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Inclusion Builders 2021 Implementation Evaluation Findings

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Introduction

In 2020, Michigan was one of 20 states selected by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to receive a Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five (PDG B-5) renewal grant. This grant funded the Inclusion Builders initiative, among other Michigan Department of Education (MDE) initiatives, as a strategy under the state's broad goal of preparing children to enter kindergarten and improving transitions into school. As part of Michigan's PDG B-5 evaluation, MDE contracted with the American Institutes for Research® (AIR®) to conduct an evaluation of Inclusion Builders. This brief describes the findings from the first phase of the evaluation, which focused on the initiative's implementation lessons.

The purpose of the Inclusion Builders initiative is to improve the implementation of evidence-based inclusion practices for young children with disabilities in general education preschool classrooms. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires that children with disabilities be educated in the least restrictive environment—that is, with their typically developing peers—to the maximum extent possible. Research has found that inclusive preschool settings have developmental benefits for children with disabilities (Holahan & Costenbader, 2000; Hundert et al., 1998; Mills et al., 1998; Rafferty et al., 2003) and provide more opportunities for peer interactions compared with segregated settings (Guralnick et al., 1996; Kwon et al., 2011). High-quality inclusive preschool classrooms serve children with and without disabilities, ensuring that all children have the supports they need to meaningfully participate in classroom activities and thrive.

The Clinton County Regional Educational Service Agency (CCRESA) Office of Innovative Projects administers the Inclusion Builders initiative, under the supervision of MDE. The PDG funding for the project includes support for a CCRESA preschool special education content specialist who works collaboratively with the MDE lead and facilitates and oversees ISD efforts.

About Inclusion Builders

The Inclusion Builders initiative is designed to improve the implementation of high-quality inclusionary practices for young children with disabilities in general education preschool classrooms with typically developing peers. The first Inclusion Builders cohort, funded in 2020, includes seven geographically diverse, intermediate school districts (ISDs) across the state. Inclusion Builders promotes preschool-inclusive practices through professional development and capacity building. The initiative convenes a professional learning community among ISD leaders and funds a new position within each ISD called preschool inclusion and equity support specialists (PIES). Each PIES provides individual and group professional development to support the implementation of evidence-based practices that promote preschool inclusion. They are trained in practice-based coaching and support classroom staff using this coaching model.

(In this brief, this leadership team is referred to as the state project team.) The state project team also includes a contracted consultant who is an expert in preschool inclusion and serves as a coach for ISD staff.

The Inclusion Builders Model

In the long term, Michigan’s Inclusion Builders initiative intends to reduce the number of children with disabilities being served in separate classrooms, develop demonstration inclusive classrooms, and establish best practices in ISDs for replication beyond the original cohort. To achieve these goals, the Inclusion Builders initiative provides supports and resources at several levels. First, the state project team facilitates a learning community among ISD leaders, most of whom serve as

the supervisor of special education for early childhood services within their respective ISD, to share ideas and engage in joint problem solving. The state project team also meets individually with ISD leaders to provide support regularly.

In addition, the grant funds a new staff position (a PIES) dedicated to preschool inclusion in each ISD. (Funding for this position decreases each year of the grant, with the understanding that the ISD will assume more responsibility for funding to sustain the role.) Some ISDs have split the PIES role among multiple staff (and some PIES have additional roles and responsibilities in their ISDs). The state project team consultant provides intensive coaching to each PIES, who then provides coaching to classroom teachers as they implement inclusive practices. In addition, Inclusion Builders offers other professional development, including local and national training opportunities, to ISD leaders and the PIES.

To train and support the PIES and classroom teachers, Inclusion Builders uses practice-based coaching. In this model, a teacher works with a coach in a collaborative and cyclical process that involves planning, observations, and feedback. The Inclusion Builders initiative uses a professional development platform known as TORSH Talent to facilitate coaching. Teachers upload videos of their work with children and engage with their coach to develop goals, identify action steps, reflect, and receive feedback. The relationship between the teacher and the coach is to be collaborative.

