Creating Inclusive Preschool Services at the Community Level Through Community Inclusion Teams

Early CHOICES
An Inclusion Initiative
of the Illinois State Board of Education

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Overview

Illinois has demonstrated a clear commitment to inclusive special education services in preschools, Head Start and child care programs. In 2020, Illinois and Early CHOICES was chosen as one of two states to pilot the *Implementation of Inclusion* project through a partnership with the Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center (ECTA). ECTA developed Indicators of High-Quality Inclusion to guide implementation, sustainability, and scale-up of high-quality inclusive preschools. These indicators, which constituted the basic structure of the project, address inclusive policies and practices at the four levels of a state system: state, community, program, and early care and education environment.

Building on the *Implementation of Inclusion* project, Early CHOICES was awarded with Preschool Development Grant B-5 funds to continue the work of engaging communities and programs to adopt, implement and sustain high-quality inclusion services, policies and practices. The growing preschool inclusion movement and evolution became the *Advancing Inclusion in Community-Based Early Childhood Education Settings* project.

Implementation teams have been called a lever for organization change in education. Research has shown that, without the use of implementation teams that keep a focus on implementation infrastructures, it takes an average of 17 years to achieve full implementation in only 14% of sites. However, with the support of implementation teams, we can reach full implementation in 80% of sites, in only 3 years. And that difference of 14 years is the full career of a generation of students. Research shows that it typically takes about 2-4 years to make those significant changes with implementation teams in place. (Higgins, Weiner, 2012, Fixsen, Blase, Timbers, & Wolf, 2001, Balas & Boren, 2000, Wallace, Blasé, Fixsen, Naoom, 2008).

PDG B-5 Planning Grant 2023

Early CHOICES gathered the Advisory Group for Advancing Preschool Inclusion in Community-Based Early Childhood Education Programs on April 11, 2023 to reconvene, to review and discuss the final report and help direct plans for the launch of the new PDG B-5 effort to implement the recommendations within the report. The project was funded by PDG B-5 grant and supported by the Illinois State Board of Education and Start Early. The advisory group worked to help surface recommendations for potential service and funding models to advance quality inclusive special education and related services to preschoolers (3-5 years old) with disabilities in community-based early childhood education programs.

Early CHOICES with Start Early and the Robert R. McCormick Foundation hosted an in-person and virtual event to launch the project on April 28, 2023. The invited attendees included school districts, community-child care partners, Head Start programs, policy stakeholders, early childhood collaboratives, and families, to learn more about an opportunity to ensure all voices are heard as the state considers the realignment of funding and new models to better serve children with disabilities across the mixed-delivery early learning system. Local "watch parties" of early childhood community partners were encouraged to attend the event. The goal was to set the stage for the additional Community Inclusion Teams (CITs) to be created to address the issues of serving children with disabilities in community based settings. The event had speakers representing the US Department of Health and Human Services, Illinois legislature, Illinois State Board of Education, Illinois Department of Human Services, Illinois Principals Association, families, Head Start, Child care, advocacy and philanthropy. There were 388 people registered individually to attend with over 200 joining the meeting in person or virtually. The event was recorded and posted for those who could not attend.

To create public awareness, share models for testing and engage partners, we followed the launch of the project with an informational webinar on May 16, 2023, to interested parties in applying to be one of three Community Inclusion Teams focused on planning for an itinerant model. The Webinar had 80 registrants with 50 attending. We also recorded the webinar and posted on our website for ease of access. To support interested parties we created the application, rubric, a Frequently Asked Questions document and an additional resource list for applicants to learn more.

There were inquiries from 20 individuals seeking clarification or basic information. Six applications were received by the due date of June 2, 2023. Three applicants were selected based on the rubric, geographical location, and itinerant model plan to receive funding of $25,000 each. The three programs that were not chosen were contacted and offered technical assistance without the additional funding.

The advisory group gathered again on June 23, August 10, October 11 and December 12, 2023, to support the work of the CITs and raise policy and system needs, as well as advocate for solutions to the challenges the CITs face.

The advisory group reviewed the PDG B-5 workplan and assessed membership to expand the group to assure all stakeholders were represented. At each meeting, the group heard from the CIT leaders about their work, successes and challenges. The group addressed major cost components and drivers and any policy changes necessary for communities to implement itinerant services. The advisory group completed a review of existing policies analyzing the

extent to which these policies impede or support inclusion of children with disabilities in community settings and workforce issues. The group specifically raised up recommendations that the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) provide guidance for how itinerant Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) and related service professionals who are employed by the Local Education Agency (LEA) can use existing background checks to satisfy Community Based Organization (CBO)/DCFS requirements. This issue resulted in DCFS issuing a memo clarifying requirements related to background checks for related service providers in June 2024.

