



## Together We Can All Make Inclusion Work:

An Illinois Early Childhood Professional  
Development Provider Community of Practice

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## An Illinois Early Childhood Professional Development Provider Community of Practice

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### Early Childhood Inclusion for Each and Every Child in Illinois

From: *Illinois State Board of Education, Division of Early Childhood*

Inclusion is about each and every child.

Inclusion is the principle that supports the education of children with disabilities alongside their non-disabled peers rather than separately. Both the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (Sec. 504) require schools and agencies to provide equal education opportunities for children with disabilities. The primary source for the inclusion requirement is the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act or IDEA. For preschool and school age children (ages 3-21), IDEA requires that children with disabilities be educated in the “least restrictive environment” (§1412(a)(5) and §1413(a)(1)). For infants and toddlers (ages 0-3) with disabilities, IDEA promotes the use of “natural environments” for early intervention services (§1432(4)(G)).

Inclusion in early childhood programs refers to including children with 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, friendships with peers, and belonging. This applies to all young children with disabilities, from those with mildest disabilities, to those with the most significant disabilities.

### Early CHOICES

*An Inclusion Initiative of the Illinois State Board of Education*

The Early CHOICES inclusion initiative promotes increasing high quality inclusive early care and education for each and every child from birth to age 5. The goal of the initiative is to increase the number of children with disabilities receiving specialized services in regular early care and education settings. Early CHOICES provides technical assistance and facilitating professional learning for teams that support children and families, engages and empowers families to access resources and information, and collaborates with other Illinois early care and education entities

Early CHOICES is operated through a grant awarded by the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) in partnership with the Governor’s Office of Early Childhood Development (OECD) to School Association for Special Education in DuPage County (SASED); 100% of annual funding for the project is from federal sources. Early CHOICES provides technical assistance and facilitate professional learning for the early childhood community in Illinois, assists the ISBE and OECD in meeting their local needs by providing services throughout Illinois, and partners with the other technical assistance projects and early care and education entities.

# What Makes Inclusion Work in Early Childhood?

To increase the number of children with disabilities receiving specialized services in regular early care and education settings, Early CHOICES has created and implemented professional development opportunities and resources which highlight the eight qualities of early childhood programs that have an impact on the successful inclusion of young children with disabilities.



## Vision & Attitude

The program has a written vision statement supporting inclusion of children with disabilities, which is shared with families and the community.

## Formal Time to Plan & Reflect

Teams meet regularly. Teams use an agenda, a strategy to document meetings and decisions, and keep within an allotted time frame.

## Collaboration & Teaming

Practitioners use strategies to enhance team functioning and interpersonal relationships with and among team members.

## Family & Community Partnerships

Program, family and community providers collaborate to provide high quality inclusion.

## Professional Learning

The system is committed to learning through a variety of venues. Team has a variety of opportunities for learning based on individual needs and continuous improvement plan.

## Evidence-based Practices

Program-wide, teams use developmentally appropriate, evidence-based practices.

## Adaptations & Support Systems

Teams utilize a consistent process for determining appropriate individualized accommodations and modifications based on assessment data.

## Administrative Support

Administration provides leadership to support high quality inclusion.

For more information on *What Makes Inclusion Work in Early Childhood*, visit:

<https://www.eclre.org/good-to-know/what-makes-inclusion-work/>

# The Professional Development Provider Community of Practice (COP) on Inclusion in Early Childhood

Early childhood programs that serve young children (ages birth-5 years) and their families include federal, state, and locally-funded programs, as well as private/corporate and church or community-based programs. Programs may include, but are not limited to: Head Start programs, Preschool for All and/or school district programs, child care programs, and/or park district preschool programs. To ensure all children with disabilities have the opportunity to engage in early childhood programs alongside typically developing peers, all early childhood programs can support and utilize inclusive practices.

Early childhood professional development providers are critical to the development of strategic capabilities needed to achieving the goal of inclusion, as they are knowledgeable about and understand the specific sector of the early childhood field they work in. These providers are often tasked with the responsibility of increasing the knowledge and skills of program leaders and/or staff and support the implementation of evidence-based or research-based practices. Currently, early childhood educators receive professional development from a variety of different providers. These may include, but are not limited to individuals working within the following agencies: Illinois State Board of Education, Child Care Resource & Referral, Illinois StarNet, Head Start, Start Early, and The Center Early Childhood Professional Learning. While professional development providers have various levels of skills, knowledge, and experiences specific to inclusion of young children with disabilities, many skills are needed to support early childhood programs' use of inclusive practices.

