

# Preschool Inclusion: Ohio's Guidance



**PRESCHOOL INCLUSION AND  
LEAST RESTRICTIVE ENVIRONMENT STATE WORKGROUP**

In Ohio’s Strategic Plan for Education, the vision is that each child is challenged to discover and learn, prepared to pursue a fulfilling post-high school path, and empowered to become a resilient, lifelong learner who contributes to society. In order to support schools in creating the environments where this happens for each child, this document offers an introduction to including each child, beginning in preschool. We hope that districts will use this document to examine their current practices and consider steps to expand these practices along the full continuum of inclusion.


Ohio’s guidance reflects the commitment of the Ohio Department of Education’s Office of Early Learning and School Readiness to help districts promote educational access and participation for preschool children with disabilities. The Department is committed to helping preschools provide children with disabilities the opportunity to receive special education and related services in least restrictive environments and show progress in environments that include their peers.

### WHAT IS PRESCHOOL INCLUSION?

Preschool inclusion “refers to including children with disabilities in early childhood programs, together with their peers without disabilities; holding high expectations and intentionally promoting participation in all learning and social activities, facilitated by individualized accommodations; and using evidence-based services and supports to foster their development (cognitive, language, communication, physical, behavioral, and social-emotional), friendships with peers, and sense of belonging. This applies to all young children with disabilities, from those with the mildest disabilities, to those with the most significant disabilities” (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, U.S. Department of Education, 2014).

Preschool inclusion consists of the values, policies and practices that support the right of every young child and his or her family to participate in a broad range of activities and contexts as full members of families, communities and society.

The defining features of high-quality preschool inclusion are Access, Participation and Supports (DEC/NAEYC, 2009).

	<p><b>Access:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Ensure all children have access to multiple, varied learning opportunities; typical routines, activities and settings; and general education curricula.</li><li>• Use Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles and technology to ensure and expand access.</li></ul> <p><b>Participation:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Ensure all children are active, independent participants in their families, classrooms and communities.</li><li>• Use a range of instructional practices to ensure all children have opportunities to engage, participate, and learn.</li><li>• Use adaptations to promote active participation and sense of belonging for all children.</li></ul>
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- Emphasize the needs of the individual child and his or her family.

## Supports:

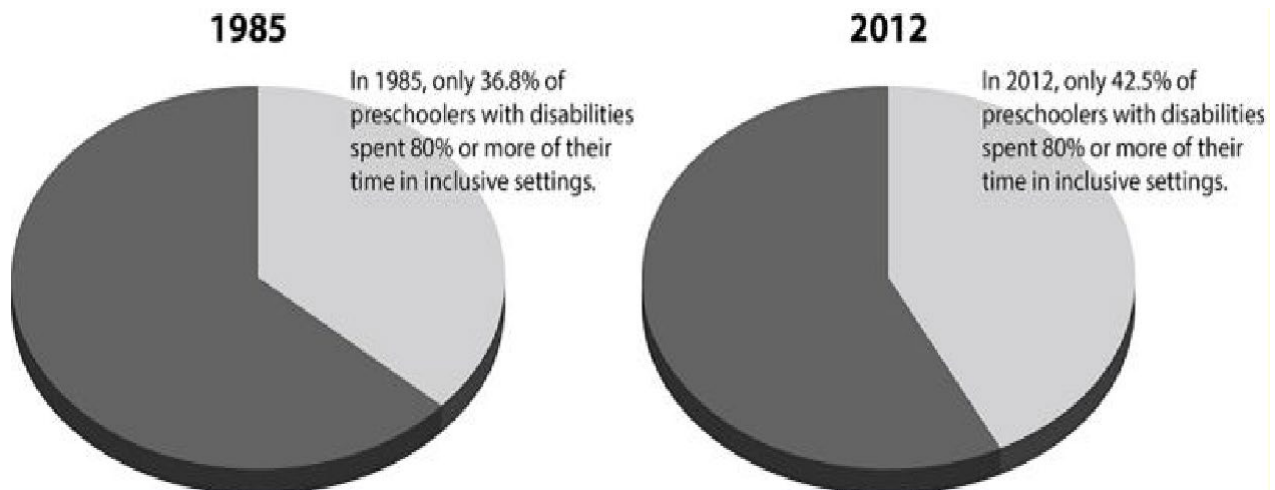
- Provide broad, infrastructure-level support to administrators, teachers and staff.
- Ensure all adults involved have access to high-quality professional development; effective, ongoing assistance; and support for collaboration.
- Develop and implement effective policies that promote high-quality preschool inclusion.

