for the competencies and professional learning supports that

teachers, leaders, and other staff will need at the district, program, and classroom level to successfully implement a new model. Professional learning opportunities should be offered through a variety of formats in advance and during initial implementation, including trainings, “book clubs,” communities of practice, and individual coaching. Support tailored to specific roles is important, though joint professional learning with ECSE and general education staff together is also valuable to develop a shared understanding of best practices and each other’s respective roles. Importantly, the team who develops IEPs and make placement decisions also need professional development around inclusive and itinerant service delivery.

Finally, as part of the slow and intentional approach, a key role for leadership teams across school district and community partners is to collect and use data to inform implementation and ongoing improvement. Even with solid planning and preparation, initial implementation of a new model is often challenging. Building continuous quality improvement (CQI) cycles deliberately into operations from the get-go when deploying inclusive ECSE services in community-based settings helps identify successes and challenges early, supports learning from what works and what doesn’t, and promotes adjustments during this early stage. The data collection and CQI plan should include and address disaggregated quantitative data to understand equity impacts and potential unintended disparities, as well as qualitative data from families, general education teachers, ECSE teachers, and related service providers to understand how programming is working in real time and to uncover any inequities that aren’t captured by quantitative data. Facilitating these feedback loops and using data over time supports thoughtful, equitable expansion of inclusive ECSE services into the future.

### *Augusta County, Virginia*

The Augusta County Public School District has had great success over many years in implementing fully inclusive ECSE services, utilizing an individual teacher model in their school settings and an itinerant model in community-based settings.

A recent challenge has been that there are fewer institutions of higher education offering teacher preparation programs with dual endorsements in ECE and ECSE and fewer graduates of the current programs, which has made hiring for the individual teacher model more difficult. However, the district has been able to access grant funds from the state to support newly hired licensed teachers to become ECSE endorsed within the first few years of hire. Through onboarding, the District takes care to ensure that teachers and teacher assistants understand the vision, the philosophy, and the rationale for their inclusive program and practices.

The District has two instructional specialists who coach new teachers weekly, providing additional support especially to those not yet dually endorsed. They have monthly grade level meetings with teachers and teacher assistants for ongoing professional learning and instructional support. The itinerant teacher also attends these meetings for professional learning support and a sense of connection.

They also have an early childhood committee of pre-K and Kindergarten teachers who meet monthly around annual topics such as supporting student engagement and behavior. They use the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) and the Inclusive Classroom Profile as tools to support continuous improvement. District leaders emphasize that implementing inclusive services requires patience; implementation can be messy at first. However, by offering grace and support, best practices can grow and children can flourish.

### 6. Increase Resources for Both ECSE Services and Community-based ECE

To support inclusive ECSE services, school districts leverage multiple funding streams, in their own budgets and through community partnerships, such as ECSE (IDEA Part B 619) funding, Head Start, state pre-K, Title I, child care, Medicaid, and/or other local funds. School districts typically utilize ECSE dollars for the ECSE staff and services, supplementing with local funds when available, while other funding, such as state pre-K or Head Start (from the school or community-based program), is used for the other staff and program costs. Across the board, these resources are inadequate.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that many community-based ECE programs struggle with having enough foundational resources for quality programming. This can hinder efforts to increase inclusive, community-based options for ECSE services and impact the quality of experiences for all children served both with and without disabilities. Community-based sites experience challenges with staff turnover, staffing ratios, and quality curricula. Workforce compensation is too low to recruit and retain a well-qualified early childhood workforce. Public funding must be increased to cover the costs of quality and ensure access for all families; the cost of full tuition is already too high for most parents to afford.

Advocacy efforts and strategy development should simultaneously address these issues and the resources needed for providing ECSE services in community-based settings and for increasing the quality of inclusive community-based early care and education. The new federal guidance highlights financing strategies like contracted slots and higher child care or state pre-K reimbursement rates for children with disabilities. It also

recommends that community partners examine the ways that they currently allocate funds within and across programs for early childhood and adjust resource allocations, including layering and braiding funding, to promote inclusion and bolster the quality of programming.<sup>xi</sup> Special education funding also needs to be increased at the federal, state, and local levels to support more inclusive services.

## Continue Striving for Full Inclusion

While starting slowly and implementing multiple models, communities must continue to strive for full inclusion of children with disabilities and delays. It is worth noting that all the districts profiled here continue to serve some children in self-contained ECSE classrooms, as determined in children's IEPs. However, they are striving for additional fully inclusive classrooms and engaging community-based partners to assist with this. Also, for children in self-contained classrooms, at least one of the school districts, Atlanta Public Schools, has a specified goal to transition children in self-contained classrooms to inclusive classrooms within one year. This should be a goal for communities across the country. The demonstrated benefits and positive outcomes for children with and without disabilities to learn together in inclusive early childhood settings are undeniable – and it is a federal protection and guarantee under IDEA.



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<sup>i</sup> The Division For Early Childhood (DEC) And The National Association For The Education Of Young Children (NAEYC) (2009). Joint Statement.

<sup>ii</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the U.S. Department of Education (2023). Policy Statement on Inclusion of Children with Disabilities in Early Childhood Programs. Retrieved on February 1, 2024 from <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/ece/policy-statement-on-inclusion.pdf>

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