Meeting the Needs of Our Youngest Californians:
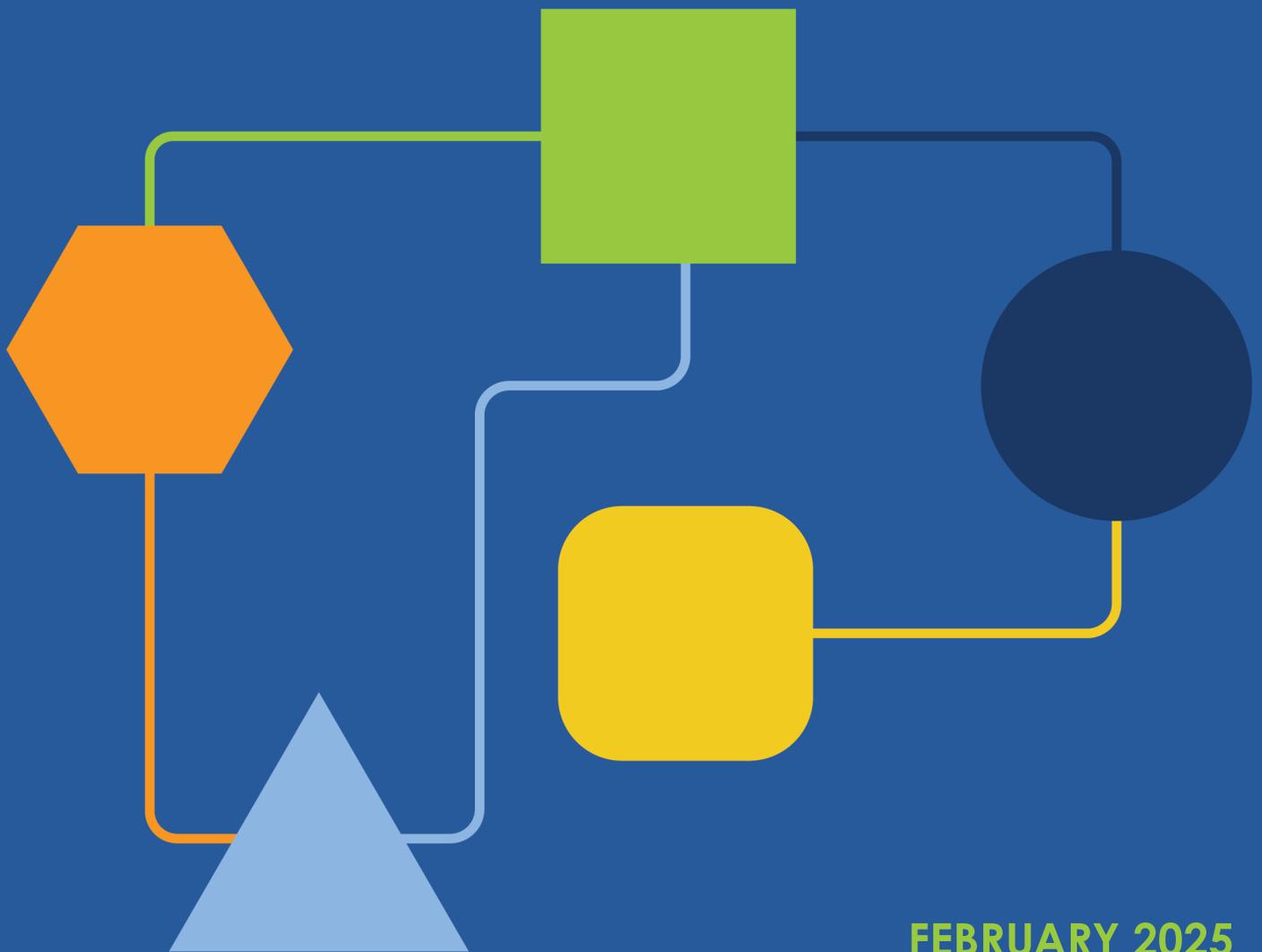
A Framework for Inclusion in Early Education

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Introduction

We are a group of diverse educators and Teach Plus California Policy Fellows focused on identifying and dismantling barriers to inclusive practices within early childhood educational (ECE) spaces. We teach in preschool, elementary school, middle school, and special education settings across the state and, between us, have more than six decades of teaching experience. Our range of experience, and our expertise as educators, grounds our assertion that ECE models must include full inclusion. Rather than a list of practices, inclusion is a systematic approach that should address each student's holistic learning experience. We believe a statewide framework of inclusion for our state's youngest learners must especially include students with special needs.