**PRESCHOOL INCLUSION IS NOT:**

- A decision based on administrative, personnel or budgetary convenience;
- A decision made without informed family input and approval;
- A setting designed primarily for special education programming; or
- Possible without planning the supports children and adults need, such as training, services and accommodations.

**WHY DOES PRESCHOOL INCLUSION MATTER?**

The research is clear: to maximize progress for preschool children with disabilities, they must have access to inclusive learning opportunities with peers who do not have disabilities. Neither Ohio nor the nation have made the desired progress in ensuring this access. “In 27 years, the practice of providing special education and related services in regular early childhood settings to preschoolers with disabilities has increased only 5.7%” (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, U.S. Department of Education, 2014). According to the U.S. Department of Education’s 40th Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, published in 2018, in 2016 only 39.9% of children were reported as attending a regular early childhood program at least 10 hours per week and receiving the majority of special education and related services in the regular early childhood program.



*The Preschool Inclusion Toolbox: How to Build and Lead a High-Quality Program* by Erin E. Barton and Barbara J. Smith. Copyright 2015. Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co. All Rights Reserved.

## WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS ABOUT PRESCHOOL INCLUSION

- High-quality inclusive classrooms with higher ratios of peers were found to have a significant impact on children with disabilities language skills (Justice, Logan, Lin, & Kaderavek 2014).
- “Some studies have shown that children with disabilities in inclusive settings experienced greater cognitive and communication development than children with disabilities who were in separate settings, with this being particularly apparent among children with more significant disabilities. Further, children with disabilities tend to have similar levels of engagement as their typically developing peers and are more likely to practice newly acquired skills in inclusive settings as compared to separate settings” (Nahmias, Kase, & Mandell, 2014); Rafferty, Piscitelli, & Boettcher, 2003).
- “In addition to making learning and achievement gains, children with disabilities in inclusive early childhood programs also demonstrate stronger social-emotional skills than their peers in separate settings” (Nahmias, Kase, & Mandell, 2014; Rafferty, Piscitelli, & Boettcher, 2003; Guralnick et al., 1996; Freeman & Alkins, 2000; Katz & Mirenda, 2002).
- “High quality inclusion that begins early and continues into school likely produces the strongest outcomes. Studies have shown that children with disabilities who spend more time in general education classes tend to be absent fewer days from school and have higher test scores in reading and math than those who spend less time in general education classes and spending more time in general education classes was related to a higher probability of employment and higher earnings” (Blockorby et al., 2004; Rea, McLaughlin, Walther-Thomas, 2002).
- Children without disabilities also can benefit from inclusive early childhood programs. Studies indicate that typically developing children can show positive developmental, social and attitudinal outcomes from inclusive experiences. They also can develop a better understanding of diversity and disability as concepts (Strain & Hoyson, 2000; Cross, Traub, Hutter-Pishgahi, Shelton, 2004; Diamond & Huang, 2005).