Communities of Practice (COP) are *groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.*<sup>1</sup>

Because professional development providers support a large number of individuals at the program and classroom-levels, and guide programs in use of recommended practices, Early CHOICES invited professional development providers from across the state and from diverse early childhood groups and agencies to participate in a COP to improve professional development practice as it relates to implementation of inclusion. Professional Development Credits were offered to those who chose to participate.

**Initial PD Provider  
COP – Inclusion**

6 - 90-minute Virtual Sessions

APRIL 20, 2021

MAY 25, 2021

JUNE 15, 2021

AUGUST 17, 2021

SEPTEMBER 21, 2021

NOVEMBER 18, 2021

## Pre-COP Questionnaire

Individuals interested in participating in the COP were asked to complete a questionnaire to best identify and/or prioritize topics for discussion. Individuals were asked to rank each of the eight elements of *What Makes Inclusion Work* on how easy each is to support (1-being the easiest, 8 being the hardest).

Additionally, interested PD providers were also asked to describe the biggest challenges in helping others understand use of inclusive practice.

## Initial Meeting

An initial meeting was held in April, 2021. During this meeting, participants had the opportunity to introduce themselves, their sector of the field, and to express why they joined the COP. Additionally, Early CHOICES provided participants with a definition of COP and how together as practitioners they might develop a shared repertoire of resources related to inclusion. These shared practices may include, but are not limited to: experiences, stories, tools, and/or ways of addressing recurring problems.

Results of the two portions of the pre-COP questionnaire indicated that although many initially ranked Vision & Attitude as easiest to support, open-ended responses describe challenges directly related to this element. One participant stated their biggest challenge in helping others understand inclusive practices as, “Getting staff buy-in, changing attitudes and beliefs,” Others shared similar challenges such as “understanding benefits of inclusion,” and also “understanding resources available.” Therefore, it was determined by the group that they would focus their attention towards building the group’s capacity to help programs establish a shared vision and to support the belief that all children can and will learn.

Perceptions of PD Providers Related to Qualities of <i>What Makes Inclusion Work</i>		
	Pre-COP	Post-COP
<b>Most Challenging</b>	Administrative Support	Family & Community Partnerships
	Formal Time to Plan or Reflect	Formal Time to Plan or Reflect
	Adaptations and Support Systems	Administrative Support
	Evidence-based Practice	Adaptations and Support Systems
	Teaming & Collaboration	Evidence-based Practice
	Family & Community Partnership	Teaming & Collaboration
	Professional Development	Professional Development
<b>Easiest</b>	Vision & Attitude	Vision & Attitude

## COP Sessions

During each session, COP participants were engaged in self-reflection, breakout discussions, and given opportunity to share and discuss resources used by PD providers themselves or available through Early CHOICES. Each meeting concluded with a questionnaire to provide participants with the opportunity to provide feedback on what went well, suggestions for improvement, and interests for upcoming sessions. Feedback was by and large positive, with participants citing high levels of engagement throughout each session and usefulness of discussion among participants and resources.

## Post-COP Questionnaire

COP participants were asked to complete a final evaluation questionnaire following the final session in November, 2021. Almost half of all participants, 23 individual responses, were recorded. The questionnaire included 19 questions/prompts, eliciting quantitative and qualitative data.

PD providers felt most confident in addressing Vision & Attitude (Average Rating: 4.56) and Professional Learning (Average Rating: 4.52) after their participation in the COP. However, they felt the least confident addressing Formal Time to Reflect and Plan (Average Rating: 4.17) and Administrative Supports (Average Rating: 4.09).

PD providers also described Vision & Attitude and Professional Learning as being the easiest of the *What Makes Inclusion Work* qualities to support. The group found Administrative Support, Formal Time to Plan and Reflect, and Family-Community Partnerships as the most challenging.

Qualitative data indicated overall participants found the COP very helpful and beneficial. When asked about what they had learned from the COP related to helping others shift to an inclusive mindset (focus of initial COP), participants described resources, tools, data and research detailing lack of benefit to self-contained placements, understanding importance of partnerships and evaluation of attitudes and beliefs.

