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**All Children Have Individual Needs  
Building an Inclusive Preschool for All Program  
Principles and Considerations for Planning and Implementation  
September 24, 2004**

Several coordinated initiatives are underway in California to make access to high-quality preschool a reality for all California children. As this process moves forward, parents, inclusion specialists, and other advocates for children with special needs are an important source of expertise to ensure that preschool planning and implementation address barriers to inclusion of all children. Inclusion is not simply the presence of children with disabilities or special needs in preschool programs; rather, it is the full and active participation of children with disabilities or other special needs, along with typically developing children, in community activities, services, and programs, including preschool. If support, accommodations, or modifications are necessary to ensure full, active participation, they are provided appropriately. The degree to which preschool programs are successful in including children with special needs into their programs should be considered an important indicator of overall program quality.

On January 27, 2004 and April 30, 2004, the Child Care Law Center, Children Now, and Preschool California convened a meeting of 20 advocates who have direct experience in working with families with children with disabilities, have developed and implemented inclusive programs, or hold expertise in child care workforce development. The group met to discuss the principles that should be an integral part of planning for a preschool for all system. It was the participants' and conveners' intent that this be an initial step toward development of a coordinated approach to inclusion on the part of various preschool initiatives and a resource for state and local level planning. We drew upon the work done by the Los Angeles Master Plan for Universal Preschool Special Needs Committee. While we look forward to continuing our work with this collaborative on a number of areas that need further research and discussion, we developed and agreed upon the following principles at the meeting.

In developing the principles below, the group agreed upon a broad definition of "special needs" and "disability" that must be used when developing an inclusive preschool system and programs. We define children with disabilities or special needs as

*children who are protected by the Americans with Disabilities Act or who have, or are at risk for, a chronic physical, developmental, behavioral, or emotional condition and who also require developmental, health, mental health, and related services and/or supports of a type or amount beyond that required generally.*

Stringent eligibility criteria for the provision of "accommodations" should be avoided.

Certain themes permeated our discussion and all agreed that two in particular must underlie any inclusive preschool program. *First*, all parents must be given the opportunity to choose from among high-quality programs within the universal preschool system. *Second*, all facets of a system or program must meet families' linguistic and cultural needs.

**Family Partnerships:** An inclusive preschool program must foster a collaborative relationship between teachers and family members to ensure high quality care for children and support parents as contributors to the program. It must:

- ensure ongoing two-way communication to establish trust and respect between the program and families while remembering that parents are, and should be, the principal influence on their children.
- facilitate a streamlined process for entry into and access to a coordinated delivery system.
- obtain express consent from parents, in a language accessible to them, for all services, assessments, and testing.
- educate consumers (parents and other family members) regarding their choices and their right to access high quality programs.
- link with and integrate ongoing support and services beyond preschool services (e.g., occupational and physical therapy).
- link with existing parent-to-parent organizations.
- ensure that family members have access to and knowledge of relevant laws and regulations in a language they understand.
- have the cultural and language capacity to take advantage of family members' expertise and knowledge about their children.

**Outreach:** An inclusive preschool system or program must reach out affirmatively to families and children that have not yet been identified as having special needs, children already receiving services, and programs providing those services. It must not place the burden on families to seek out the program. It must:

- reach out to children who are at increased risk for under-identification, including those in foster care, homeless families, migrant and otherwise mobile families, in a linguistically and culturally appropriate manner without labeling these children as having special needs based only on these factors.
- address a wide range of needs for both the child and the family members.
- be knowledgeable about and have connections to relevant service organizations.
- make inclusion principles and practices and children with special needs part of all community outreach and media reports.

**Screening:** An inclusive preschool program must screen every child who enrolls to identify and understand the child's overall individual needs as well as to identify disabilities and other special needs. It must:

- identify any social, emotional, and behavioral development issues as early as possible.
- use high quality screening tools that have adequate sensitivity.
- use an integrated screening system that involves preschool providers, parents, pediatricians, and other service and physical and mental health professionals and leads to appropriate next steps.

**Assessment:** An inclusive preschool system must ensure that children need not “fail” before receiving services. It must:

- undertake early assessment and appropriate intervention for all children who may be at risk.
- engage families in proactive assessment of their child’s progress with existing supports in the current setting.
- use multiple high quality assessment tools and measures that have adequate specificity, validity, reliability, and are aligned with curriculum goals; have been standardized on diverse populations, and are developmentally, linguistically, and culturally appropriate.
- include ongoing methods of informal assessments
- ensure that accommodations are made available for children during assessments

**Curriculum and Classroom Practices:** An inclusive preschool curriculum must be effective for all children. It must:

- be developmentally, culturally, linguistically, and age appropriate.
- be flexible in using accommodations and adaptations that will allow integration of children of varying abilities.
- embed inclusive practices.
- promote individualized and differentiated instruction.
- create a caring community in the classroom.
- embed social skills training.
- incorporate the goals and strategies written in a child’s IEP, IPP, IFSP, Section 504 plans as well as individual curriculum plans for children without formal plans.

**Facilities and Environments:** An inclusive preschool facility and surrounding environment whether newly constructed or undergoing renovation, must:

- make meeting inclusion goals a priority in allocating funding for facilities development and renovation.
- be accessible to children with varied disabilities and other special needs.
- facilitate the inclusion and promotion of imaginative, interactive, dramatic social play between children of all abilities and developmental stages.
- provide children with diverse opportunities to be creative, to learn, and to grow with structures and supports to encourage collaboration that is safe, fun and educational and based on best practices and current research.
- be sensory rich, diverse, and developmentally appropriate for children of varied abilities and include a variety of textures and tactile materials.
- be planned from its earliest stage to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act, the California Building Codes and all other applicable state and federal law.
- incorporate best practices for accessible facilities in all stages of planning and implementation, inasmuch as making facilities truly accessible is much more difficult and expensive once classrooms and playgrounds are constructed.