## WHAT DOES OHIO DATA LOOK LIKE?

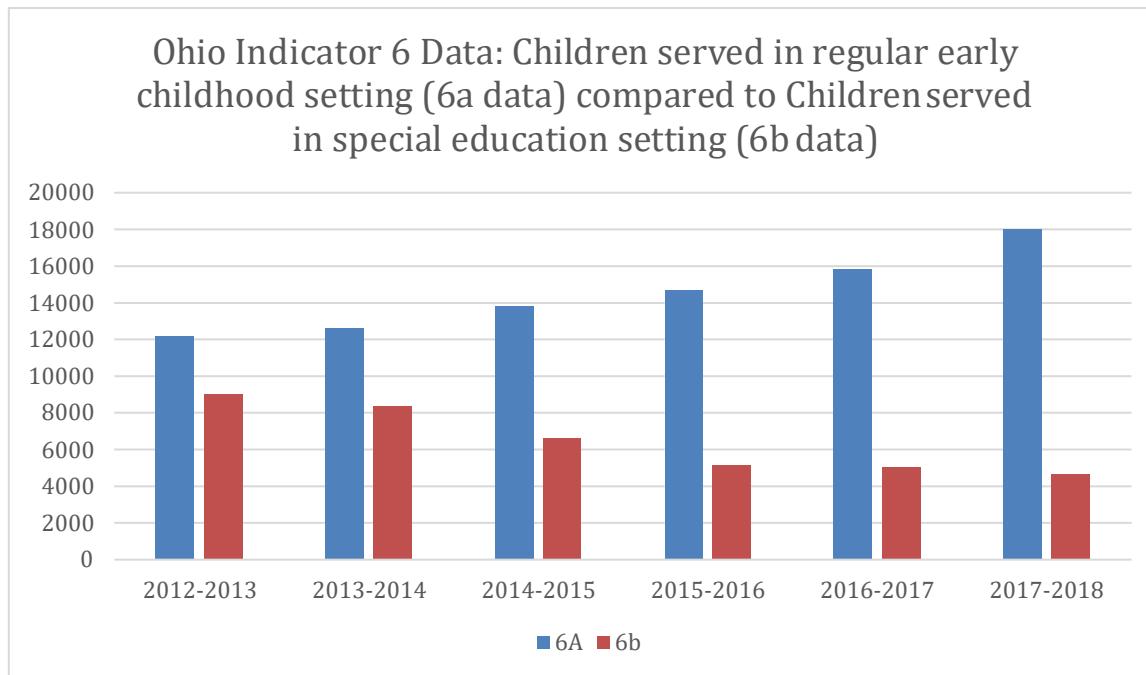


Figure 1: State Performance Plan Indicator 6 data

In Ohio Department of Education-licensed preschool special education programs, the majority of children receive services in a regular early childhood setting. State Performance Plan data provided in Figure 1 above show a consistent increase in the number of children served in a regular early childhood setting (6a data) compared to children served in a special education setting (6b data).

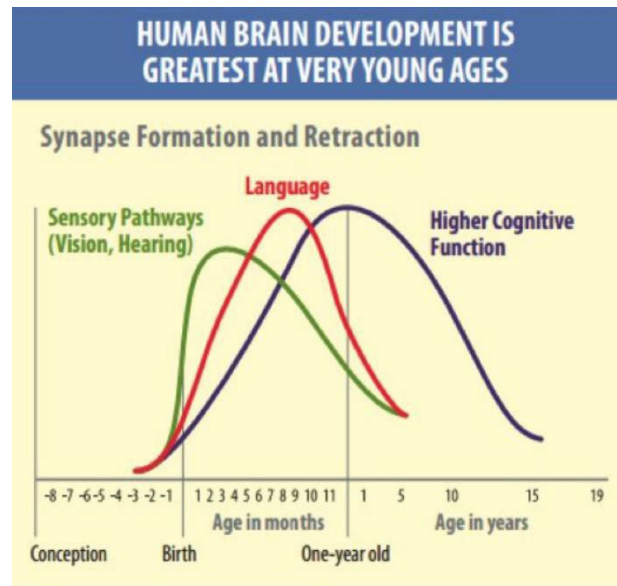
In Ohio, a regular early childhood setting typically consists of a 50:50 ratio of children with disabilities and their typically developing peers. In this setting, an early childhood intervention specialist provides both specially designed instruction for children with disabilities and general education instruction. While a 50:50 ratio meets the minimum federal definition of an early childhood setting, it does not reflect the ideal representation of preschool inclusion that research has shown to maximize the progress of children with disabilities. Also, Ohio's current reporting system does not represent service delivery options in a continuum of least restrictive environments, which limits interpretation of that data.