Background

In recent years, California has made considerable investments in ECE for children ages 0 to 8. The investments range from local initiatives funding childcare subsidies[1] to statewide implementation of universal transitional kindergarten.[2] As outlined in the Master Plan for Early Learning and Care,[3] which provides a framework for the state to follow as children transition from birth to 3rd grade, the expansion of ECE is a central priority. However, that ECE expansion must address the integration of students with special needs. Students with special needs require additional services to access education due to a disability or other extraordinary circumstance, and schools have a legal requirement to provide these services.

Nationwide, the number of students enrolled in special education services is rising,[4] a trend that is consistent in California. In the 2023-24 school year, over 800,000 students in the state[5] received special education or related services, with 5.8 percent receiving those services in a preschool setting. California has been proactive in supporting these students, and notably extended the Inclusive Early Education Expansion Grant[6] through 2027, which increases access to inclusive learning environments for students with special needs.

However, this is not enough to fully support these students. There is a nationwide special education teacher shortage,[7] making it difficult to fill vacancies with highly qualified educators. Additionally, special education educators spend up to 80 percent of their time on non-instructional activities,[8] such as completing compliance paperwork or scheduling and participating in Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings. Because of these systemic issues, it comes as no surprise that students with special needs have lower academic outcomes than their peers.[9]

Our Vision for Young Californians

To provide best practices and guide local implementation efforts, California must adopt an inclusion framework for ECE students with special needs. This is an important step in addressing the needs of this vulnerable student population, in combination with continued funding opportunities.

An inclusive framework should be rooted in a state-adopted definition of inclusion, with the goal of inclusion being to create equity and opportunity through diversity, respect, and the welcoming of all learners, enabling them to make meaningful contributions to their local and global communities. Though the definition that we developed below should be used as a guiding principle for inclusion of all students across age levels, the inclusion framework we are advocating for should be primarily directed toward ECE students with special needs.

"Inclusion embraces equity and diversity to ensure fair treatment for all people so that norms, practices, and policies in place ensure identity is not predictive of opportunities or outcomes, and that the intersectionality of different aspects of an individual identity, such as class, race, exceptional needs, and multilingual and migration status, are reflected and celebrated in every educational space."

Essential Components for Successful Inclusion

The key to creating inclusive spaces in education is long-lasting change that improves all students' experiences. Implementing inclusive practices throughout California will take time and require consistent guidance and support from state education leaders. Although an inclusion setting is typically based on a student's needs, we believe it should be available to all ECE students in both general and special education.

After reviewing a broad range of research on inclusive practices[10] and frameworks,[11] we identified five critical components of developing an inclusive ECE experience:

+ Integrated and Connected Systems
+ Educator Preparation
+ School Culture
+ Classroom Environment
+ Family Engagement

In the sections below, we explain the importance of each component and provide examples about how each one supports our youngest learners in California.

A   Integrated and Connected Systems

In California, there are various grant programs, initiatives, and plans designed to support students with special needs.[12] Similar to the English Learner Roadmap[13] created to improve academic outcomes for multilingual students, California's youngest learners in ECE settings, including those with special needs, would benefit from a state-level inclusion definition and a framework to support its implementation. A state-led effort to support inclusion would create cohesion between the various programs already in existence and all ECE spaces that welcome students with special needs.

Similar efforts in other states have proved to be successful in developing inclusive ECE programs. Illinois' inclusion definition stands out as a model, stating, "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."[14]

To guide ECE teachers who are creating inclusive environments, California will need to develop a set of inclusion standards and an evaluation system to determine how effectively inclusion is being implemented. Creating change on this scale requires a systemwide approach and guidelines, combined with an evaluation system for schools and districts to assess their role in supporting their educators, students, and families.

B   Educator Preparation

The state must ensure that aspiring teachers in educator preparation programs (EPPs) understand the inclusion mindset before they enter the ECE space, while having practical tools and strategies to teach students with special needs. The California Standards for the Teaching Profession, which were recently revised, lay the groundwork for successful teaching, with statements like this one: "Their focus is to ensure inclusive learning experiences based on individual learner assets and needs while also creating equitable outcomes for all."[15] However, the standards would further benefit from a clear and centralized definition of inclusion.

To establish the importance of access to diverse, equitable, and inclusive spaces for all ECE students, the state should consult experts in the field to build professional learning for both aspiring and current educators. In addition, all professionals who work with and for students, including school board members, administrators, and classified staff, must have opportunities to participate in the learning to ensure cohesion throughout each school and district. Based on the particular needs of the community, training could focus on topics such as: collaboration, co-teaching, self-assessment, goal setting, implementation process, strategic planning, providing feedback, formal evaluations, and data collection.

