

EXAMPLES OF COLLABORATIONS SUPPORTING INCLUSION IN ILLINOIS

Spring, 2020

Early CHOICES and Illinois Council on Developmental Disabilities (ICDD)

Michelle M. Sands – Research Consultant

In partnership with the Illinois Council on Developmental Disabilities. This project was supported, in part by grant number CFDA 93.960, from the U.S. Administration for Community Living, Department of Health and Human Services, Washington, D.C. 20201. Grantees undertaking projects with government sponsorship are encouraged to express freely their findings and conclusions. Points of view or opinions do not, therefore, necessarily represent official ACL policy.



EXAMPLES OF COLLABORATIONS SUPPORTING INCLUSION IN ILLINOIS

Early CHOICES and
Illinois Council on Developmental Disabilities (ICDD)

As a result of the Early Childhood Inclusion Policy Summit in 2017, efforts to increase access to high quality inclusive early care and education were prioritized. Most inclusive settings are offered within school-based settings but we know that young children participate in a variety of settings and school districts may not always have the capacity to be the only inclusive option. To encourage the implementation of inclusion within preschool settings across the state, it is important for school districts to unlock the possibilities that arise from collaboration with community-based preschools and childcares. While innovative and effective collaborations exist to support inclusion, more opportunity exists. To encourage others to collaborate within their own communities, it was determined that more information was needed to document the existing models of success and to identify possible strategies to help school districts move forward with children being included in community preschools and childcares. Below are the findings of a qualitative study conducted for this purpose (see sidebar for study details).

Motivations for Collaboration

Although some state program grants require programs to have Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) with community-based agencies or local organizations, school district participants did not describe a systemic push for collaborations within the community specifically to support inclusion. However, the motivation to establish collaborations to support inclusion were based on specific program circumstances (i.e. lack of space, small program) or a strong district philosophy or commitment to inclusive practice. In the case of Head Start participants, they shared that federally funded programs are not only required to have MOUs with community-based agencies, but additionally 10 percent of their overall enrollment must be children with disabilities. Head Start programs also have some systematic requirements related to participation in the referral, screening, and evaluation processes and supporting families.

Collaborative Decision Making

When asked about the extent of the collaboration that takes place between community agencies, there was a great deal of difference between programs.

THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to answer the following questions:

- How are school districts programs collaborating with community-based preschools and childcare programs to support inclusion?
- What does the collaboration look like?
- What are these programs' suggestions for those seeking collaboration with community-based programs?

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives of four programs currently working collaboratively within their community to support inclusion. Participants were identified by Early CHOICES' team members, members of Illinois Head Start Association, or self-referral, and included a cooperative early childhood program administrator, a school district early childhood program administrator, and two directors of Head Start agencies.

Interviews took place over the phone between November 2019 and February 2020. Data were transcribed and a thematic analysis was conducted. Four themes emerged: *motivations for collaboration, collaborative decision making, resources available/ways to address challenges, and suggestions for successful collaboration.*

**EXAMPLES OF COLLABORATIONS
SUPPORTING INCLUSION IN ILLINOIS**

- All of the participants described engaging in collaborations that facilitates a joint provision of services for children with disabilities. Although, how those services are provided (i.e. push in, pull out, on-site, off-site, etc.) varied.
- Participants described various ways that they engage with their collaborative partners to plan or address needs. In one case, program administrators met on a monthly basis to plan and problem solve at a program level. In other cases, the planning or addressing of needs took place as needed.

Funding

Participants described no additional funding allocations specific to collaborations supporting inclusion. Typically, funding was based only on existing program options (i.e. school district purchasing additional slots in community-based preschool program necessary to provide special education services and supports, or a portion of a Head Start agency's budget earmarked or dedicated to supporting children with disabilities.

Transportation

Transportation for special education services or programs were in all cases provided by school districts, unless the child was enrolled in a Head Start program full-time and only received special education services on-site. In this case, Head Start was responsible for providing transportation to and from school for those students.

WE HAVE A SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER WHO'S CERTIFIED IN EARLY CHILDHOOD SPECIAL EDUCATION. SHE WORKS IN ANOTHER BUILDING. BUT IF A STUDENT IS IDENTIFIED FOR SUPPORT THERE, THAT PERSON, THAT TEACHER WILL BECOME THE KID'S MANAGER, AND WOULD COLLABORATE WITH STAFF AT RIVER FOREST COMMUNITY CENTER TO DETERMINE, WORK ON A SCHEDULE FOR SUPPORTING AND TRANSITIONING.

(A SCHOOL DISTRICT EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAM ADMINISTRATOR)

district administrators. In other cases, a child was dually enrolled (receiving special education teacher support at the district program and then included in the community-based program for another part of the day) or was enrolled in the community based program and was transported to the district location for special education services (i.e. Speech, OT, etc.).

