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State Policies that Support Full Participation of Preschoolers with Disabilities in State-Funded Preschool

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ABOUT NIEER

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Introduction

Decades of research document the potential benefits of serving children with disabilities together with their typically developing peers (Baglieri & Shapiro, 2012; Bailey et al., 1998; Justice et al., 2014; Odom & Diamond, 1998; Sauer & Jorgensen, 2016; USHHS & USED, 2023). High-quality preschool programs serving children with disabilities alongside peers provides developmental growth opportunities for every child in the classroom through peer interactions, individualized instruction, and overall higher quality of the language and literacy environment in the classroom (Grisham-Brown et al., 2010; Odom et al., 2004; US Department of Health and Human Services [USHHS] & US Department of Education [USED], 2023; Warren et al., 2016; Weiland, 2016). In 2023, USHHS and USED released a Joint Policy Statement highlighting research supporting the benefits of high-quality preschool programs that serve children with and without disabilities together, and some of the policies necessary to support such programs.

Drawing from the National Institute for Early Education Research's (NIEER's) 2024 State of Preschool Yearbook, this data snapshot analyzes the extent to which states have policies and/or guidance in place to support high-quality public preschool programs that include children with and without disabilities, as specified by USHHS and USED. Specifically, the Yearbook surveyed whether state preschool programs have policies and/or guidance related to teacher qualifications, professional development and coaching, mixed-delivery, and classroom proportions to support high-quality services for children with disabilities integrated into general preschool classrooms. This snapshot reflects data from 65 state programs operating within 45 states and DC that have a program(s) meeting NIEER's definition of a state preschool program.

State Preschool Context

State preschool policies are especially relevant for children with disabilities because all 65 state programs report that children with disabilities are served in state-funded preschool classrooms, though in some cases, children with disabilities are funded separately. All but two state preschool programs incorporate preschoolers with disabilities in the total enrollment counts reported in the Yearbook, and 51 of those programs are able to disaggregate the number of preschoolers with disabilities from total enrollment counts. The two outstanding state programs (New Jersey and Minnesota VPK/SRP) report that preschoolers with disabilities are served within state preschool classrooms, but data on those children are not included in their enrollment. Table 1 shows the percentage of children with and without disabilities served in state-funded preschool classrooms who have a disability, broken down by age where available.

Table 1. Enrollment of Preschoolers with Disabilities in State-Funded Preschool

State Programs	State Preschool Enrollment			Preschoolers with Disabilities in State Preschool			Percent of Children in State Preschool with Disabilities		
	Total	3's	4's	Total	3's	4's	Total	3's	4's
Alabama	24,640		24,640	954		954	3.9%		3.9%
Alaska Pre-Elementary	699	345	354	Data not available					
Alaska Early Ed Program Grants	95		63	Data not available					
Alaska ADM Pre-K	523		523	Data not available					
Arizona	5,583	2,370	3,213	147	53	94	2.6%	2.2%	2.9%
Arkansas	19,004	6,927	12,077	2,153	699	1,454	11.3%	10.1%	12.0%
California CSPP	99,216	42,855	56,361	8,020	3,621	4,399	8.1%	8.4%	7.8%
California TK	151,491		151,491	16,979		16,979	11.2%		11.2%
Colorado	52,617	9,138	43,479	11,739	5,876	5,863	22.3%	64.3%	13.5%
Connecticut CDCC	1,336	775	561	67	41	26	5.0%	5.3%	4.6%
Connecticut SR	8,611	4,571	4,040	876	469	407	10.2%	10.3%	10.1%
Connecticut Smart Start	582	239	343	106	42	64	18.2%	17.6%	18.7%
Delaware	1,238	398	840	139	39	100	11.2%	9.8%	11.9%
District of Columbia	13,193	6,115	7,078	1,017	Suppressed	1,017	7.7%		14.4%
Florida	151,449		151,449	720		720	0.5%		0.5%
Georgia	71,526		71,526	3,846		3,846	5.4%		5.4%
Hawaii EOEL	761			Data not available					
Hawaii SPCSP	265	90	175	25	10	15	9.4%	11.1%	8.6%
Illinois	82,342	33,568	48,774	17,070	8,271	8,799	20.7%	24.6%	18.0%
Indiana	7,948		7,948	Data not available					
Iowa Shared Visions	1,114	545	569	174	110	64	15.6%	20.2%	11.2%
Iowa SWVPP	26,794	1,757	25,037	2,290	862	1,428	8.5%	49.1%	5.7%
Kansas	23,753	7,553	16,200	6,844	2,845	3,999	28.8%	37.7%	24.7%
Kentucky	18,978	4,127	14,851	10,348	4,127	6,221	54.5%	100.0%	41.9%
Louisiana 8(g)	1,823		1,823	Data not available					
Louisiana LA 4	16,386		16,386	954		954	5.8%		5.8%
Louisiana NSECD	1,306	349	957	39	3	36	3.0%	0.9%	3.8%
Maine	6,094		6,094	1,042		1,042	17.1%		17.1%
Maryland	32,728	5,227	27,501	Data not available					
Massachusetts CPPI	2,545	1,110	1,435	359	139	220	14.1%	12.5%	15.3%
Massachusetts Chapter 70	30,062	10,483	19,579	11,274	4,447	6,827	37.5%	42.4%	34.9%
Michigan	41,120		41,120	5,405		5,405	13.1%		13.1%