### Confidence in Delivery of PD or Coaching on Inclusion After Participation in COP

<i>What Makes Inclusion Work</i> Quality	Comparative Confidence (1 – less confident to 5 – more confident)	Range
Vision & Attitude	4.56	4-5
Professional Learning	4.52	4-5
Evidence-based Practices	4.48	4-5
Family & Community Partnerships	4.30	3-5
Teaming & Collaboration	4.26	4-5
Adaptations & Support System	4.22	3-5
Formal Time to Reflect and Plan	4.17	3-5
Administrative Supports	4.09	3-5

PD provider participants shared that they felt the statewide, across program participation of providers was helpful. Additionally, individuals described a need for additional COPs to maintain collaboration and reflective practice. When given four potential opportunities for future engagement, a majority of respondents indicated they would be interested in either continuing with the COP for PD Providers (43.5%) or joining a PLC focused on use of inclusive practices (47.8%). Only one respondent described no interest in maintaining participation or joining another group.

## Post-COP Evaluation

An outside consultant familiar with program evaluation and qualitative investigation conducted small group interviews with two dyads following the final session of the PD Provider COP on Inclusion. The purpose of the investigation was to understand to what extent PD providers found the COP helpful, benefits of across program participation, and if and what remains to be needed in terms of support.

A purposive sample determined by Early CHOICES and based on participation in the COP were contacted by the outside consultant to recruit their participation in a brief 45-minute virtual group interview. Six individuals responded to recruitment emails. Based on availability, four PD providers participated in two small group interviews.

Participants indicated there remains a need for additional support related to Family & Community Partnership, Collaboration & Teaming, and Adaptations & Support Systems. Individuals described how there exists a need for ensuring parents and all agencies involved in the care of a child have opportunities to work and collaborate. Additionally, individuals identified a need to move beyond MOUs to best support children with disabilities and that statewide professional development providers might be more effective if they adopt a blended model to embed use of inclusive practice into all professional development opportunities. Finally, participants describe the need for additional funding and professional development for child care to build stronger equity of practice related to inclusion.

### **What has been the most helpful or valuable?**

*The sense of community – knowing you're not alone and being able to hear there's similar things happening and how those are being overcome...being with like-minded individuals.*

*Hearing other people's ideas and how they have successfully reached out to the community.*

*Having a model of what a COP looks like and how it can be used to reestablish commitment to inclusion, nurture shared beliefs and values, and as a way to share knowledge and strategies.*

## The Need for Continuation of Professional Development Provider Collaboration and Support

To best support the successful inclusion of children with disabilities throughout community-based early childhood settings, previous research<sup>2</sup> has identified the need for embedded professional development that can support professionals' support and implementation of inclusive practices. Yet, professional development providers have various levels of skills, knowledge, and experiences specific to inclusion of young children with disabilities. Therefore, ongoing collaboration among professional development providers that is facilitated by an individual or group with a strong understanding of use of inclusive practice is needed to collectively examine recommended practices and brainstorm how these practices can be implemented in a variety of settings and address barriers to implementation through sharing of identification of specific resources.

### Continuation of COP for Professional Development Providers

As mentioned, there exists shared needs and interests among early childhood professional development providers to continue collaboration that can support their own and others' understanding of inclusion and use of inclusive practices. 22 out of the 23 individuals that completed the post-COP questionnaire indicated that they would like to continue participation in the COP as it was delivered earlier in the year or participate in small group opportunities to address specific needs or topics.

Communities of Practice (COPs)“...transcend organizational barriers by allowing professionals from various roles, geographic locations, and contexts to come together based on common interests, passions, or issues and to have additional time to apply and master new ideas or practices.<sup>37</sup> The results of the initial professional development provider pilot demonstrate and further justify continued use of COPs to support use of inclusive practice in early childhood settings. Furthermore, additional COPs have the potential to establish networks of providers for the purposes of supporting their practical implementation of evidence- and/or research-based practices.

### Additional Considerations

#### Need for School District Participation in Community-Based Program Collaboration

Consistent with previous research<sup>2</sup>, findings from post-COP questionnaires and focus groups indicate a need for enhancing school district understanding of and engagement and collaboration with community-based organizations to increase the number of students that can receive special education services and supports in community settings.

#### Ensure Equity of Resources Across Programs

Because funding for professional development used to support early childhood providers comes from a variety of funding streams (federal, state, and local), providers indicate a need to ensure that all programs have equitable resources available to them to best support the collaboration and knowledge/skill development needed to successfully implement inclusion across a variety of community-based settings.