**Delivery System:** An inclusive preschool delivery system must integrate special education and related services into all aspects of its program to create a system that addresses the needs of preschool children, taking into account the varying forms of care children experience prior to

preschool and the importance of seamless transition from early care to preschool and preschool to kindergarten. It must:

- integrate children into full-day, full-year programs as family circumstances require while maintaining the flexibility that children with disabilities and their families may need.
- ensure that all child-based state standards are written to include children with special needs.
- promote coordinated delivery of services and create a streamlined process that avoids requiring families to apply to multiple agencies to receive the services they need.
- make specialty services available in a way that is appropriate and convenient by, e.g., bringing services to children rather than transporting children to services.
- establish adult/child ratios that allow for inclusion of children of all abilities and needs.
- establish and support an oversight entity (individual or office) whose function is to help parents navigate the complex system of services for their children with disabilities.
- make special efforts to avoid disruption of services at points such as the transition from child care or early intervention programs to pre-school and pre-school to kindergarten.
- incorporate a child's IFSP, IPP, IEP, Section 504 plans and any informal individual plans within the delivery of services.
- minimize the number of transitions and settings the child experiences on a daily or weekly basis, and the number of adults with whom the child must interact, while still meeting the family's needs for child care.
- formalize agreements between agencies (e.g., California Department of Education, Resource & Referral Agencies, Family Resource Centers, Special Education Providers, Special Education Local Planning Agencies, child care, Head Start, etc) to promote co-ownership of responsibility for meeting children's needs.
- integrate public and private programs at the management/administration level to foster collaboration.
- anticipate the needs of families who have the greatest difficulty in ensuring that their children's needs are met, such as homeless, foster, migrant, and mobile families.
- anticipate barriers to inclusion and address them at the policy and planning stages.
- address the particular challenges to rural programs when rural communities are included in the service area.
- throughout the child's preschool experience, involve parents in service planning, including participation in developing IEP's, IFP's, IFSP's, Section 504 plans and informal individual plans to foster a smooth transition to kindergarten. Effective education and service planning should include all appropriate family members and service providers.

**Workforce Development:** An inclusive preschool program must recruit, develop, and retain a workforce that understands the importance of the relationship among children, family members, and staff and possesses the capacity and qualifications to serve, relate to, and advocate for a broad range of children. The program must:

- integrate qualifications to serve children with disabilities and other special needs into the overall definition of qualifications and ensure that institutes of higher education offer classes to reach this goal.

- train education workforce in inclusion principles and practices, implementation of these principles and practices within the whole system, how to build partnerships with families, and how to work with all the child's service providers. Training must:
  - include a working knowledge of the relevant laws and regulations that applies to educating children with disabilities and other special needs.
  - include both "specialized" providers who also have knowledge of how to work in groups and general education teachers who know how to work with children with disabilities and other special needs.
  - include direct experience in inclusion settings.
  - include model parent-professional partnerships.
  - involve both parents and providers, be ongoing, and be offered in multiple settings.
  - promote seamless transitions between the early intervention/special education system and the child's preschool.
- involve service providers and educators who work with children with special needs in planning preschool programs.
- ensure inclusion and disability and behavioral health specialists in leadership and administrative positions to implement the adoption of policies to meet children's special needs.
- make ongoing support and joint training available to teachers, parents, and service providers to promote integration of all services and service providers into the preschool setting.
- provide opportunities for the workforce to develop best practices for accommodating children with different abilities, including communication at the important transition points between Early Intervention and preschool and between preschool and the K-12 system.
- ensure that the workforce has access to ongoing technical assistance and support from disability specialists, e.g., physical, occupational, and speech therapists and mental health care providers.
- help create an early care and education career ladder that includes opportunities for specialized training in inclusive preschool services that leads to an additional degree or credential (e.g. dual credentials in Early Childhood Education and Early Childhood Special Education).
- ensure that staff receive support from their supervision in their work with families, including time for Reflective Supervision.

**Financing:** An inclusive preschool program must have sufficient financing in place to provide necessary services. It must:

- establish a rate structure that recognizes both the real cost of high quality inclusive programs for all children and the special needs of particular children.
- blend funding streams creatively and appropriately to craft a cost-efficient system that can meet each family's needs and maximize access for all families.
- leverage existing funds and explore new sources of funds.

**Evaluation:** An inclusive preschool program must evaluate its success on an ongoing basis to ensure that it is meeting the needs of all children. It must:

- ensure that tools used to determine program quality or an individual child's progress include measures of full inclusion of children with disabilities and other special needs.
- ensure that evaluation integrates requirements from different systems (e.g., federal and state requirements).
- ensure that overall program funding and contract decisions are based on the evaluation of the program and not the assessment of individual children.
- ensure that program evaluation does not limit access for families with children with disabilities and other special needs.
- use or develop evaluation tools that are appropriate for preschool programs.
- ensure that families have opportunities to participate in ongoing evaluation.
- ensure that programs have a process through which outcomes from evaluations can be incorporated.

Nothing in these principles will preclude any program from complying with or allow for the erosion of any entitlements or special services required or allowed by federal, state or local laws.

*The following is a list of those who participated in the drafting of the above principles. Those who are available for technical assistance are indicated below.*

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