An electronic statewide survey of early childhood stakeholders was completed in May of 2018 by the Early Learning and School Readiness Preschool Inclusion and Least Restrictive Environment State Workgroup. A total of 221 program stakeholders including administrators, general education teachers, intervention specialists, school psychologists, and related service providers responded to the survey. Only 17 percent of respondents reported offering services in an inclusive setting that reflected natural proportions (the number of children with disabilities is in proportion to their presence in the general population), while 86.7 percent of respondents reported an integrated preschool special education program as a service option. Furthermore, respondents said that many factors influence their schools' decisions about least restrictive environments, including children's behavioral and accommodation needs, classroom enrollment availability and parent preference. Only 42 percent of respondents considered the location of the child at the time of eligibility determination, which leads to confusion for the parent about the options available.

## EQUITY AND EARLY DEVELOPMENT

All children have the right to inclusive opportunities in high-quality preschools. These opportunities are critical for young children with disabilities to build the foundations they need for learning and development in all domains.

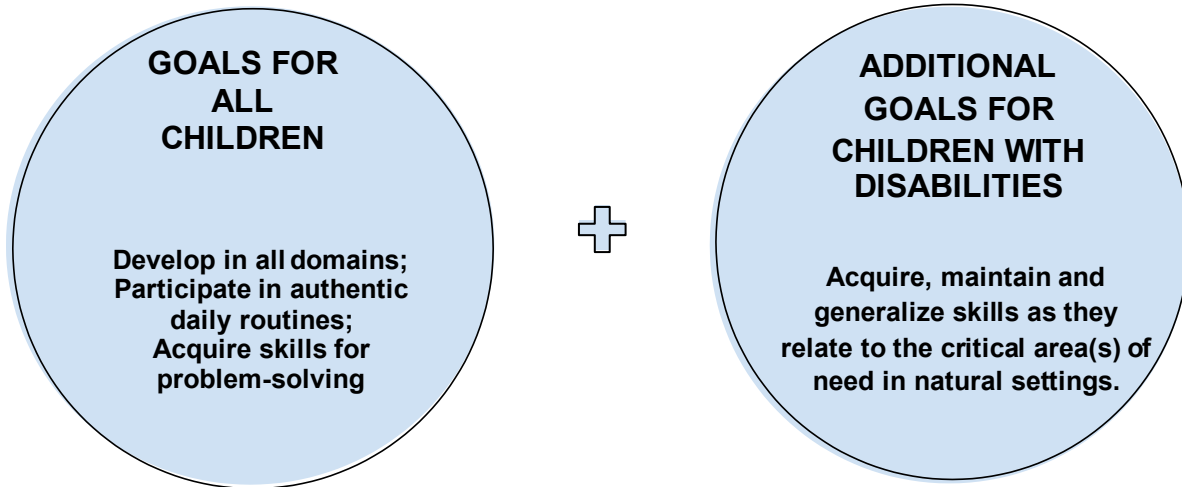
The first five years of life are characterized by rapid brain development. In fact, 90 percent of all brain development occurs in the first three years of life.



SOURCE: C.A. Nelson in Jack P. Shonkoff and Deborah A. Phillips, eds, *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*, National Academy Press (2000), p. 188.

High-quality environments, experiences and relationships have a powerful impact on brain development during this period, presenting a critical opportunity to prepare **all** children for **all** future learning. The concept of inclusion for **all** young children with disabilities implies **equity and access** to the same high-quality educational settings in which all other young children without disabilities participate (Guralnick, 2001; Odom, 2002).

Ohio does not have enough high-quality educational settings to allow all young children with disabilities access to rich early learning experiences. The concept of inclusive equity and access is not just an opportunity to participate in high-quality educational settings. Inclusive equity also applies to the goals set for all young children with disabilities, and these should be largely the same goals our society holds for all children without disabilities (Early Childhood Research Institute on Inclusion [ECRII], 1998; McWilliam et al., 2001). It also is critically important for young children with disabilities to have opportunities to develop, maintain and generalize their skills related to critical areas of need.



Adapted from McWilliam et al., 2001.