Though there are a variety of inclusion models that may be adopted to best suit the needs of a local community, a well-defined ECE school culture must be a fundamental attribute of each. An inclusive school culture thrives when there is a paradigm shift toward inclusion, collaboration between general and special education teachers and administrators, advanced administrative support, and ongoing professional development (discussed in the next section).

There is a crucial need to shift the inclusion model from a specific service or location to a mindset adopted by all school staff.[16] Rather than simply encouraging ECE staff members to change their point of view, school leaders must foster conditions in which inclusion is the default. When administrators provide continuous training opportunities, sufficient time and resources to implement new ideas, and dedicated time to collaborate with peers and complete compliance paperwork, attitudes toward inclusion and teacher self-efficacy improve.

Keys to a successful school culture is collaboration. General and special education teachers must have dedicated collaboration time to develop individualized support strategies for all students. Furthermore, teachers must have time to collaborate with other staff, such as resource specialists, paraprofessionals, occupational therapists, adaptive physical educators, and speech therapists. Collaboration among these professionals supports students of diverse backgrounds and allows for a wide variety of inclusive classroom models that will ultimately reduce students' learning gaps.[17]

Administrators in ECE play a pivotal role in developing school culture. They are responsible for identifying and providing support for teachers' professional learning needs. Beyond that, they must model inclusive mindsets, provide behavior and family outreach support, and ensure there is protected planning and collaboration time built into the work week. Behavior management systems grounded in restorative practices can strengthen student-to-teacher relationships, positively impact shame management, and reduce reliance on exclusion through school suspensions and expulsions.[18]

An inclusive ECE classroom environment serves all students, regardless of their family background, race, ethnicity, gender expression, and cognitive and physical ability. All students deserve to feel they belong and must be provided multiple and diverse learning opportunities.

Creating an inclusive classroom environment starts with the design and layout of the classroom, as well as the furniture provided for students to use. The room should be thoughtfully and intentionally designed to foster inclusion and accessibility.[19] Applying a tool, such as the classroom environment checklist,[20] will help ensure that use of the space is optimized based on the daily activities for young learners.

Beyond the physical layout of the space, adopting a culturally relevant and responsive teaching approach will create an ECE learning environment that acknowledges and respects the unique cultural experiences and perspectives of each student, while promoting academic success. This is especially critical for students with special needs. Students must see themselves in books, videos, and other instructional media, further promoting inclusion and valuing diverse viewpoints.

Along with culturally relevant and responsive teaching, implementing restorative practices develops early learners' social-emotional skills and equips them with tools they can use throughout their educational career. Restorative practices can also bridge racial disparities and reduce the disproportionate identification of students of color in special education, a current priority for California.[21]

E Family Engagement

Research shows that strong relationships between schools and families improve academic outcomes for students.[22] A strong ECE partnership between families, educators, support staff, and community partners underpins the development of an inclusive environment and promotes students' learning and development.

Both families and educators provide valuable knowledge in understanding a student's needs. Families, as well as caregivers, know their children, culture, and the community in which they live best, while educators and school staff know the ECE curriculum, the child's development level, and additional support services that the school can offer. This knowledge is complementary and essential to ensure the success of all children, as well as a mutually respectful partnership. To further strengthen a positive culture of collaboration between all ECE stakeholders, families and caregivers must have access to all the resources and information necessary to actively participate in their children's education. This will guarantee a supportive and collaborative learning environment for all.

CONCLUSION

"Inclusion embraces equity and diversity to ensure fair treatment for all people so that norms and practices ensure identity is not predictive of opportunities or outcomes, and that the intersectionality of different aspects of an individual identity, such as class, race, exceptional needs, and multilingual and migration status, are reflected and celebrated in every ECE education space."

California has made significant investments in ECE in order to improve student outcomes, and especially the outcomes for students with special needs, further guidance on developing inclusive environments is necessary. Adopting a clear statewide definition of inclusion, such as we recommend in this paper, will lay the foundation for creating a comprehensive framework for schools and districts to reference as they meet the needs of their communities. As the state considers the key features of this framework, we hope practitioners in the field, such as those of us in the Teach Plus California, can be an essential resource to support its development. Additionally, we suggest the use of surveys, committees, and focus groups composed of experienced practitioners, researchers, and families. Partnering with community-based organizations will facilitate and guarantee the participation of qualified and experienced educators who have center children's best interests. By using the collective knowledge and expertise from various stakeholders, we can move toward more inclusive ECE settings with improved outcomes for all student, especially those with special needs.

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