The advisory group also started a conversation about workforce issues, including hearing a presentation on the Blended Early Childhood/Early Childhood Special Education program and an Early Childhood Alternative Licensure program at University of Illinois Chicago (UIC). This work has been flagged as an area needing additional consideration as part of the transition working groups outside of the advisory group.

Early CHOICES engaged Start Early Consulting to research the cost drivers and barriers that local school districts face to providing itinerant ECSE services to children in community-based PreK programs; this research is intended to assist with setting the foundation for future statewide funding and fiscal analysis needs for inclusive ECSE. With oversight from this advisory group, Start Early engaged in research and identified recommendations to address cost barriers that local school districts face when providing itinerant ECSE. The memo yielded several state-level opportunities to strengthen inclusion across settings:

A. Strengthen preschool LRE and inclusion in program administration and state rule,
B. Collaborative professional learning can support success,
C. Identify systemic solutions to the workforce shortage,
D. Provide guidance on background check requirements across early childhood programs,
E. Clarify how programs can leverage all available funding streams, and
F. Conduct a more comprehensive fiscal analysis.

Community Inclusion Teams Defined –

Community inclusion teams (CITs), with support of an inclusion specialist from Early CHOICES, bring service providers and families together to build community-wide awareness and vision of the importance of early childhood inclusion. Early CHOICES created supporting documents to facilitate understanding and bolster recruitment for the local CITS. The overview document explains the larger project and the CIT Fact Sheet provides specific details for the basics of a CIT.

To support communities building teams and beginning dialogue Early CHOICES created this Getting Started Toolkit. This toolkit aims to build the capacity of communities to equitably serve preschool children with disabilities in inclusive learning environments. The mixed service delivery model in Illinois creates more opportunities for children with disabilities to attend and receive services in community based early childhood education settings (CBOs). This model does not replace existing inclusive models that are established in many public preschool programs but expands using an itinerant model to reach beyond the public school district programs.

Community Inclusion Team Highlights

- Aligned vision for inclusion supports collaboration across community systems,
- Community collaboration increases access to inclusive placements,
- Early childhood community leaders collaborating builds communication across the system, and
- Indicators of High-Quality Inclusion guide the work of each CIT.

Communities

Collinsville CUSD 10

As a result of their involvement in the Implementation of Inclusion Project, the Collinsville School District Preschool Coordinator has instituted and maintained a Community Inclusion Team (CIT), consisting of local agencies that touch the lives of young children and their families. The CIT has developed a vision, worked through the CIT Indicators of High Quality Inclusion, and developed an action plan based on those indicators. The team has developed press releases, a Facebook page on preschool inclusion, and a website with the vision statement, historical information, and success stories. The CIT has also developed several community awareness documents to promote this work in their community.

In addition, the Collinsville Community Unit School District 10 and Collinsville Head Start developed a collaborative model of service delivery for children in Head Start who also had an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). An itinerant teacher from the district provided special education to the Head Start children in their classrooms with services and interventions embedded in the routines and activities of the day. The itinerant teacher supported the classroom team in understanding and implementation of these interventions. This eliminated unnecessary disruptions and transitions for the children with IEPs having to be transported between service providers.

In 2023, Collinsville applied for and received funding and technical assistance from Early CHOICES through B-5 PDG, to complete planning activities that would support expansion of these community-based services to a local childcare center. Funding was used for CIT facilitation and preparation, professional development and release time for staff, observation of partner programs, purchase of ePyramid modules for childcare staff, and provision of materials and supplies to support inclusive environments and practices.