OUR CHILD DEVELOPMENT SERVICES MANAGER MEETS MONTHLY WITH ALL OF THE ADMINISTRATORS WITHIN THE SCHOOL DISTRICT TO TALK ABOUT EARLY CHILDHOOD SERVICES AND HOW WE CAN BETTER COLLABORATE....THERE ARE MANY OTHER HEAD START PROGRAMS...THEY'RE NOT ALLOWED IN SCHOOL DISTRICTS; THEY DON'T HAVE THOSE CONNECTIONS. SO, WE ARE VERY LUCKY IN THAT RESPECT. WE ALSO IF THERE IS A TRAINING THAT'S GOING ON THAT ALL OF US COULD BENEFIT FROM, WE INVITE EACH OTHER. WE TRY TO RECIPROCATATE AND HELP EACH OTHER SAVE MONEY. I THINK THAT'S A BIG PLUS.

(A HEAD START AGENCY DIRECTOR)

Staffing

- Staffing was another variable that differed across participants. For some programs, a special educator was provided by the school district to support children at a community-based program location.

Evaluations of itinerant special education staff members were conducted by school

Professional Development

(THE INCLUSION FACILITATOR) ALSO SUPPORTS THEM (COMMUNITY PRESCHOOL TEACHERS) ON THE REGULAR ED SIDE, AS FAR AS WHOLE CLASSROOM TRAINING AND NOT JUST ON THE SPECIAL ED SIDE. SO, IT'S NICE IN THAT WAY BECAUSE SO MUCH OF GOOD INTERVENTION IS WHAT YOU DO FOR ALL THE KIDS AND THE INSTRUCTION THAT YOU GIVE. SO, SHE PROVIDES ALL THE GUIDANCE ON THAT AS WELL AND NOT JUST ABOUT THE KIDS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS.

(A COOPERATIVE EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAM ADMINISTRATOR)

- The extent to which programs collaborated related to professional development also varied across participants, with some districts providing a special educator on-site to provide regular and ongoing professional development to all staff (related to general education and special education curricula and practices/strategies) and others simply extending invitations between programs to share in professional development opportunities as they occur.

“Sometimes (ECSE teachers) work to provide some training and guidance, or training or guidance for (community-based) staff in terms of how to support students... I think that in the past we've also, when we offer some of our early childhood professional development, we'll reach out and extend an invitation to (the community-based program). Their staff can attend, who are interested in attending...They've always expressed interest in continuing to be invited and be aware of what we're offering” (a school district early childhood administrator).

In another case, the district staff provides the training and support to the community program. One cooperative

director mentioned how in one program, the inclusion facilitator provided by the district supports park district teachers in a community program by providing curriculum guidance and professional development relevant to not only students with identified disabilities, but all students.

Problem Solving

Problem solving was described by participants as occurring in various ways.

- For some programs, problem solving was scheduled and occurred regularly, and was ongoing (typically in programs where special education staff were on-site). The cooperative director mentioned that in the model used by one of their programs, the preschool program found that the general education park district teachers felt very supported and that they became more capable of supporting a variety of diverse learners because of how they met to problem solve together regularly and often.

“They (district special education teachers and community preschool teachers) meet to co-op-plan and things like that once a month and then we'll need to problem solve once a month. So, we'll sit and we'll talk about students in their class and it's not just the students in the class who's having any difficulty and we can problem solve strategies and ideas. The (community preschool) teachers are so thankful to have people who have ideas and things to do ...because, I think that typically in community pre-schools you're often on your own...We do talk a lot about the kids who are there but as the team has developed they have so many good supports that...they then start implementing strategies that they've learned and had from previous students and it becomes a really natural strategy...They may try some things without any help, which is pretty amazing to see them support kids” (a cooperative early childhood program administrator).

- In other cases, participants described problem solving occurring only when it was initiated by a particular program. One Head Start agency director described how they provide time for staff to work with school district staff to support a child. “Whether that means perhaps meeting about a child's progress

EXAMPLES OF COLLABORATIONS SUPPORTING INCLUSION IN ILLINOIS

or going to the IEP meeting. As far as training, I think we're definitely open to doing training but just haven't identified those opportunities available to us...(But), they'll work with the special education liaison or the special education director, just child by child to help really best understand what is it that this child's learning environment needs look like and how can we support that."

All participants described having staff that were willing to work with their collaboration partners to support students with disabilities and provide consistency across programs. One Head Start agency director stated, "We don't have special education teachers, so we love to learn from our district partners what learning approach works best, what kind of supports work best with each child with different learning needs."

- Additionally, when asked, participants each described working with outside districts to coordinate and agree upon provision of services and support to students who resided outside their school district. One program described facilitating the negotiation between two school districts on who would serve a particular child. In another case, the child was being served by a park district program and the serving district agreed to support the child using RTI and communicating with his home district, and then worked with his home school district to transition him to special education services once he went to kindergarten.