Table 1. Enrollment of Preschoolers with Disabilities in State-Funded Preschool *(continued)*

State Programs	State Preschool Enrollment			Preschoolers with Disabilities in State Preschool			Percent of Children in State Preschool with Disabilities		
	Total	3's	4's	Total	3's	4's	Total	3's	4's
Minnesota HdSt	709			Data not available					
Minnesota VPK/SRP	7,159			Preschoolers with disabilities not included in state preschool counts					
Mississippi ELC	6,283		6,283	585		585	9.3%		9.3%
Mississippi SIP	862		862	41		41	4.8%		4.8%
Missouri FF	6,043	1,165	4,878	682	158	524	11.3%	13.6%	10.7%
Missouri QPK	2,651		2,651	Data not available					
Nebraska	12,700	4,032	8,668	3,688	1,346	2,342	29.0%	33.4%	27.0%
Nevada	3,606	455	3,151	415	23	392	11.5%	5.1%	12.4%
New Jersey	61,868	25,323	36,555	Preschoolers with disabilities not included in state preschool counts					
New Mexico	16,095	4,547	11,548	1,724	150	1,574	10.7%	3.3%	13.6%
New York	158,956	39,987	118,969	28,292	6,964	21,328	17.8%	17.4%	17.9%
North Carolina	27,304		27,304	1,481		1,481	5.4%		5.4%
North Dakota	896		896	101		101	11.3%		11.3%
Ohio	28,144	7,926	20,218	4,285	1,205	3,080	15.2%	15.2%	15.2%
Oklahoma	36,359	3,010	33,349	2,980	878	2,102	8.2%	29.2%	6.3%
Oregon Pre-K	6,547	2,909	3,638	2,039			31.1%		
Oregon Preschool Promise	5,260	2,018	3,242	1,091	410	681	20.7%	20.3%	21.0%
Pennsylvania RTL	7,471			Data not available					
Pennsylvania HSSAP	6,452	2,608	3,844	488	178	310	7.6%	6.8%	8.1%
Pennsylvania K4 & SBPK	9,546	2,012	7,534	10	1	9	0.1%	0.0%	0.1%
Pennsylvania PKC	29,619	11,032	18,587	790	281	509	2.7%	2.5%	2.7%
Rhode Island	2,364		2,364	228		228	9.6%		9.6%
South Carolina	27,125	135	26,990	Data not available					
Tennessee	17,633	857	16,776	1,353	86	1,267	7.7%	10.0%	7.6%
Texas	247,466	42,590	204,876	15,918			6.4%		
Utah	2,011	721	1,290	Data not available					
Vermont	7,663	3,275	4,388	1,168	471	697	15.2%	14.4%	15.9%
Virginia VPI	23,038	2,267	20,771	2,178	274	1,904	9.5%	12.1%	9.2%
Virginia Mixed Delivery	1,955	999	956	270	142	128	13.8%	14.2%	13.4%
Washington ECEAP	16,293	6,843	9,450	2,876	1,299	1,577	17.7%	19.0%	16.7%
Washington TK	5,397	17	5,380	918	9	909	17.0%	52.9%	16.9%
West Virginia	13,375	1,311	12,064	2,964	1,311	1,653	22.2%	100.0%	13.7%
Wisconsin	40,842	61	40,781	4,650	40	4,610	11.4%	65.6%	11.3%