### Expanding Collaboration to Include Community Members Outside of the Field

Professional development providers describe the need for all caregivers and individuals working with a child with disabilities to work together to ensure their successful inclusion. With this in mind, caregivers of children with disabilities need additional opportunities to understand what inclusion can look like in early childhood, why and how inclusion works, and the roles they and others can play in ensuring their child’s success.

Furthermore, identification of individuals within the community, including families of children with and without disabilities, businesses, and other not-for-profit organizations that share a vision for inclusion of children with disabilities within community-based early childhood setting may be one way of to build issue awareness and consistent messaging within communities about inclusion and inclusive practice.

#### To what extent did you find value in participation across sectors of EC?

*If it was just Head Start – I know Head Start, so we get ideas from one another and it’s always helpful.*

*It was helpful to be able to then say.. this is what (another district) is doing and I would like to replicate or try to do some of those things between us.*

*You kind of get into the same old rut – you do what you do because that’s what you know. But, when you start hearing other ideas that you can kind of break out.*

*I don’t think it would have been as rich of a conversation if it was just one group or stream that participated.*

## Prioritizing Early Childhood Programs' Use of Inclusive Practice and Taking Action

All children and families need to have access to high quality inclusive early childhood programs. While many programs are serving children with disabilities in general education settings, some are not and the quality in which some are is unclear. High quality inclusion does not occur without intentional and meaningful opportunities to collaborate and team. Yet, the collaboration and teaming that most often occurs within early childhood programs is limited to their own staff and the families they serve. Although the collaboration between staff and families is essential, it can be made even more effective if broadened to include other local early childhood programs, community-based organizations, and local and state resources. But, the question is – *How do we ensure that all programs engage in these broader collaborations?*

Early CHOICES is unique in its ability to cross early childhood program sectors to provide resources on inclusion and inclusive practice, and professional development and networking opportunities to a variety of service providers. Early CHOICES is the only entity in the state which has the specific knowledge of how to best support children with disabilities in a variety of regular early childhood programs and has established relationships with the broad spectrum of early care and education providers and technical assistance and training providers.

To support all programs' ability to collaborate with other local early childhood programs, community-based organizations, and local and state resources for the purposes of improving their use of high quality inclusive practices, Early CHOICES proposes to create communities of practice with a focus on inclusion that will support existing programs, professional development and technical assistance providers in connecting and building their skills in high quality inclusive practices.

*Individually we are drop of water but together we are an ocean.*  
Ryunosuke Satoro

## References

- 1 Division of Early Childhood, Illinois State Board of Education. (2019). Early childhood inclusion for each and every child in Illinois. <https://www.isbe.net/Documents/Inclusion-Brochure.pdf>
- 2 Berman, K., Goldfarb, K., & Kamal, Z. (2021). *Strengthening early childhood inclusion opportunities to improve collaboration between school districts and community partners to support young children with disabilities* <https://www.startearly.org/app/uploads/2021/11/Strengthening-Early-Childhood-Inclusion-Report-11.15.21.pdf>
- Early CHOICES, Illinois Council on Developmental Disabilities, & Sands, M.M. (2020). Examples of collaborations supporting inclusion in Illinois. <https://www.eclre.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/final-report-to-ICDD-3.27.2020.pdf>
- 3 Gillaspay, K., Vinh, M. E., Surbrook-Goins, N., & Nichols, S. (2019). *Growing together: Developing and sustaining a community of practice in early childhood*. Gryphon House, Inc.

## COP Attendees

Over 50 individuals participated in the COP, including professional development providers from the following agencies:

4C Community Coordinated Child Care  
Carole Robertson Center for Learning  
CCR&R Evanston  
Chaddock Caregiver Connections  
Children's Home & Aid CCR&R  
Early CHOICES  
Early Childhood Professional Learning  
Early Intervention Training Project  
East Maine School District  
Easter Seals Chicago Head Start  
Erikson Institute  
Illinois Action for Children  
John A Logan CCR&R  
Metropolitan Family Services  
Project CHILD CCR&R  
Riverbend Head Start  
Southern Illinois University  
STARNET  
Start Early  
Tazwell Woodford Head Start  
Tri County Opportunities Council HS/EHS  
Waukegan District 60  
Woodstock 200  
YWCA Metro Chicago  
YWCA Northwestern IL CCR&R