Resources Available and Ways to Address Challenges

- One participant described needing to approach collaboration as a "leap of faith." Other participants shared similar sentiments, describing how collaboration at first may create a sense of uncertainty and feel like a loss of "control" over certain aspects of the program.
- Participants also each described addressing challenges that are associated with collaboration with persistence and active and ongoing engagement. One Head Start agency director shared how important it was to remain open to change when attempting to collaborating with other programs. "I think it's important that we stay open, that we look at... community assessment - How are we serving children? Where do you see maybe services are not as good or maybe not as high quality or maybe we're lacking services in certain areas. You need to be conscientious of that and then base that on who do you reach out to, who do you collaborate with. I think that's important."
- Resources that participants described as used to support inclusive practices included: School district staff, STAR NET, community agencies, and private consultants.

Conclusion

A majority of children attend preschools that act as a community-based organization. While it is important for schools to collaborate with these programs to achieve alignment and continuity of practice,.

WHEN DISTRICTS HAVE TALKED ABOUT THE IDEA OF COLLABORATING WITH A COMMUNITY PRE-SCHOOL, IT'S SCARY BECAUSE THERE'S A LACK OF CONTROL OVER THINGS. YOU'RE NOT HIRING THE TEACHERS AND YOU'RE NOT 100% IN CHARGE. AND SO, IT DOES TAKE A LEAP OF FAITH TO CREATE THAT COLLABORATION BUT THIS HAS BEEN OUTSTANDING... IT'S BEEN REALLY POSITIVE FOR A REALLY LONG TIME BUT I GIVE A LOT OF PRAISE TO THOSE WHO STARTED IT JUST BECAUSE IT TOOK LIKE, OKAY, WE DON'T HAVE TO BE IN CHARGE OF EVERY BIT OF THIS, WE DON'T HAVE TO HIRE EVERY TEACHER, WE CAN GET THIS DONE THROUGH COLLABORATION.

(A COOPERATIVE EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAM ADMINISTRATOR)

one additional consideration remains to be addressed. If schools are truly serving children within the least restrictive environment, early childhood special education programs must consider the option to serve children in these community-based organizations first before moving to a school-based program.

Suggestions for Successful Collaboration

- 1) Be on the same page, have or establish the same vision across programs.

Clearly defining a shared mission or vision of inclusion in your community is important to ensure that all feel a deep commitment to achieving it. This can come from conversations among different program or agency staff and community members. One school district administrator stated she felt that it was important for teams to align their vision of inclusion, “Making some time at the beginning when that process or that relationship is established, that (the vision) was clear...And just making sure you revisit that idea of this is the reason we do this. That this is the benefit of it (inclusion).”

MAKING OF PARTNERSHIPS OR CREATING OF PARTNERSHIPS ... IS CRITICAL, ESPECIALLY IF YOU'RE TRYING TO SERVE CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES IT'S ABSOLUTELY CRITICAL THAT YOU COLLABORATE ... YOU'VE GOT TO KEEP TRYING TO MAKE THOSE CONNECTIONS AND SOMETIMES A DOOR WILL OPEN... KEEP TRYING. INVITE THEM TO YOUR EVENTS. INVITE THEM TO YOUR COUNCIL MEETINGS. TRY TO GET ONE ON THE BOARD, ON YOUR POLICY COUNCIL. KEEP REACHING OUT. SEND AN OPEN HOUSE INVITATION... IF YOU CONTINUE TO DO THAT, 9 TIMES OUT OF 10 SOMEBODY IS GOING TO OPEN THEIR DOOR.

(A HEAD START AGENCY DIRECTOR)

- 2) If struggling to establish a collaboration with program(s), be persistent – keep asking, let them know you are here and wanting to work together.

One Head Start director acknowledged that some programs are going to be hesitant and not understand your motivations, so these must be made clear. “You've got to let them know that you don't mean any harm, that you are there to support kids and you're not trying to take enrollment away from them,” she stated.

Additionally, it's important to make clear that you want to work together as a team. “Sometimes, I fear that, that coming from the school district is viewed as oh, they're going to come in and tell us what to do. When that's really not the intent. Right? It's really about really getting on the same page about kids, and how to support programming for the students,” stated one school district administrator. Being up front about what your intentions are can reduce fears from others who may be struggling with concerns of their own or be weary about collaborating due to past circumstances.

- 3) Bring something unique to the table—let possible partners know what you could provide to them and how you could help support their mission.

One Head Start agency director talked about how he believes collaboration is essential because programs' focuses can complement each other and work together to support more than one program can do alone. “So many of the kids that might have IEPs would need much more family-wise than what the district can offer. So having Head Start and districts collaborate together to serve those families, provides the diversity of services that meet the family's needs. Whereas we have one social worker to every 20 kids, a district may have one social worker to several hundred kids.”

- 4) Recognize and remember that you can have a positive impact!