Table 1 shows there is significant variation across states in terms of the percentage of children served in state-funded preschool who have a disability. In programs like Alabama, Arizona, Florida, Louisiana NSECD, Mississippi SIP, Pennsylvania K4 & SBPK and Pennsylvania PKC, less than 5% of state-funded preschoolers have a disability. This contrasts with states/programs like Kansas, Kentucky, Massachusetts Chapter 70, Nebraska, and Oregon Pre-K which all report that more than a quarter of state-funded preschoolers have a disability (Kentucky is the highest with almost 55%). In these states, state-funded preschool is an important pathway for delivering IDEA Part B/619 services to preschoolers with disabilities.

Across age groups, there are also notable differences in the percentage of preschoolers with disabilities served within state-funded preschool programs. Some states appear to prioritize 3-year-old enrollment for children

with disabilities within the state preschool program. For example, 100% of state-funded 3-year-old preschoolers in Kentucky and West Virginia have a disability. Seats for 3-year-olds with disabilities are also prioritized in Washington TK, Colorado, and Wisconsin which report more than 50% of state preschool 3-year-olds having a disability. Although not to the same extent as 3-year-olds, Kansas, Nebraska, Massachusetts' Chapter 70 program, and Kentucky also dedicate a significant percentage of state preschool seats (25% or more) for 4-year-olds with disabilities.

The data reported in the Yearbook do not illustrate whether the children with disabilities served via public preschool programs are in classrooms with their peers, but the very fact that they are served within the context of a state-funded preschool program suggests that any policies supporting educating preschoolers with and without disabilities together within those programs are important to consider. With the above context in mind, the sections that follow explore the extent to which state-funded preschool programs have policies in place to support preschoolers with disabilities in state preschool programs.



Teacher Qualifications and Training

In the 2023 Joint Policy Statement on children with disabilities in general education early childhood programs, USHHS and USED identify teacher quality as one of the most important factors of a high-quality inclusive program and call on states to require early childhood teachers to work from a common set of knowledge and competencies, throughout which special education principles and practices are embedded (USHHS & USED, 2023).

As of the 2023-24 school year, only about one-third (23 of 65) of state preschool programs have policies or guidance in place requiring lead teachers in classrooms with children with and without disabilities to have qualifications and/or certifications specific to working with children with a disability (see Table 2). Policies related to professional development and coaching are only slightly more common. About half of state preschool programs (33 of 65) require professional development for lead teachers about educating children with and without disabilities in preschool classrooms, and about 43% (28 of 65) require coaching on this topic.

Table 2. Presence of Program Policy or Guidance Supporting Qualifications/Training for Lead Teachers in Inclusive Classrooms

