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Expanding Opportunities an Interagency Inclusion Initiative

BACKGROUND

Research has shown that both young children with disabilities and their peers benefit from participating together in quality programs and community activities. However, inclusive opportunities for young children with disabilities are often not systematic, comprehensive or necessarily of high quality. Cross-agency dialogue and commitment among multiple federal, state and local early childhood programs and services are necessary for identifying and implementing effective and efficient inclusion strategies.¹

Four federal agency partners recognized the need to promote collaborative efforts in states that would result in high quality inclusive opportunities for all children and families. They created the Expanding Opportunities Initiative and supported it through the coordinated efforts of their technical assistance (TA) resources. The agencies and the primary TA providers are:

- Child Care Bureau
 - National Child Care Information and Technical Assistance Center (NCCIC)
- Office of Head Start
 - Head Start Collaboration Projects
- Administration on Developmental Disabilities
 - University Centers for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities Education, Research and Service (UCEDD)
- Office of Special Education Programs
 - National Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center (NECTAC)
 - Regional Resource Center Program (RRCP)

PARTICIPATING STATES

This interagency inclusion initiative began in 2005 and has continued to be supported by the federal partners each year. The first four cohorts of states were selected and invited to participate by the federal partners. Thereafter, a self-nomination process was open to states that had not yet received technical assistance support from either the Expanding Opportunities Initiative, the National Professional Development Center on Inclusion, or SpecialQuest Birth-Five.

Twenty states have participated to date:

Year 1	Arizona, Florida, Iowa, Montana
Year 2	Delaware, Idaho, Tennessee, Wisconsin
Year 3	Kansas, Massachusetts, Oregon
Year 4	Maine, Maryland, Oklahoma
Year 5	Kentucky, Michigan, Texas
Year 6	Hawaii, New York, Utah

MAJOR ACTIVITIES

Traditionally, the Expanding Opportunities meeting is held in conjunction with the National Inclusion Institute in Chapel Hill, North Carolina in order to provide participating states the opportunity to learn about research findings, models and resources related to inclusive policy, professional development and practice for early care and education.

Each federal agency supports one key contact from each participating state to attend the Expanding Opportunities meeting and the Inclusion Institute where they begin a collaborative strategic planning process guided by the TA team. The cross-agency state leadership teams include:

The National Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center

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- State Child Care Director/Administrator
- Head Start State Collaboration Office Director
- State Section 619 Preschool Coordinator or Part C Coordinator
- University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities Director

The plan is fully developed in each state with a group of stakeholders with broad representation to address identified needs, improve coordination, and support or enhance existing efforts. Over the next one to three years the state leadership team, with TA support, takes responsibility for implementing the plan, modifying it as necessary, monitoring workgroup activities, and evaluating progress and outcomes.

STATE RESPONSIBILITIES

Participating in Expanding Opportunities requires commitment on the part of the state leadership team. They are responsible for the following:

- Travel to North Carolina to attend the initial planning meeting and bring back information from the Inclusion Institute for use in subsequent planning
- Identify and invite a broad based stakeholder group that includes representation from special education, child care, developmental disabilities and Head Start and supports parents to participate in a meeting (s) in the state; work with interagency TA team to plan agendas
- Take leadership in developing the state Expanding Opportunities plan and support implementation of resulting plans, decisions and strategies
- Facilitate smaller workgroups to address strategies and activities on the plan
- Monitor progress of activities intended to reach desired outcomes; request TA as needed
- Communicate regularly with the stakeholder group and TA Team members

INTERAGENCY TA SUPPORT

TA Projects provide expertise from their own perspective and share responsibilities for Expanding Opportunities activities including:

- Joint facilitation to develop the state's Expanding Opportunities plan
- Ongoing technical assistance over a one to three year period to provide resources and information to assist with implementation of plan activities
- Facilitation of additional on-site meetings or statewide training events
- Regular communication among TA providers and the state leadership team to assess progress and evaluate plan activities

ACCOMPLISHMENTS & OUTCOMES

Many states are implementing their Expanding Opportunities plans and achieving their intended outcomes. Concrete examples of change that are laying the groundwork for increasing the numbers of young children served in a high quality inclusive setting include:

- Pooled resources to create a Web site to improve state level cross-agency networking, sharing of materials and planning
- Developed a public awareness/public relations priority targeted to state boards, commissions and other decision-making bodies to promote early childhood inclusion
- Provided information during legislative sessions to increase child care assistance reimbursement rate for children with disabilities
- Developed stronger partnerships with state institutes of higher education to embed content into curricula for producing a larger pool of practitioners with background knowledge in inclusive early childhood practices
- Developed a Web-based training calendar supported by all early care and education agencies to coordinate training opportunities
- Developed a Community Toolkit of program assessment resources to assist consultants, program administrators and program staff in examining practices
- Created positions for inclusion specialists and supported them to work in local programs

“Almost every respondent believed that the progress their team made would not have taken place without this initiative.”

- *External Evaluation Report*

REFERENCE

1. National Professional Development Center on Inclusion. (2009). *Research synthesis points on early childhood inclusion*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, FPG Child Development Institute, Author.

Thank you for your interest!

NECTAC collaborates in a number of TA initiatives in early childhood. For more information about the work of The National Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center, please visit our website at <http://www.nectac.org>

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