



Evaluation Summary of the Expanding Opportunities Interagency Inclusion Initiative

*Increasing and Enhancing Access, Participation and Supports
for All Children in High Quality Inclusive Programs and Services*

May 2011

BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

This paper describes the impetus for creating the Expanding Opportunities Interagency Inclusion Initiative and achievements to date in identifying and implementing effective and efficient inclusion strategies in the participating states. In March 2004, the Child Care Bureau (CCB) (renamed the Office of Child Care) and the Administration on Developmental Disabilities (ADD) in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services convened the *Inclusive Early Care and Education Policy Forum* (Keilty, 2004) to gather information from stakeholders about policies and practices that support the inclusion of children with disabilities in community-based settings and activities. Issues examined included creating early childhood environments that foster full participation for all children with and without disabilities, developing effective training and technical assistance systems, leveraging funding sources and increasing collaboration across programs and services. Forum participants identified “next steps” for Federal and State agencies:

- **Leadership:** Federal agencies can play a leadership role in nurturing the alignment of systems to create a comprehensive, cross-agency collaborative approach to early childhood inclusion to support inclusive policies and practices across all systems involved in the services and supports of young children with and without disabilities
- **Professional Development:** Building comprehensive, evidence-based professional development systems through training and technical assistance is essential to prepare all early care and education providers to promote quality inclusive natural settings for all children
- **Accountability:** State and local systems, as well as service providers, need to be accountable for ensuring that initiatives and practices being implemented promote improved access and participation for young children with disabilities and their families

In December 2004, the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), with the support of the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE), convened a policy forum on *High Quality Inclusion Opportunities for Preschool-Age Children with Disabilities* (Müller & Ahearn, 2005). A variety of recommendations were made by the participants in the areas of public awareness, policy, technical assistance, professional development, data collection and analysis, finance, monitoring, family choice, and research.

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NETWORK

As a direct result of the recommendations generated by the two federal forums, four federal agencies acknowledged the call for action to promote collaborative efforts in states that would result in high quality inclusive opportunities for all children and families. They created the Expanding Opportunities (EO) Initiative and supported it through the coordinated efforts of their technical assistance (TA) resources. The four federal agency partners are:

- Office of Child Care
- Office of Head Start
- Administration on Developmental Disabilities
- Office of Special Education Programs



THE EXPANDING OPPORTUNITIES INITIATIVE PROCESS

In 2005, the EO Initiative began in earnest with a state selection process. For the first four years, cohorts of three or four states were selected and invited to participate by the federal interagency team. Moving forward, the selection approach evolved into a self-nomination application process by states that had not yet engaged with or received TA support from the National Professional Development Center on Inclusion (NPDCI) or SpecialQuest Birth-Five (SQ). As of 2011, twenty-four states have participated in the EO Initiative.

The degree of participation of states in each cohort has varied. Most of the states engaged in a strategic planning process whereby their state interagency

leadership team developed a systems change plan that included a series of activities designed to improve inclusive opportunities for young children with disabilities ages birth through five. However, not all states were able to develop a long term plan for change and not all who developed a plan were able to implement all of the proposed activities. A few states discovered that, due to their current state context, the ability to focus on inclusion was diverted by other priorities requiring attention and resources. Changes in state level leadership also served as an important factor influencing the long term effectiveness or capacity to take action. However, most of the participating states were able to implement their strategic plans and make improvements to their system of services.

The state interagency leadership team has most often comprised of the State Child Care Director/Administrator, the Head Start State Collaboration Office Director, the State Section 619 Preschool Coordinator, the Part C Coordinator, and the University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities Director. Originally, the newly identified EO state leadership teams with additional state representatives met to begin the planning process at the National Inclusion Institute conducted annually in Chapel Hill, NC. Meeting during the National Inclusion Institute provided additional benefits to the new state teams as it offered the opportunity to learn about current research findings, best practice models and resources related to inclusive policy, professional development and practice. The participation of team representatives to attend the Institute continues to be supported, but due to increasing budget and travel constraints faced by state personnel, the teams conduct the majority of their planning before and after the Institute. The team members that do attend the Inclusion Institute meet with their TA team and take advantage of the opportunity to engage in discussion, strengthen relationships by working on their vision and mission and make plans for subsequent meetings in the state allowing for broader stakeholder input into the planning process with members of the interagency TA team.