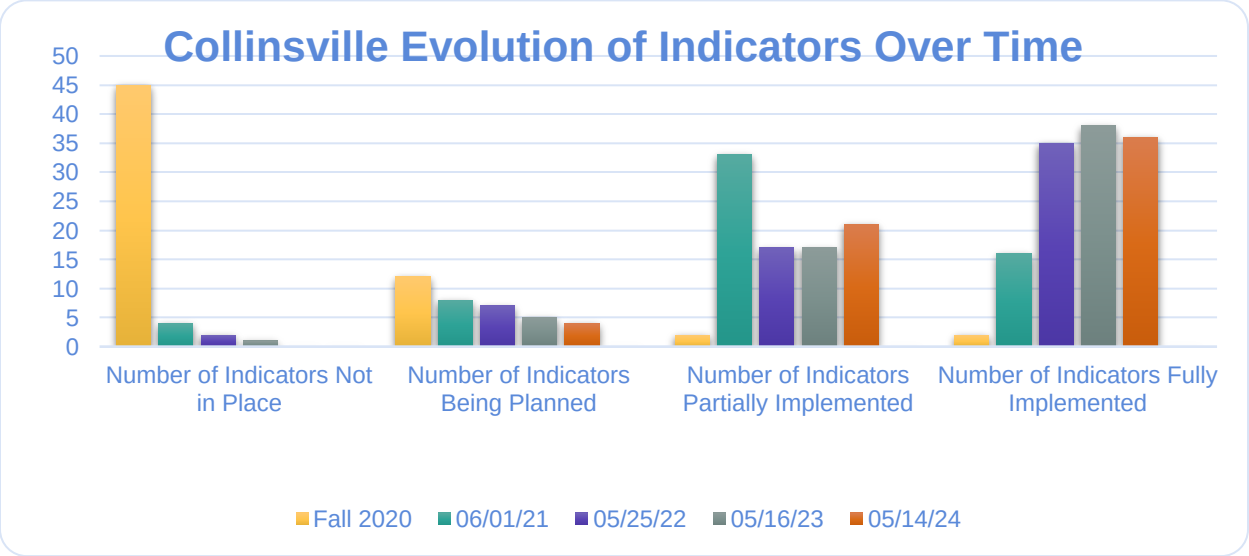
The CIT completed staff and parent surveys resulting in specific programmatic changes to propel the work forward. The CIT is in the process of creating recruitment materials to share with other

communities. As a result of the work with Early CHOICES, the district has made a commitment to inclusion and is on a journey to full preschool inclusion.

Challenges that this CIT encountered include:

Inconsistent member attendance,
Difficulty coordinating shared professional development,
Continued use of itinerant model with existing resources, and
Allocation of staff when enrollment declines in community-based settings.

The growth of the CIT work is reflected in the following graphic illustrating the Collinsville Indicators of High-Quality Inclusion at the Community level. There is a noticeable increase in the number of Indicators fully met from the Fall of 2020 to the Spring of 2024.



Quad Cities

In 2023, Western Illinois University Center for Best Practices in Early Childhood applied for funding and technical assistance from Early CHOICES to advance inclusion and support early childhood special education in community-based settings in the Quad Cities area. Members from five local school districts, a local university, the local early childhood community collaboration, Head Start, Birth to Five Illinois, a local special education cooperative, and local childcares formed the CIT.

Western Illinois University Center for Best Practices, Birth to Five Illinois: Region 49, United Way and Q2030 held an Early Childhood Workforce forum in Fall 2022 for Community-Based and School-Based partners to discuss community needs in Early Childhood, with Special Education birth to 5 services being identified by the group as a high priority need. In April 2023, alongside the launch of this project, WIU the Center for Best Practices in Early Childhood Education and East Moline Early Learning Center launched a community solution-seeking workgroup around special education. CBOs, early childhood community resource partners, and school-based partners in Rock Island County attended. They held a follow up focus group for those with serious interest in the work of providing inclusive special education services across the

community. The Early Childhood Coalition of the Illinois Quad City Area (ECC), Regional Office of Education #49, Black Hawk Area Special Education District (BHASED), and Skip-A Long (SAL) Family and Community Services worked on recruitment of providers within their organizational reach with a focus of Birth to 5 Region #49. BHASED, Western Illinois University and Birth to Five Illinois Region #49 reached out to the Child Care Resource & Referral (CCR&R) partners, additional Head Start Programs, and additional school districts within the service area.

Before the CIT work began, the school districts partnered to support CBOs through informal agreements, conversations and basic service. The school district participants within this project received support through site visits/case studies, assessments, surveys, and CBOs attending IEP meetings as they could. The school districts screened on site with SAL and Head Start. Transportation was an issue across the region due to parents using childcare close to their homes versus their serving district.

Two CIT Coordinators facilitate monthly CIT meetings. Parents and an early interventionist have joined the CIT. This particular set of partner agencies has not worked together previously so it was important for the members to visit a partner program to gain knowledge. The CIT developed an Inclusion Vision Statement, and the team has developed an action plan with priorities.