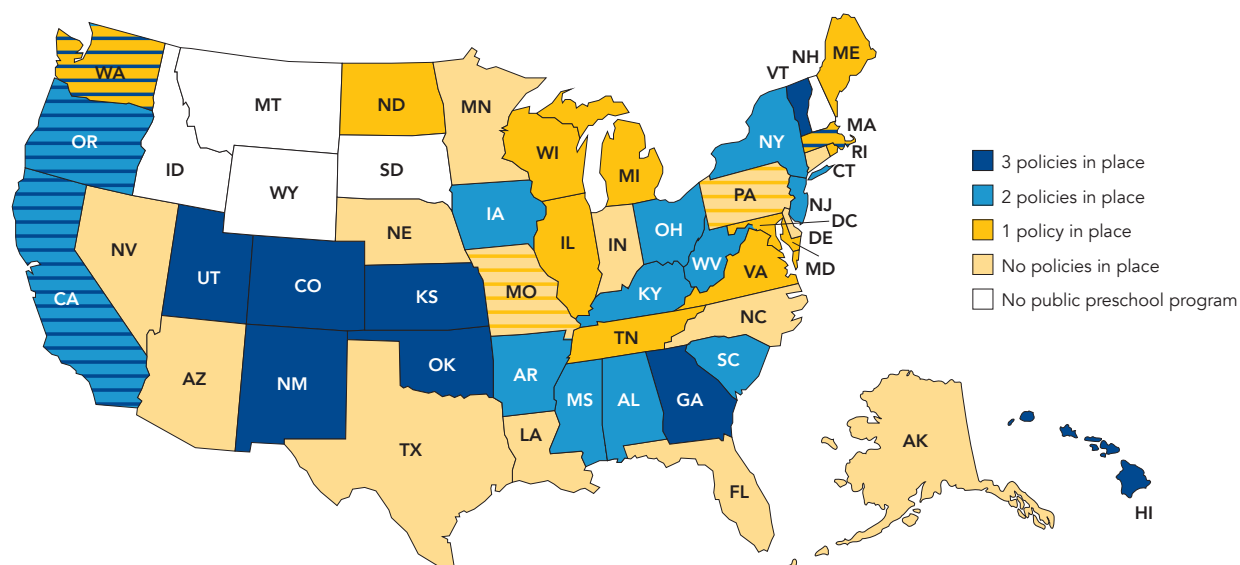
State Programs	Qualifications and/or certifications specific to working with children with a disability for lead teachers in inclusive classrooms	Professional development for lead teachers on teaching preschoolers with a disability in inclusive classrooms	Coaching for lead teachers on teaching preschoolers with a disability in inclusive classrooms
Alabama		Guidance	Guidance
Alaska Pre-Elementary		No Policy or Guidance	
Alaska Early Ed Program Grants		No Policy or Guidance	
Alaska ADM Pre-K		No Policy or Guidance	
Arizona		No Policy or Guidance	
Arkansas		Policy	Policy
California CSPP		Guidance	Guidance
California TK	Policy	Guidance	Guidance
Colorado	Policy and Guidance	Policy	Guidance
Connecticut CDCC		No Policy or Guidance	
Connecticut SR		No Policy or Guidance	
Connecticut Smart Start		No Policy or Guidance	
Delaware	Policy	Guidance	
District of Columbia		Guidance	
Florida		No Policy or Guidance	
Georgia	Policy	Guidance	Guidance
Hawaii EOEL	Policy	Policy	Guidance
Hawaii SPCSP	Policy	Policy	Guidance
Illinois		Policy	
Indiana		No Policy or Guidance	
Iowa Shared Visions		Guidance	Guidance
Iowa SWVPP		Guidance	Guidance
Kansas	Policy	Policy	Guidance
Kentucky	Policy	Policy	
Louisiana 8(g)		No Policy or Guidance	
Louisiana LA 4		No Policy or Guidance	
Louisiana NSECD		No Policy or Guidance	
Maine	Policy		
Maryland			Guidance
Massachusetts CPPI	Policy and Guidance	Guidance	Guidance
Massachusetts Chapter 70	Policy		
Michigan			Guidance
Minnesota HdSt		No Policy or Guidance	
Minnesota VPK/SRP		No Policy or Guidance	
Mississippi ELC	Policy		Guidance
Mississippi SIP	Policy		Guidance
Missouri FF		No Policy or Guidance	
Missouri QPK	Guidance		
Nebraska		No Policy or Guidance	
Nevada		No Policy or Guidance	
New Jersey		Policy	Guidance
New Mexico	Guidance	Guidance	Guidance

Table 2. Presence of Program Policy or Guidance Supporting Qualifications/Training for Lead Teachers in Inclusive Classrooms *(continued)*