## LAWS SUPPORTING PRESCHOOL INCLUSION

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act	Mandates that, to the maximum extent possible, students with disabilities be educated with children without disabilities with supplemental supports and services as necessary (IDEA, 2004).
Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973	Prohibits discrimination by public or private entities that receive federal financial assistance. Further, Section 504 provides that no individual with a disability shall be excluded from participation in or be denied the benefits of the services, programs or activities of any entity that receives federal financial assistance due to his or her disability.
Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act	Prohibits discrimination by public entities, regardless of receipt of federal funds and protects children with disabilities from unlawful discrimination in early childhood programs, activities and services operated by state or local governments, including public school districts. Title II also provides that no qualified individual with a disability shall, by reason of such disability, be excluded from participation in or be denied the benefits of such services, programs or activities of a public entity or be subjected to discrimination by such entity.

### WHAT IS LEAST RESTRICTIVE ENVIRONMENT?

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) describes the educational environment where children with disabilities receive their special education and related services. The [Jan. 9, 2017, “Dear Colleague”](#) letter from the U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services reaffirms that “all young children with disabilities should have access to inclusive high-quality early childhood programs where they are provided with individualized and appropriate supports to enable them to meet high expectations.”

Least Restrictive Environment: “In accordance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), children ages 3-21 are entitled to a free, appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE). LRE requires that, to the extent possible, children with disabilities should have access to the general education curriculum, along with learning activities and settings that are available to their peers without disabilities” (Division for Early Childhood, 2009).

## CONTINUUM OF SERVICE REQUIREMENTS

A child’s individualized education program (IEP) team makes a decision about where the child will receive special education services by determining the least restrictive environment for that child. During the IEP team meeting, the team must consider the child’s placement in a *less* restrictive environment before considering placement in a *more* restrictive environment. “Many preschool children are referred to separate settings, such as special education preschool classrooms, as a first resort. This may be especially true for children with more significant disabilities, despite evidence that inclusion is beneficial to children across ability levels” (U.S. Department of Education, 2015, p.6). The IEP team starts by considering a general education preschool classroom with natural proportions and that provides all necessary supplemental aids and services. When determining a child’s least restrictive environment, an IEP team must consider all options defined within Ohio’s continuum of services, addressing the following:

- Settings where a child would be if he or she were not identified as a child with a disability
- Child’s ability to access, participate, and make progress in the general education curriculum with appropriate aids, services and supports

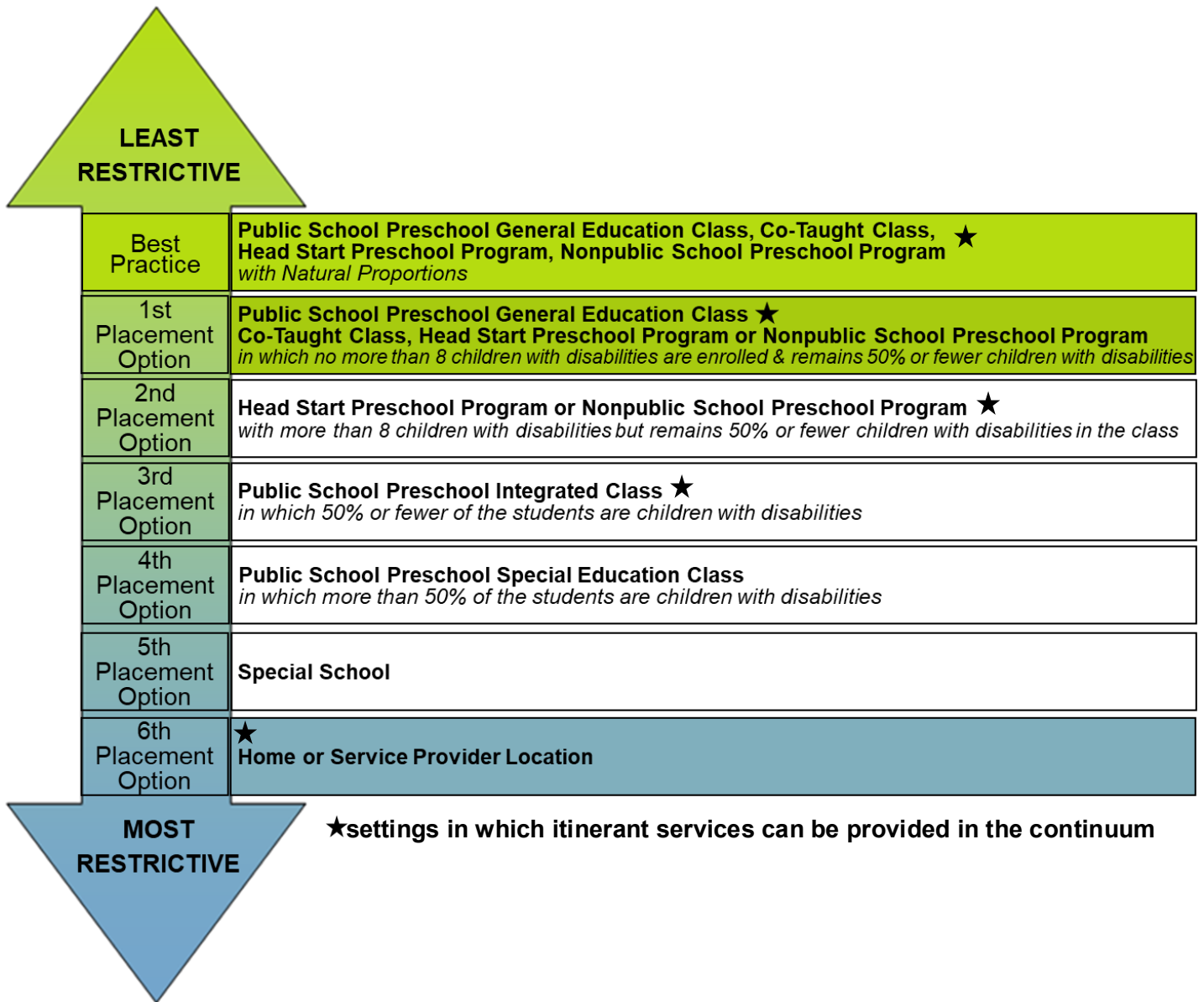
## OHIO’S PRESCHOOL CONTINUUM OF LRE PLACEMENT OPTIONS