Findings

This section highlights important findings from the implementation evaluation. Inclusion Builders is a new initiative that is relatively early in its implementation. CCRESA finalized contracts with the seven participating ISDs in December 2020, and each ISD hired their respective PIES by March 2021. This brief summarizes the initiative’s initial lessons; the initiative has not been operating long enough to determine its impact on the long-term goal of increasing the rate of inclusion for young children with disabilities. The findings are structured according to the evaluation’s five research questions¹ (see the box on page 2).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. Who was served by the Inclusion Builder initiative?
2. What strategies did the initiative use to promote the inclusion of children with individualized education programs (IEPs) in general education classrooms with their typically developing peers?
3. What strategies did the initiative use to build sustainable policies, practices, and systems to ensure access to supportive, inclusive classrooms in the participating ISDs?
4. What were the successes and challenges of the initiative, according to project staff and other stakeholders?
5. What factors facilitated or hindered implementation of the Inclusion Builders initiative?

¹ The evaluation design included two research questions that were not addressed in this phase of the study: (1) To what extent did the PIES use data from the Inclusive Classroom Profile (ICP)? (2) What system-level conditions supported the implementation of the program? As explained in this brief, the ICP was not available to the program because of the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, the program is too early in its implementation to fully understand the system-level conditions that facilitate its work. These questions will be addressed, as feasible, in future evaluation efforts.

DATA COLLECTION

AIR conducted key informant interviews with the state project team to understand the program goals and objectives, as well as successes and challenges to date. To understand how the program has been implemented at the ISD and classroom levels, AIR conducted key informant interviews with leaders from six of the seven participating ISDs, most of whom served as a supervisor of special education for early childhood. AIR also conducted focus groups with the PIES (eight staff participated, representing five of the seven ISDs). Finally, AIR analyzed quarterly data submitted by each ISD to the state, summarizing their implementation progress.

In its first cohort, Inclusion Builders is serving seven ISDs, with 20 classrooms identified for support.

Inclusion Builders is helping address the low rate of preschool inclusion in Michigan. Currently, 30% of the children ages 3 through 5 with an IEP attend an inclusive classroom in Michigan; the national average is 46%.² In 2019, the average preschool inclusion rate across the seven participating ISDs was 45%.³ However, preschool inclusion is much more widespread in some ISDs compared with other ISDs. One ISD reported a very high inclusion preschool rate (99%). Among the other six ISDs, three had a preschool inclusion rate less than 25%, and the other three had a preschool including rate ranging between 46% and 57%. Data expected to be available in spring 2022 should shed more light on whether inclusion rates change as the participating ISDs engage more deeply in their work.⁴

Each participating ISD has some level of history of engaging in efforts to promote preschool inclusion. However, the progress each made prior to joining Inclusion Builders varies, as evidenced by the wide range of preschool inclusion rates across the ISDs. Their past work included efforts such as reducing the number of separate early childhood special education classrooms and participating in a state-facilitated working group to identify and address challenges to inclusion.

Based on ISD reports to CCRESA, the ISDs selected 20 classrooms⁵ (as of the third quarter of 2021) for their Inclusion Builders work. These classrooms include 14 Great Start Parent Coalition (GSRP) classrooms, two Head Start/GSRP classrooms, and two tuition-based classrooms. The classroom type was not specified for two classrooms.

To promote preschool inclusion in classrooms, one core strategy of Inclusion Builders is to build the capacity of the PIES as practice-based coaches.

At the PIES level, the first phase of Inclusion Builders focused on hiring and training these staff. The state project team consultant provides intensive support to each PIES, through group reflective practice meetings as well as individual sessions. Each PIES and the consultant are engaged in practice-based coaching, with the goal of building the PIES' capacity to do the same with classroom teachers. Many PIES described TORSH, the platform that supports the coaching process, as useful. But many PIES also reported that this technology required a steep learning curve.

In addition to working with the state project team consultant, each PIES participated in other training offered through Inclusion Builders, such as attendance at national and state conferences and professional development on the Pyramid Model for Promoting Social Emotional Competence in Infants and Young Children and the Teaching Pyramid Observation Tool. The Pyramid Model training, comprising five virtual sessions provided through the state preschool special education professional development grant, was offered to each PIES and included approximately 300 staff across the seven ISDs.