State Programs	Qualifications and/or certifications specific to working with children with a disability for lead teachers in inclusive classrooms	Professional development for lead teachers on teaching preschoolers with a disability in inclusive classrooms	Coaching for lead teachers on teaching preschoolers with a disability in inclusive classrooms
New York		Guidance	Guidance
North Carolina	No Policy or Guidance		
North Dakota			Guidance
Ohio		Guidance	Guidance
Oklahoma	Guidance	Guidance	Guidance
Oregon OPK	Guidance	Guidance	Guidance
Oregon Preschool Promise		Guidance	Guidance
Pennsylvania RTL	No Policy or Guidance		
Pennsylvania HSSAP		Guidance	
Pennsylvania K4 & SBPK	No Policy or Guidance		
Pennsylvania PKC	No Policy or Guidance		
Rhode Island	Policy		
South Carolina		Guidance (First Steps)	Guidance (First Steps)
Tennessee		Policy	
Texas	No Policy or Guidance		
Utah	Policy	Guidance	Guidance
Vermont	Guidance	Guidance	Guidance
Virginia VPI		Guidance	
Virginia Mixed Delivery		Guidance	
Washington ECEAP		Policy	
Washington TK	Policy	Policy	Guidance
West Virginia	Policy	Policy	
Wisconsin	Policy and Guidance		
	23	33	28

Only 13 of the nation's 65 programs have all three types of policies or guidance in place to support teacher quality—California TK, Colorado, Georgia, Hawaii (both programs), Kansas, Massachusetts CPPI, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Oregon OPK, Utah, Vermont, and Washington TK. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the prevalence of these policies in states across the nation.

Figure 1. Prevalence of Program Policies or Guidance Regarding Qualifications/Training for Lead Teachers in Inclusive Classrooms



Preschoolers with Disabilities in Mixed-Delivery Settings

USHHS and USED (2023) are also clear that school districts must be nimble enough to provide accommodations and special education services to children within a mixed-delivery context (i.e., to children served in child care or Head Start settings (private providers), as well as to children in school district settings). IDEA, Part B requires that the first placement option considered for any child with a disability should be to remain in their current classroom with additional supports in place (USHHS & USDOE, 2023). Especially if an equally inclusive environment is available through a child's current private provider, placement teams are required to consider the educational and emotional toll of moving a child out of a private provider setting (USHHS & USDOE, 2023).

In 2023-24, 40 programs (60%) reported having guidance and/or policies in place supporting families in the option of enrolling their preschool child with a disability in a preschool classroom in a private provider setting. However, data on the specific type of setting in which children with disabilities are served within state-funded preschool are not currently available.

Classroom Proportions

The Joint Policy Statement from USHHS and USED (2023) urges states to ensure that the principle of natural proportions is followed in determining the maximum number of children with disabilities in a classroom. Following the principle means ensuring that the number or percentage of preschoolers with disabilities in inclusive classrooms reflects their presence in the community as a whole (USHHS & USED, 2023). According to USED's most recent Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2025), preschool age children with disabilities represent about 7.1% of the population.

Twenty-nine programs (43%) reported having policies in place pertaining to the number of children with disabilities in state-funded preschool programs. However, 22 of the 29 program policies reference USED's (2025) definition of a "regular early childhood program," meaning that fewer than 50% of the children in each

classroom have a disability. Six of the 29 programs have more specific policies limiting the number of children with disabilities in an inclusive classroom, but still exceed the principle of natural proportions (Georgia, Illinois, Massachusetts CPPI, Michigan, Ohio, and Pennsylvania PKC). For example, Pennsylvania PKC limits the percentage of preschoolers with disabilities to 20%, Michigan limits it to 25%, and Illinois to 30%. New Jersey's guidance comes closer to natural proportions, recommending 2 to 3 preschoolers with disabilities per classroom. Given the state's maximum class size of 15, this translates to 13%-20% of children in the classroom, which is lower than most states, but still higher than natural proportions. Only Connecticut's Smart Start program specifically reported having guidance in place to encourage programs to use natural proportions when determining how many preschoolers with disabilities to place in a general education classroom.

Conclusions

While some state programs have taken initial steps to embed policies that support high-quality services for preschoolers with disabilities in regular (general education) classrooms—such as professional development requirements, guidance on mixed-delivery models, or classroom composition limits—only a small subset of programs have implemented a comprehensive, multi-pronged policy approach aligned with the recommendations of the US Departments of Education and Health and Human Services. The fact that so many programs do not have these benchmarks in place underscores how much work remains. By adopting evidence-informed policies and providing the infrastructure to implement them effectively, states can ensure that preschoolers with disabilities are not only present, but also meaningfully included in high-quality learning environments. Of course, collecting and being able to report data about how many children with disabilities are served in state preschool classrooms is a critical first step, and one that not every state has yet taken.

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