The importance of interagency TA to the state teams became clearer with each passing year. Having an interagency TA team representing child care, Head Start and early childhood special education and early intervention provided a crucial breadth and depth of support, providing key information and resources to the planning and implementation process that no single TA entity could provide. The interagency TA team is responsible for supporting the development of a state's plan by providing joint facilitation to support the strategic planning process. The plan is then fully developed in each state with input from a group of stakeholders with broad representation to address diverse needs and improve coordination among state and local agencies. The state leadership team is ultimately responsible for implementing the plan, modifying it as needed, monitoring activities, and evaluating progress and impacts. They receive ongoing assistance from the interagency TA team over one to three years with both the development and implementation of the plan. The TA providers facilitate on-site meetings, conference calls, and statewide training events as well as provide resources and information to support implementation of specific activities on the plan. There is also regular communication between the TA providers and state leadership team members to assess progress and evaluate plan activities.

PURPOSE OF STUDY/REPORT AND METHODOLOGY

In June 2010, NECTAC began an evaluation of the EO Initiative to identify the impacts on participating states and to understand the types of processes or characteristics that have facilitated success. Four types of data collection were used for the evaluation: portfolio review of existing data collected over the last five years (including follow up survey data and state portfolios documenting the journey and outcomes achieved in EO states), a focus group of NECTAC TA Specialists working with EO states, a validity check with national TA partners to confirm the themes identified during the previous two data collection processes, and a validation survey of EO state contacts to verify the impacts in their states.

- **Portfolio review:** A review of existing data was key to identifying the impacts that had occurred in EO states. NECTAC TA staff and evaluators reviewed more than five years of data that included state strategic plans, survey data from states participating in EO, and evidence of impacts that had occurred in states.
- **Focus group:** A focus group with NECTAC TA Specialists who have been highly involved with EO states was conducted and the data collected were summarized into themes. Two questions were used during the discussion: (1) What has been the impact on state systems and inclusive opportunities for young children with disabilities in community-based settings and activities as a result of participation in EO? (2) What processes contributed to successful implementation of work supported under EO, or what factors were influential in helping states achieve identified impacts?
- **Validity check with national TA partners:** A validity check of national TA partners involved in EO was conducted to verify the types of facilitators and impacts that had occurred in each EO state. TA partners were sent a list of the 'themes' identified through the NECTAC focus group and portfolio review. Partners were asked to confirm or edit, and their suggestions were incorporated.
- **Validation survey of EO state contacts:** A validation survey of EO state contacts was conducted to confirm the types of impacts that had occurred in each EO state. State contacts were sent a chart identifying areas of impacts in their state and were asked to verify the accuracy of the data and provide edits to ensure the accuracy of the data. Please note that as of 2010 and the collection of these data, twenty states had participated in the EO Initiative. The percentages that follow in the Impacts section of this paper are aggregate data from the validation surveys verified by contacts in the first twenty states that participated in the EO Initiative. Four more states were added in 2011, but are still in the development phase of their plans and are accordingly not included in this evaluation.

FACILITATORS OF SUCCESS FOR EXPANDING OPPORTUNITIES

Through the evaluation, TA providers working with EO states identified numerous facilitators of success:

- Strong federal support and guidance
- Strong and designated state leadership
- Having a designated person who is willing to serve as facilitator for the group to ensure that meetings occur and to coordinate all initiative activities
- Strong state level interagency support, including representation across agencies; regular communication and participation in workgroups or other efforts; joint decision making or problem solving
- Use of effective frameworks for systems change
- Dedication of financial resources and collaboration to maximize the use of existing resources; willingness to put resources into efforts (TA, training, workgroups, etc.)
- Collaborative training and technical assistance across national, state, and regional TA entities
- Commitment, momentum, passion for inclusion

IMPACTS IN STATES IMPLEMENTING EXPANDING OPPORTUNITIES

Across all data collection methods, NECTAC TA Specialists, EO state contacts and national TA providers identified six areas of impact that emerged from the EO Initiative. As a result of participation in EO, states were able to:

Impact	% of EO states
(1) Strengthen partnerships across state agencies or initiatives	80%
(2) Increase public awareness regarding inclusion	65%
(3) Improve personnel development systems	60%
(4) Effectively address funding and finance barriers to inclusion	45%
(5) Launch other inclusion initiatives	40%
(6) Build community partnerships and local coordination to support inclusion	40%

Strengthened Partnerships across State Agencies or Initiatives

Eighty percent (80%) of EO states have established new (or improved existing) state-level partnerships and cross-sector collaboration necessary for ensuring an effective state-level infrastructure that supports opportunities for young children with disabilities. For some, that has come in the form of new or revised interagency agreements or formalized agreements between EO and other state level professional development initiatives that delineate roles, responsibilities, and expectations across agencies. For others, new cross-sector policy workgroups were created to focus on inclusion by concentrating efforts to broaden representation at the state and regional levels to include perspectives from all component areas involved in providing opportunities for and supporting young children with disabilities. While some workgroups focused on state policy issues and barriers, others focused on professional development opportunities. These working relationships between agencies developed over time and fostered improved communication and more effective decision making during meetings.

Increased Public Awareness regarding Inclusion

Sixty-five percent (65%) of EO states have implemented new public awareness efforts related to the benefits of inclusion. For example, two states developed and implemented communication and marketing plans that focus on inclusion, targeting all essential audiences. One of those states developed parent information sheets on finding support for specific disabilities such as autism and Fragile X syndrome while the other state gave presentations about the EO Initiative at professional conferences and published an article on inclusion in a statewide child care journal. In other states, new brochures, flyers and websites were created to educate administrators, early care and education providers, families and others about inclusion. One state is currently working on a tool kit of state and national resources to support parents and providers on inclusion. One component of the tool kit is a public awareness flyer on the benefits of inclusion, which is available in English, Spanish and Creole.

Links to state materials/evidence:

- AZ — An Early Childhood Inclusion Coalition (ECIC) website
<http://www.ade.az.gov/earlychildhood/ecic/>
- AZ — Brochure on How Early Childhood Inclusion Benefits Children, Families, Professionals and the Community
<http://www.ade.az.gov/earlychildhood/ecic/InclusionBrochure.pdf>
- DE — Information for Families: Did you know that ALL Children Benefit from Inclusion of Children with Disabilities
<http://dhss.delaware.gov/dhss/dms/epqc/birth3/files/brochure.pdf>
- DE — (MAPS) Meaningful Access Participation & Supports Toolkit
http://www.dhss.delaware.gov/dhss/dms/epqc/birth3/files/de_maps_inclusion.pdf
- FL — Expanding Opportunities for Inclusion Children Birth to Five
<http://www.centraldirectory.org/uploads/PubAwareFlyer-Englishlogo.pdf>
- ME — An Overview of Expanding Inclusive Opportunities (includes extensive glossary)
<http://www.umaine.edu/ExpandInclusiveOpp/default.htm>
- ME — An Early Childhood Settings Inclusion Toolkit
http://www.umaine.edu/ExpandInclusiveOpp/inclusion_toolkit/default.htm



Improved Personnel Development Systems

Sixty percent (60%) of EO states changed their personnel development systems to enhance provider accessibility to resources and supports for inclusion. Several states (e.g., including those who became NPDCI and/or SQ states) have begun to develop cross-sector systems of professional development. Other states have revised state licensing or competencies and have strengthened language on inclusion. Some states have developed interagency training and TA resources and have conducted new and revised training and TA specific to inclusion.

Links to state materials/evidence:

- FL — PreKindergarten Children with Disabilities: Expanding Opportunities for Providing Services
<http://www.fldoe.org/ese/pdf/PreK-disabALL.pdf>
- ID — A Resource on Inclusion for Child Care Training and Professional Development
<http://www.idahostars.org/dnn/InclusionResources/tabid/114/Default.aspx>
- ID — Quality Rating and Improvement System
http://www.idahoayc.org/idahostars_qris_centers.php
- ME — Early Care and Education Training Calendar
<http://ecetrainingcalendar.muskie.usm.maine.edu/public/main.aspx>
- ME — List of Online Training Resources Focused on Serving Children with Special Needs and Inclusion
<http://www.umaine.edu/ExpandInclusiveOpp/training-resources/default.htm>
- WI — Wisconsin Early Childhood Collaborating Partners information about initiatives for professional development
<http://www.collaboratingpartners.com/professional-development-initiatives.php>