² This percentage includes all children ages 3 to 5 with an IEP, including children attending kindergarten. These data are from fall 2018 as reported to the Congress in 2020 (U.S. Department of Education, 2020).

³ MDE provided ISD-level data to AIR.

⁴ These inclusion statistics are part of the annual data that Michigan submits to the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs, including the percentage of children who attend a regular early childhood program and receive their special education services in that setting.

⁵ As of Quarter 3 (Q3), five of the seven participating ISDs reported working across 18 classrooms. The sixth ISD had yet to report Q3 data but indicated working with two classrooms in the Q2 report. The seventh ISD reported in their Q3 report that they had yet to select classrooms for participation in the program.

The ISD leaders and each PIES generally appreciated the training available through Inclusion Builders (although fatigue with online training and coaching, according to feedback from both the PIES and ISD leaders, was high). One ISD leader said,

“ I can’t say enough about the training piece . . . [it] has been the propeller pushing us forward. Without that, I really do not feel that we would have as much success as we’re having now.”

All PIES have started providing support to classroom staff to promote preschool inclusive practices.

As described earlier, the initial focus of Inclusion Builders was to build the capacity of PIES as practice-based coaches. In addition, each PIES is working with classroom teachers, although to varying degrees across the ISDs. All PIES are expected to select two classroom teachers with whom they would work using the TORSH platform. The majority of the PIES have identified teachers to participate in the practice-based coaching. A few ISDs struggled to identify and maintain work with two specific teachers, given the challenges of working within the context of COVID-19.

The PIES in many of the ISDs are fully engaged in practice-based coaching, including developing action plans and conducting classroom observations with teachers. A few ISDs are in the initial stage of practice-based coaching, focused on building relationships with teachers. This step was particularly important in ISDs where the general early childhood and special education programming is siloed. For example, one PIES described the situation as follows:

“ Right now, a lot of my work has been building relationships and breaking down barriers . . . just even getting invited to some of those conversations at GSRP, Head Start, building those relationships, figuring out what’s going to be the best way for us to approach the work in this county to make it sustainable.”

This person emphasized the disconnect between special education and general education in the ISD:

“ We’re often not even at the same meetings when decisions are being made. We’re not even at the same trainings.”

Other PIES described an easier experience establishing relationships across early childhood special education and general early childhood programs in their respective ISDs. These ISDs typically had existing partnerships in place. For example,

“ We rolled that Inclusion Builder work into our ECS [early childhood specialist] work. So it’s a partnership between those two roles . . . because we already had relationships with our teachers through the ECS work, that piece of it was done for us.”

In addition to providing practice-based coaching to teachers in selected Inclusion Builder classrooms, some PIES have conducted trainings on preschool inclusion to larger groups of staff from GSRP, Head Start, and tuition-based preschool programs.

To build sustainable systems to support preschool inclusion, the Inclusion Builders state project team facilitated a learning community and provided support to ISD leaders.

One goal of Inclusion Builders is to address system-level barriers, such as policies and procedures related to placement decisions for young children with IEPs and a lack of a structural connection between general and special education staffing structures within ISDs. To address this goal, Inclusion Builders facilitates a learning community for ISD leaders to share resources, discuss challenges, and identify solutions.

Many ISD leaders remarked on the value of connecting with their peers. One ISD leader reflected as follows:

“ When you hit a bump in the road, we come back together and share where we’re at. And then we come up with a plan, and we keep moving forward. It’s made all the difference.”

Another ISD leader commented on the connections the program has facilitated with their peers:

 "We're just constantly getting ideas from each other. And it's honestly been, it's amazing."

In addition to the learning community, the state project team meets regularly with each ISD to check in about progress and provide support.

To build sustainable systems to support preschool inclusion in their ISDs, ISD leaders have engaged in a variety of strategies, such as stakeholder engagement and the development of new policies and procedures.