Ohio’s Operating Standards for the Education of Children with Disabilities say that the least restrictive environment for preschool has the same meaning as that defined in [Ohio law](#). As such, (a) The first placement option considered for each child with a disability shall be the general education setting the child would attend if he or she did not have a disability; (b) All options listed as placements on the continuum (not listed as Best Practice) must be made available; (c) Removing a child from his or her general educational setting (such as regular routines or activities) or removing a child from nondisabled peers to provide specially designed instruction and/or related services requires individualized justification in the child’s IEP. In Ohio, this represents minimal compliance.

The preschool continuum of least restrictive environment placement options is depicted in the graphic on the following page. This continuum includes not just minimum compliance within [Ohio’s Operating Standards for Serving Students with Disabilities](#), but also the settings in which schools can maximize progress for young children with disabilities, according to research.



Preschool Continuum of LRE Placement Options



**A Public School Preschool General Education Class or a Non-public School Preschool Program with Natural Proportions**

Federal policy says that “The principle of natural proportions means the inclusion of children with disabilities in proportion to their presence in the general population” (Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children, 2013). For example, if a district’s total population of children with disabilities is 13 percent, a natural proportion would be when no more than 13 percent of children in a classroom have disabilities. The continuum of services contained in this document considers the general classroom setting reflecting natural proportions to be best practice.

**A Public School Preschool General Education Class or a Non-public School Preschool Program**

A public school preschool general education class or a non-public school preschool program in which no more than eight children with disabilities are enrolled.

**Regular Early Childhood Setting**

Regular early childhood setting means any educational setting in which 50 percent or less of the students are children with disabilities.

**Public School Preschool Integrated Class**

A public school preschool integrated class is one that 50 percent or fewer of the students in the class are children with disabilities. The lead teacher of a public school preschool integrated class may serve as the intervention specialist of record or IEP case manager for any children with disabilities enrolled in the public school preschool integrated class, if the individual holds the appropriate licensure

**Public School Preschool Special Education**

A public school preschool special education class is one in which more than 50 percent of the students are children with disabilities.

**Special School**

A special school is one established to meet the needs of a specific population of students with disabilities. The setting primarily or only serves students with disabilities.