The CIT drafted a communication plan that is a series of steps Community Based Early Childhood Providers can utilize to develop a team approach to providing support and/or Special Education Services to children in their care. It is a tool to help facilitate conversations between families, Community Based Child Care and LEAs to provide education in a child's Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). This document is intended to help facilitate the conversations necessary to serve children in their LRE with integrity.

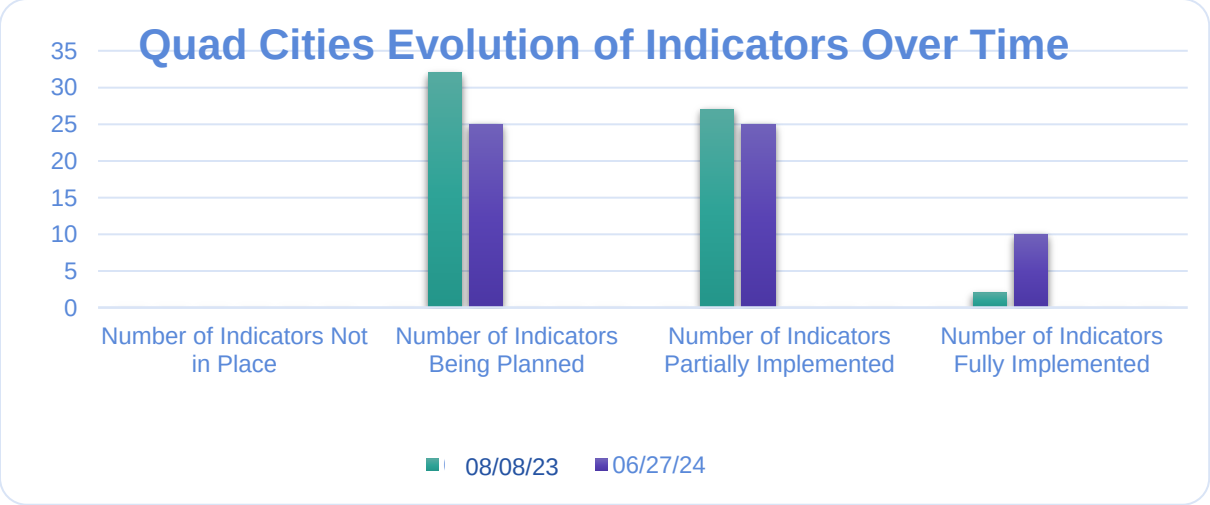
Highlights:

- Family member meeting held where families shared their appreciations and struggles with receiving special education services in the community
- Partner program observations- CBO's observing in school-based programs and school district's observing in CBOs.
- Shared understanding of best practices and the necessity for this work
- Shared professional development planned for August 2024
- Community Guidance Document drafted

Challenges:

- Inconsistent member attendance for such a large group: Finding common free time was very challenging.
- Funding an itinerant model implementation plan to work across district boundaries
- Dynamics between CBOs and school districts indicated a lack of appreciation of strengths and abilities of one another's organizations.
- Salary and benefit discrepancies between public school staff and CBO staff
- Limited time for CBO staff to engage in professional development

The growth of the Quad Cities CIT work is reflected in the following graphic illustrating the Indicators of High-Quality Inclusion at the Community level. There is a sizable increase in the number of Indicators fully met in the short time from the Fall, 2024 to the Spring, 2024.



Peoria County

Members from several school districts partnered in this CIT. Peoria County already had many pieces in place before beginning a Community Inclusion Team. The Special Education Association of Peoria County (SEAPCO) met with Bright Futures, the local Preschool For All provider, monthly to discuss inclusion as well as provide inclusive speech therapy services. SEAPCO also provided speech therapy services and Peoria Public Schools had an agreement with the local Head Start to provide some specialized services. Several districts including a cooperative had not collaborated until the CIT was formed. The county also has an Early Childhood (EC) Forum of Central Illinois that talked about inclusion and other issues related to early childhood and included not just public schools but also community providers. The CIT narrowed the focus to inclusion and brought together multiple providers across the systems.

The CIT intends to build upon the good working relationships between key partners and spread that work throughout the community. Current supports include some speech services in Peoria Regional Office of Education (ROE) community-based preschools and coordination with Cadence Academy Preschools to bus children for a half day program. The goal was to pilot six classrooms serving 10-15 students with disabilities and continue to expand as the CIT grew. All programs are Pyramid Model programs and the CIT intends to build upon that strong foundation.

The CIT met monthly and created a vision statement to center their work.