ISD leaders were asked to describe policies, procedures, or other work they are engaged in to improve systems for young children with disabilities, stemming from their participation in Inclusion Builders. These strategies include but are not limited to the following.

Engaging Stakeholders. Many ISD leaders described their efforts to engage stakeholders in discussions about inclusion as part of the initial work under Inclusion Builders. This included outreach to various stakeholder groups, such as Head Start and school district administrators with less experience in providing inclusive settings for young children. According to ISD leaders, Inclusion Builders offered a reason to communicate with stakeholders about the inclusion work and encourage their engagement.

Developing Inclusion Policy Statements. Two of the seven ISDs developed a policy statement that promotes equitable access for young children with disabilities to general education supports and environments. (Four ISDs were still developing their policy statements.) A state project team member emphasized that they are emphasizing working with the ISDs to ensure the development of a vision and mission statement for preschool inclusion before the Inclusion Builders grant ends.

Improving Procedures for Children's Placement. Two ISDs focused on the development of procedures to improve consistency across local school districts in making placement decisions for young children with IEPs. (One ISD developed and is using a new rubric to support the implementation of these new procedures, and the other ISD is currently addressing the issue.)

Implementing Training Requirements for New Staff. One ISD is finalizing training and onboarding procedures focused on inclusive practices that will be required for general and special education staff.

Enhancing Preservice Programs. One ISD (the same ISD that implemented the new training requirement and a rubric to support children's placement decisions) also began working with their local university to embed inclusive practices into preservice general education teacher coursework.

ISDs described early successes of Inclusion Builders in accelerating existing efforts and raising awareness about the importance of preschool inclusion.

Although ISDs leaders identified some early successes of their participation in Inclusion Builders, they also indicated that it was too early to determine the true impact of the initiative. ISD leaders described how Inclusion Builders accelerated their existing efforts to improve inclusion, prioritized inclusion within their ISDs, and helped address negative beliefs and attitudes about serving young children with disabilities within general early childhood programs.

Accelerating Existing Efforts. As noted earlier, many ISD leaders indicated that the Inclusion Builders funding has supported and accelerated their efforts to improve preschool inclusion. For example, one ISD reported a 70% decline in

the number of children served in separate early childhood special education classrooms in the last 3 years, an effort bolstered by Inclusion Builders. Another ISD pointed to the closure of several separate classrooms for early childhood special education. ISDs generally said that Inclusion Builders helped infuse new resources into existing efforts to ensure that they continued.

Making Inclusion a Priority. Several ISDs described how Inclusion Builders made preschool inclusion a priority and elevated it as a topic of discussion with local administrators, teachers, and other staff. An ISD leader reported as follows:

“The grant has provided some wonderful training and an opportunity for us to support the work as more of a priority versus just ‘on top of somebody else’s job.’”

Another ISD emphasized the impact of Inclusion Builders regarding raising awareness among staff, particularly those who lack experience with inclusive models, as well as with families. The grant funded dedicated staff focused on inclusion within each ISD, which helped maintain a focus on the issue as an important priority.

Shifting Attitudes About Inclusion. ISD leaders reported that participation in the initiative is helping address negative attitudes and beliefs about inclusion. The initiative, according to many ISD leaders, has helped spark discussions about inclusive practice and model a different way of serving young children with disabilities. Several PIES echoed this theme in their comments, with one reporting as follows:

“While it’s still pretty slow moving, I think it’s [Inclusion Builders] starting to open up some people’s ideas of really what we want to accomplish. We’re still in the very early stages . . . But I think that bringing this role [the PIES] on board has really helped with this. Being at a table that has those open conversations . . . we’re building like a belief system.”

Some implementation challenges have emerged in the early stages of the grant, such as how each PIES interfaces with other early childhood coaches.

Inclusion Builders faced some initial implementation challenges when some PIES struggled to clarify their role within the context of other early childhood coaches and support staff. Other challenges are broader in scope and more significant, resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic and the state’s approach to special education funding.