**Home**

Children do not participate in a classroom or community setting and receive services in a home setting by an itinerant preschool special education teacher and/or related service provider.

**Service Provider Location**

The child travels to the service provider’s location to receive IEP services, (e.g., when a child receives speech therapy in the speech therapist’s office in the school building).

**\*Itinerant Services**

Itinerant services are not a location on the LRE continuum, but rather the services provided by the intervention specialists or related services personnel which occur in the setting where the child, the child and parent(s), or the child and caregiver are located.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EARLY LEARNING PROGRAMS AND PROVIDERS

In the [United States Departments of Education \(ED\) and Health and Human Services \(HHS\) joint Policy Statement](#) on Inclusion of Children with Disabilities in Early Childhood Programs and the [Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center](#), best practices for including young children with disabilities in their natural environments include the following:

**1. Partner with Families:**

Families are children's first and most important teachers and advocates. Schools and programs should ensure all families are knowledgeable about the benefits of inclusion and include them in policy development, advocacy efforts, and public information initiatives. They should build staff's capacity to form strong goal-oriented relationships with families that are linked to their child's learning, development, and wellness.

**2. Adhere to Legal Provision of Supports and Services in Inclusive Settings with IFSPs/IEPs:**

Local educational agencies, schools, and other local early intervention service providers should review their IFSP/IEP processes to ensure that inclusive settings are meaningfully discussed for each child.

**3. Assess and Improve the Quality of Inclusion in Early Childhood Programs:**

Pair children's assessments with environmental assessments of their early childhood programs to ensure that there are appropriate accommodations and modifications to support children in reaching their goals.

**4. Review and Modify Resource Allocation:**

Local educational agencies, schools, and early childhood programs can examine the ways they allocate funds that serve children with disabilities and modify them to promote inclusion.

**5. Enhance Professional Development:**

A high-quality staff should have knowledge, competencies, and positive attitudes and beliefs about inclusion and disability in order to foster the development of all children. Specifically:

- **Local Educational Agency Administrators, Early Childhood Directors and Principals** should participate in professional development focused on the research on inclusion, establishing a culture of inclusion and enacting strong inclusive policies, and practical resource allocation strategies that support inclusion. Leaders should require staff to engage in professional development specific to inclusion and supporting the learning and developmental needs of children with disabilities
- **Teachers and Providers** should have the skills necessary to meet the learning needs of all children. All professional development opportunities offered to early childhood staff should incorporate how the content applies and can be individualized for children with disabilities.
- **Early Interventionists, Special Educators and Related Service Personnel** should deliver services to children with disabilities in early childhood setting and embedded in everyday routines and/or co-teach and coach early childhood teachers and providers to encourage inclusive educational environments, as opposed to focusing on working with children in separate settings or pulling children out of their settings for specialized instruction, as a first option.

**6. Establish an Appropriate Staffing Structure and Strengthen Staff Collaboration:**

Local educational agencies, schools, and early childhood programs should shift existing resources and systems to establish staffing structures and increase staff collaboration to better support inclusion. Early childhood programs could consist of a skilled teacher or provider and an aide, supported by specialized service providers. Programs should also have a disability or inclusion coordinator.

**7. Ensure Access to Specialized Supports:**

Early childhood programs and schools should have access to specialized supports delivered by experts. This specialized support can increase the quality of early learning experiences for *all* children.

**8. Develop Formal Collaborations with Community Partners:**

Early childhood programs and schools should establish formal agreements with service providers in their community to ensure alignment and delivery of comprehensive services.

**Resources to Get Started**

There are many resources that are available to help early learning programs and providers improve inclusive practices.