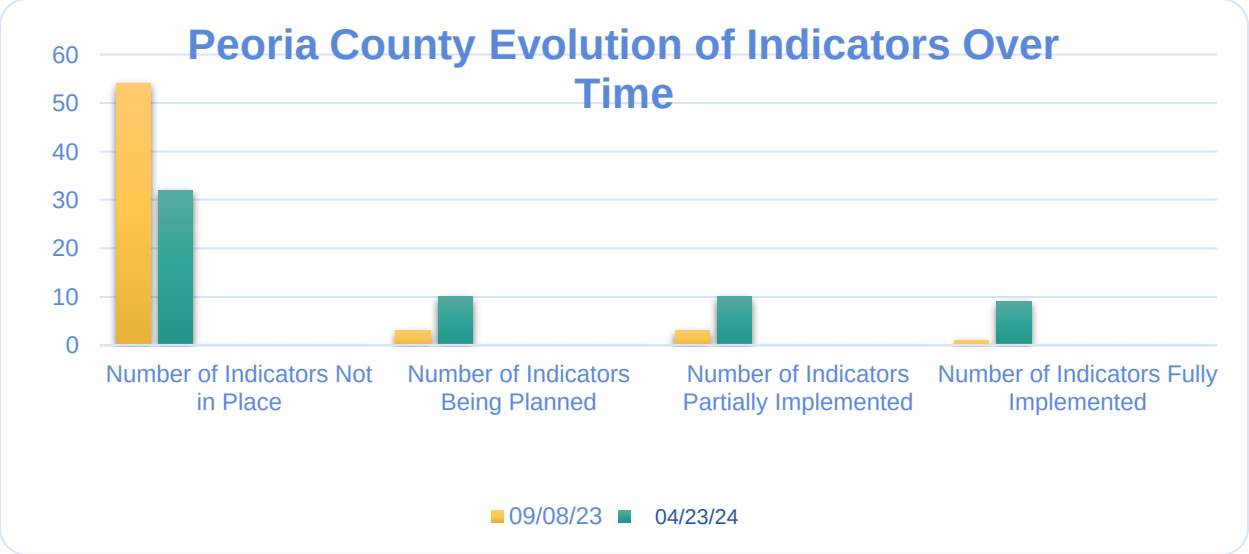
> *All children in Peoria county will receive high quality inclusive early childhood education through partnerships with families and community providers for full participation and optimal learning.*

The initial focus was on creating a well-balanced CIT and the group worked to assure that families were represented as well as early interventionists. With the multiple collaboration efforts in the county such as the EC Forum, Birth to 5 Action and Family Councils, and the LEA the CIT could focus specifically on inclusion and highlight the intersections of the work around children with disabilities.

The CIT created a survey and gathered information from community based organizations to find out how many children are being served and what the needs are in the community based organizations. At the same time, the CIT examined the Indicator 6 preschool environment data for the school districts in the county. This has opened the door to conversations about increasing inclusive options within school district programs, as well as reaching out to support children served in CBOs.

Members from this CIT also coordinated the first successful community screening. This allowed for successful planning for placement of children in community programs.

The CIT has had challenges, though. Large systems have more bureaucracy to work through to get decisions made. The funding has helped keep some partners engaged but it is a challenge to find a common meeting time. The CIT has shifted from in person to flexible meeting formats based on member needs to allow for increased participation. Early CHOICES has offered support monthly in planning and facilitating the CIT meetings.



Niles Township

Niles Township District for Special Education (NTDSE) applied with local school districts and two CBOs. Initially the CIT application was not funded with PDG B-5 grant funds but Early CHOICES received the Early CHOICES State Grant (399-CC) through ISBE and these funds were used to fund this CIT. The districts Skokie 73.5, Skokie 68 and Skokie/Morton Grove 69, along with Mosaic Early Childhood Center and Swift Child Care Early Childhood Centers were facilitated in meeting and planning through NTDSE. The community has an Early Childhood Alliance where these partners have collaborated on broader early childhood issues.

The community had its initial meeting in November 2023. The CIT used the Indicators of High Quality Inclusion to guide their work. The first step was to create a vision:

> *To advance inclusion in our community by ensuring all children with specialized learning needs and their families have access to high-quality, inclusive programs across all early childhood settings which results in full participation and optimal learning.*

The CIT decided they needed more data about what was happening in their community. Through their monthly meetings supported by Early CHOICES Inclusion Specialists they examined Indicator 6 Preschool Environment data for the community and created surveys for child cares, school districts and parents about successes and challenges in supporting children with disabilities in community based settings. The surveys also collected data on access to services and asked if families were choosing to decline services if services could not be delivered in their community based setting.