Professional development systems: One state created a state-level work group to develop a cross-sector system of Personnel Development, and as a new NPDCI grantee, gained support related to county-level training and TA. Those efforts have resulted in state and county level partners working together to provide services in collaboration with one another. Consequently, this state received funding from its Department of Education to continue training activities in 14 counties. A second

state developed a system of cross-sector professional development opportunities resulting in joint training by the Preschool 619 Coordinator and State Head Start Collaboration Office Director on how to better serve Part B children who have IEPs in Head Start programs. Enhanced communication and collaboration have moved the work forward. Another state that selected personnel development as an objective was awarded a 3-year SpecialQuest (SQ) support grant. This supported their efforts to focus on professional development opportunities such as designing quality training services that teach early education and child care providers how to include children with disabilities in settings alongside their typically developing peers. They also established demonstration sites in three counties to apply SQ methods and materials, and these trainings have resulted in community action plans with potential replication in other parts of the state. Lastly, one state undertook developing an Inclusion Certificate (45 hours) for child care with a combination of Easter Seals, SQ, and Cara's Kit trainings, as part of the tiered credential/PD matrix.

State licensure/competencies: One state drafted core competencies for training Special Education professionals and revised early childhood competencies to include inclusion practices. A second state provided input specific to inclusion on core competencies for early care and education practitioners resulting in the improvement of the state's capacity to provide inclusive early childhood education services. These competencies were then used as a framework for professional development training content and will be embedded in professional development training activities across the state. This state is also in the process of drafting targeted competencies for early childhood inclusion. Competencies will be used in conjunction with the core competencies when planning professional development activities within the state. Involvement of Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs) resulted in the EO team directly benefiting from the time and efforts that doctoral students have been able to make on behalf of this effort. The EO team in another state reviewed and contributed input on child care licensing requirements during public review.

Training resources: One state developed and utilized training and TA products and later conducted joint training. A second state has created a website on inclusion resources, providing training materials to providers about children with disabilities and the inclusion of children in the classroom. Change trickled down to the local level when the state created a support document titled *PreKindergarten Children with Disabilities: Expanding Opportunities for Providing Services* (<http://www.fldoe.org/ese/pdf/PreK-disabALL.pdf>) designed to assist school districts in making decisions about the critical steps to be considered when determining the most appropriate service provision for preschool children with disabilities. Another state compiled a comprehensive list of online training opportunities that support skills for inclusive practices to be located on the Head Start Collaboration Project website for professional development and to support the professional development goals of the Early Learning Council. Other states developed early childhood community toolkits, modified child care training materials and put together awareness training materials designed to educate ECSE providers on inclusion and community placements.

T/TA to workforce: The creation of interagency/cross-sector training programs regarding inclusion has led to a coordinated training calendar in one state. A second state expanded existing training opportunities so that Head Start teachers could access/attend a professional development curriculum designed to enhance early childhood care and education skills. This state also applied for and received funding to provide T/TA in 14 selected counties that were identified as having the fewest children placed in community placements. Low performing programs were given additional aid and guidance. Another state has Model Early Learning Standards trainers working to enhance LRE throughout all counties by preparing teachers and child care providers with the skills necessary for serving children with disabilities. Training participants included community partners from public school systems, child care agencies, mental health services and special education providers,

among others. In another state, community colleges have integrated SQ into early childhood courses. Additionally, advocacy for and implementation of presentations and training workshops on inclusion at state-wide conferences has increased.

Effectively Addressed Funding and Finance Barriers to Inclusion

Forty-five percent (45%) of EO states have addressed challenging issues related to funding and finance that can be barriers to including young children with disabilities. For example, one state determined the barriers to accessing special purpose reimbursement rates through the child care subsidy program and was able to address one known specific barrier to increase the enhanced rate to the amount needed rather than the past rate of four hours per day. A second state has passed legislation to change the funding structure of special education to be needs-based, supporting more inclusive placements. Since 2007, this state's Request for Proposal information for contracting with Medicaid Managed Care Organizations (MMCO) has been worded to allow payment for service regardless of location, thereby removing the barrier to natural environments of the MMCO plan. In a third state, an online survey related in part to funding barriers was conducted to assess perceptions, practices and concerns for serving young children with disabilities in early care and education programs. The responses are being developed into an executive summary to share with state agencies.