Alignment of the PIES Role With Other Coaching Staff. The participating ISDs have autonomy to determine what other roles the PIES play, if any, beyond Inclusion Builders. In our focus groups, we spoke with seven PIES representing five ISDs.⁶ Three of the seven PIES also serve as an ECS. As noted earlier, the ECS role includes providing support to GSRP early childhood classrooms, including monitoring and evaluating program quality.

In three of the five ISDs represented in our focus groups, the ECS and PIES roles are separate, although the level of collaboration between these staff positions varies. For example, in one small ISD, the PIES and the ECS work as a team to provide inclusive supports to classrooms. The PIES described a strong collaboration within this team that has been bolstered by Inclusion Builders. In a larger ISD, where the general education and special education systems are siloed, the PIES encountered challenges in (a) establishing relationships with ECSs and general education teachers and (b) determining how to avoid duplication of effort with the ECS. In this ISD, the PIES first must navigate existing relationships between classroom teachers and the ECSs, before moving forward with providing practice-based coaching focused on inclusion.

According to some PIES, a staffing structure in which the ECS and PIES positions are separate also can raise communication and coordination challenges. For example, one PIES noted that it has been challenging to explain the new role to teachers:

⁶ In addition, an ECS (who does not serve as a PIES) joined one of the focus groups.

“Considering all the other coaches that [teachers] have also in their classrooms, so their ECS, their special education support, and then their administration. Now you’re throwing in a PIES. So it’s just trying hard to balance, and [to find] the balance with ourselves, that we’re not giving them different information.”

An ISD leader made similar remarks, pointing out the logistical challenges of rotating coaches and other support staff into classrooms without burdening the classroom teachers.

Combining the PIES and ECS roles also raises implementation questions that should be addressed. One “ECS/PIES” in our focus groups reported that it was challenging to determine what “hat” to wear when working in a classroom. The state project team has encouraged ISDs to separate the role of the PIES from the ECS who is responsible for classroom evaluation or compliance, emphasizing that practice-based coaching is most effective within the context of a trusting, collaborative partnership. Similar comments were voiced by one PIES:

“When I first went in . . . nobody wanted you in, because [they said] you must be an evaluator. You’re going to evaluate me. Once they found out that you were truly there just to help and that [evaluation] wasn’t the point of it, then you could really make a difference.”

Several factors have facilitated the implementation of Inclusion Builders, including support available to ISD staff and the practice-based coaching model.

Feedback from ISD leaders and the PIES, as well as members of the state project team, pointed to several factors that facilitated the initial implementation of the grant. These levers primarily focused on aspects of the program design, including support through the ISD learning community and from members of the state project team, the PIES role, and the use of practice-based coaching.

Support for ISD Leaders. As noted earlier, the ISD leaders praised the support of their peers and appreciated the opportunity to connect and share with them in regular meetings. They also appreciated the support and responsiveness of the state project team.

PIES Role. Another effective component of the Inclusion Builders model, from the perspectives of ISD leaders, was the support for a staff person dedicated to preschool inclusion to ensure that the work had momentum and did not get lost among competing priorities.

Practice-Based Coaching. The PIES were generally enthusiastic about the practice-based coaching component of Inclusion Builders; it was an effective tool in supporting teachers to both learn and practice inclusion. The PIES praised the state team consultant for her support and guidance in helping build their capacity as practice-based coaches. In turn, the consultant described a high-level of buy-in among the PIES to the coaching model.

Obstacles to implementation included challenges resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic and the state’s special education funding system.

The COVID-19 pandemic created three significant challenges for Inclusion Builders: (a) shifting professional development from in-person to virtual sessions, (b) changing plans to use the Inclusive Classroom Profile (ICP; Soukakou, 2012, 2016) as a key strategy of the grant, and (c) creating workforce challenges. In addition, ISD leaders pointed to the state’s special education funding structure as a disincentive for preschool inclusion.

Shift to Online Professional Development. Stakeholders across the project—ISD staff, PIES, and the state project team—discussed the challenge of providing and/or participating in online professional development and developing relationships

within a virtual context. Several respondents noted that the meetings of the ISD leaders and PIES may not have been as rich as they could be, and opportunities to connect at national conferences and other trainings were lost. Frustration with online meetings was one of the most common challenges voiced by respondents across our interviews and focus groups.