The CIT plans to continue their work in Fall 2024 to build pilot implementation sites in child care.

Overall Lessons Learned:

Community-based organizations serve as important hubs for early childhood education, socialization, and support for children with disabilities. These organizations include preschools, childcare centers, Head Starts, and family childcare. School districts receive funding through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) to provide specially designed instruction, supports and services to children with IEPs. Bringing together the various CBOs and school districts along with families and other community partners to deliver services wherever young children are served is the goal of this work. Significant challenges persist. Many CBOs lack the resources, training, and infrastructure to effectively include children with disabilities. Common barriers include lack of inclusive mindsets, inadequate staff training on inclusive practices, and limited access to specialized support services from school districts. School districts lack the funding and flexibility to be able to reach multiple CBOs and have varying levels of inclusive mindsets and implementation within their school based programs. We have learned the first step to solving these issues is creating a community space to have these discussions and that is the Community Inclusion Team.

Need for Support:

Technical Assistance to the CIT facilitator and CIT was needed. Effective project implementation required strong technical assistance from Inclusion Specialists. Their support helped in planning meetings, building facilitation strategies, overcoming resistance, and ensuring alignment with the vision. Inclusion Specialists also had access to resources to help move the group and not spend time creating tools that already exist elsewhere. Regular check-ins and acknowledging achievements of the CITs, even small ones, contributed to team cohesion and motivation.

Access to Resources:

Ensuring the CIT had access to necessary resources, including data, research, and facilitation was critical. Lack of resources lead to delays and lower the quality of outcomes. Early CHOICES was able to share Indicator 6 Preschool Environments data by each community. This led to robust conversations about inclusive practices within the participating school districts. Funding for the facilitation and professional learning of the CIT members has been essential to support the work of the CITs.

Time Matters:

Setting achievable deadlines and realistic timelines is a challenge. Overly ambitious schedules led to burnout and frustration, while overly lax timelines result in procrastination and loss of momentum. This work is not easy and requires thoughtful deliberation and examining current practices. Clearly defining priorities through action planning helped in focusing efforts on the most critical tasks. Incorporating time for reflection and course correction within the CITs allowed the team to assess progress and make necessary adjustments, leading to better outcomes.

Building Relationships:

Strong relationships within the team and across entities are vital. Regular communication, team-building activities, and a collaborative culture helped in building trust and effective teamwork within the CITs. Stakeholders were engaged through meetings, observations and workgroups to ensure that their needs and expectations were understood. This also helped in gaining support and minimizing resistance to change.

Professional Learning:

Encouraging continuous cross-systems learning and professional development helped in keeping the team updated on best practices and created an increased sense of efficacy with respect to implementing inclusive practices.

Building Capacity & Partnerships:

Collaborating with community partners, such as providers, school districts, and CBOs, provided additional expertise and resources to each CIT member. This enhanced the quality of the early childhood programming across the system. This collaboration has helped to gain broader support and ensure that the CIT efforts align with the needs and expectations of the wider community. The CIT members provided valuable insights, support, and opportunities for inclusive practices to be implemented and supported.

Recommendations:

Policy Support

ISBE and the new Early Childhood agency should implement policies that mandate inclusion in CBOs and provide funding for training and infrastructure improvements to support this work.

Resource Allocation

Allocate specific funding for technical assistance, itinerant services, and professional development for all providers. This includes the structures to support time for planning and reflection on practice as multidisciplinary teams serving children. Assure school districts have additional funding to implement itinerant model alongside existing school based inclusion efforts.

Community Engagement

Foster partnerships within communities to promote awareness and acceptance. Focusing the teams' work on inclusion leads to a stronger system for all children and families and more buy-in from all sectors as the community members learn about each entity's scope of work, priority goals and ways of working.

Increase Community Inclusion Teams with State Level support

Creating a sustainable teaming structure requires incorporating inclusion and equity throughout the process as well as time and support. The community inclusion team alone cannot change the larger system. In systems change efforts, implementation teams at each level of the system can facilitate alignment and reduce silos. Each implementation team in the system shares the same goal and can share similar frameworks but each community's resulting implementation will be unique to them. A state level implementation team that focuses on inclusion is critical to this work.

Research and Evaluation

Conduct regular evaluation and research to identify gaps in current practices and measure the impact of CITs

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