Launched other Inclusion Initiatives

Forty percent (40%) of EO states have used their early EO work to launch other inclusion initiatives. This is not surprising since the early stages of EO involve introducing states to existing models and resources funded to support states with inclusion. For example, EO was the impetus for one newly formed team to apply to become an NPDCI grantee. The state was successful and subsequently benefited from NPDCI support in the development of cross-sector systems of professional development to ensure that early childhood teachers are prepared to educate and care for young children with disabilities in settings among their typically developing peers.

In another state, an EO state-level cross-sector team drafted a successful SQ application, received the 3-year support grant, and essentially assumed SQ as a new identity for the EO work focusing primarily on professional development opportunities such as quality training services that teach early education and child care providers how to include children with disabilities in settings alongside their typically developing peers. And in a third state, a cross-agency team applied for (but did not receive) CSEFEL and NPDCI grants. Instead, they used the NPDCI conceptual framework in combination with the NECTAC Long-term Systems Change Model and TA support, and then narrowed the focus to professional development.

Built Community Partnerships and Local Coordination

Forty percent (40%) of EO states have also been successful in developing community partnerships and local coordination to improve inclusive opportunities for young children with disabilities. In a number of states, the EO work (or work that has evolved from EO into other initiatives) has resulted in community level changes. In one state, EO was influential in facilitating the collaboration of child care and Head Start to participate in local councils designed to bring community leaders together to create initiatives that promote natural placements for children with disabilities. In another state where EO led to becoming an NPDCI grantee, the state gained support related to county-level training and TA. These efforts resulted in state and county level partners working together and providing services in collaboration with one another. The State Department of Education in this state is supporting 14 community teams at the county level to support inclusion with the ambition of expanding statewide. In a third state, demonstration sites were established in 3 counties for the purpose of applying SQ methods and materials. Joint trainings have built strong collaborative relationships among local entities addressing EC education and care, including private child care organizations, family child care, Head Start programs, public schools, and EI services, resulting in community action plans. Finally, one state developed a system level guide to

assist school districts in making decisions about inclusive early childhood placements for prekindergarten children with disabilities *PreKindergarten Children with Disabilities: Expanding Opportunities for Providing Services* (<http://www.fldoe.org/ese/pdf/PreK-disabALL.pdf>).

CLOSING

The EO Initiative was successfully launched in 2005 in response to the ‘call to action’ of four federal partners to promote collaborative efforts in states to promote high quality inclusive opportunities for all children and families. As of 2010 and the collection of these data, twenty states had participated in the EO Initiative. Four additional states have now joined and are participating in the EO Initiative, but are still in the development phase of their plans and are not represented in this evaluation. While there is not yet impact data at the child and family level, impacts at the state, community and practitioner levels have been identified. These impacts support what DEC and NAEYC refer to as the defining features of early childhood inclusion used to describe high quality early childhood programs; access, participation and supports. Some key facilitators of success in the EO states emerged early on, including strong federal support and guidance, collaborative T/TA across national, state, and regional TA entities, use of evidence-based frameworks, financial resources, strong interagency support and strong and designated state leadership. Participation in the EO Initiative has led to new partnerships across agencies, the launch of other inclusion initiatives, addressing funding barriers, increasing public awareness regarding the positive impacts of inclusion, improving professional development and building community partnerships and local coordination. These impacts on both state and community systems have resulted in enhanced inclusive opportunities for young children with disabilities in community-based settings and activities.

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For more information about the EO initiative, you can visit the NECTAC website where the following resources are available:

- NECTAC Expanding Opportunities main web page: <http://nectac.org/expopps/>
- Expanding Opportunities states and links to products: <http://nectac.org/expopps/states.asp>
- An overview of the Expanding Opportunities Interagency Inclusion Initiative: http://nectac.org/~pdfs/pubs/nectac_eval_expopps.pdf

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