**Electronic Resources**

- **Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (CSEFEL)**  
CSEFEL focuses on promoting children’s social emotional development and school readiness. The website contains [training modules](#), [training kits](#), [videos](#), [practical strategies](#), and [research syntheses](#).
- **CONNECT: The Center to Mobilize Early Childhood Learning Knowledge**  
CONNECT developed [modules](#) that are practice-focused instructional resources for faculty and other professional development providers. They are designed to build practitioners’ abilities to make evidence-based decisions.
- **The Early Childhood Personnel Center (ECPC)**  
ECPC facilitates the implementation of integrated and comprehensive systems of personnel development (CSPD) in early childhood, for all personnel serving infants and young children with disabilities. Resources include [a map of States’ standards](#) and [quality Indicators for a personnel/workforce system](#).
- **Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center’s (ECTA’s) Inclusion Resources**  
ECTA provides a variety of national and state resources on inclusion, least restrictive environments (LRE), and [natural environments](#), including a compilation of [quality indicators of inclusive programs and practices](#).
- **Head Start Center for Inclusion**  
The Center provides resources to assist personnel in Head Start programs to include children with disabilities. The website contains detailed [training modules](#), [PowerPoint presentations](#), [video clips](#), and additional training resources such as worksheets and group activities.
- **Head Start Early Learning and Knowledge Center (ECLKC)**  
ECLKC serves as a portal to all Head Start and Early Head Start funded national centers, training resources, and regulatory requirements

- **Head Start National Center for Quality Teaching and Learning (NCQTL)**  
NCQTL provides resources on early learning instruction, transition to kindergarten, [teacher development](#), and a model for [practice-based coaching](#).
- **IRIS Center**  
IRIS resources and materials are primarily designed for use by college and university faculty, professional development providers, and practicing educators and includes instructional [modules on inclusion](#), video vignettes, activities, resources on [accommodations](#) and working with families, and research summaries.
- **National Center on Child Care Professional Development Systems and Workforce Initiatives**  
The Center worked with Child Care and Development Fund grantees, Head Start/Early Head Start leaders, and their partners to design and implement professional development systems that align with other early childhood quality improvement efforts. The center developed the following guides:
  - *Core Knowledge and Competencies Planning and Implementation Guide*: This resource is a planning and implementation guide for developing, revising, and implementing core knowledge and competencies. The guide describes an aligned State and Territory professional development system.
  - *Distance Learning Planning and Implementation Guide*: This resource is a planning and implementation guide for use in developing and strengthening distance learning options as part of an aligned professional development system.
  - *Technical Assistance Planning and Implementation Guide*: This resource is a planning and implementation guide for developing and strengthening technical assistance supports.
- **National Professional Development Center for Inclusion (NPDCI)**  
NPDCI developed [landing pads with evidence-based practices](#) around Access, Participation, and Supports. [Tools](#) were developed to assist States and communities design cross-sector systems of professional development.
  - *Planning Matrix for Early Childhood Professional Development can be used as part of a statewide planning process to gather information from representatives of early childhood agencies and initiatives regarding professional development efforts.*
  - *The Landscape: A Statewide Survey for Providers of Professional Development in Early Childhood is designed to help State agency administrators gather information about early childhood professional development activities across various sectors in a state.*
- **Technical Assistance Center on Social Emotional Intervention for Young Children (TACSEI)**  
TACSEI uses evidence-based practices for improving the social-emotional outcomes of young children. It has developed a variety of training resources such as [make and take workshops](#), [tools](#), and materials for implementing the [Pyramid Model](#).

## Further Reading on Early Childhood Inclusion

- **Inclusive Classroom Profile (ICP)** by Elena P. Soukakou (Brookes Publishing, 2016)
- **Six Steps to Inclusive Preschool Curriculum: A UDL-Based Framework for Children’s School Success** by E.M. Horn, S.B. Palmer, G.D. Butera and J.A. Lieber (Paul H Brookes Publishing, 2016)
- **Environment: Promoting meaningful access, participation, and inclusion** (DEC Recommended Practices Monograph Series No. 2) edited by T. Catalino and L.E. Meyer (Division for Early Childhood, 2016)
- **The Preschool Inclusion Toolbox How to Build and Lead a High-Quality Program** by Erin E. Barton and Barbara J. Smith (Brookes Publishing, 2015)
- **Inclusion in the Early Childhood Classroom: What Makes a Difference?** By Sasan L. Recchia and Yoon-Joo Lee (Teachers College Press, 2013)
- **Quality Inclusive Early Childhood Program Reflection Tool** by Office of Early Learning and School Readiness (Ohio Department of Education, November 2011)

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