Lack of Access to Inclusive Classroom Profile Training. In addition, a key aspect of the Inclusion Builder's model, as originally designed, is the ICP, an observation rating scale designed to assess the quality of daily classroom practices that support the developmental needs of children with disabilities in early childhood settings serving children ages 2 to 5 years. The state project team views the ICP as a key strategy to both educate teachers about inclusive practices and measure progress across time. The state project team planned to certify at least four staff as ICP trainers, who could then train more staff throughout the participating ISDs. However, because of the pandemic, the state could not adopt the ICP because training on the tool is offered only in-person (and requires live observations in classrooms to ensure that users are reliable). In 2021, the initiative focused on the Pyramid Model for Promoting Social Emotional Competence in Infants and Young Children and its accompanying assessment tool, the Teaching Pyramid Observation Tool. The state project team still plans to move forward with the ICP once training is available.

Workforce Issues. The COVID-19 pandemic has generated stress on the ISDs (as it has for education systems across the United States), including workforce shortages. As a result, some PIES could not, according to one ISD leader,

“identify teachers as quickly as they wanted to, or they do and then they're out in quarantine and then they can't move forward. So those things have halted the whole progress of everything.”

A state project team member summarized the significant workforce issues ISDs face:

“They don't have enough teachers. They don't have subs. They don't have bus drivers. They don't have enough school psychologists, speech pathologists. They're completely strapped. Teachers are leaving the workforce.”

Many ISD leaders mentioned these stressors as they work to support local school districts in responding to COVID-19. In addition, a state project team member reported that two PIES and one ISD leader left their roles in 2021, creating additional challenges.

State Special Education Funding Structure. Several ISD leaders said that one of the most significant barriers to system change was the structure of the state special education funding system. Two ISD leaders commented on how disconnected the system is from other funding streams, with one ISD representative stating as follows:

“Everyone is here for the right reasons, for early childhood . . . but we have created silos, and the jockeying for funding has created competition in this environment, and it's really difficult to overcome.”

Another ISD leader argued that the state system financially incentivizes ISDs to maintain separate special education classrooms:

“The thing with ECSE [early childhood special education] is that it is very well funded. So you get a full FTE [full-time equivalency] for a half-day program, and that makes it very enticing to remain in that model. I think that the state has got to make a change. They're encouraging self-contained programming.”

As a state project team member described, a classroom in an ECSE **program** (operating under the Michigan Administrative Rules for Special Education [MARSE] R340.1754)⁷ only serves children with IEPs. It operates approximately 3.5 hours per day, with enough days of service to provide children with 450 hours of instruction. Placing a child in an ECSE classroom program allows the district to be reimbursed for an FTE pupil for a child who attends half-day sessions. The other service delivery model under which the ISD may collect full-time equivalency for preschool-aged children with

⁷ See https://www.michigan.gov/documents/mde/MARSE_Supplemented_with_IDEA_Regs_379598_7.pdf for the specific MARSE specifications.

disabilities is ECSE **services** (MARSE R340.1755). Reimbursement to districts for these costs is complex compared with the ECSE program and is based on documented evidence that the child is receiving services under the direction of an ECSE-endorsed teacher. These services may be provided in typical preschool settings, homes, or a variety of other regular early childhood programs. ISDs use this model to provide IEP supports in least restrictive settings, but the cost of doing this work often is not fully covered by the FTE calculation. Some ISDs that fail to demonstrate the correct documentation do not receive their full reimbursement. Thus, ISDs may be hesitant to embrace this service model, if the documentation requirements (and uncertainties in funding) are deemed too challenging, according to a state project team member.

ISDs are concerned about the long-term sustainability of the Inclusion Builders model.

Many ISDs raised concerns about sustaining the work of Inclusion Builders, including the PIES role, once the grant ends. One ISD leader said Inclusion Builders has

 Inclusion Builders has created a sense of urgency around the issue. I think that allocating the funding to a person is problematic just in terms of sustainability of the work, and so that probably has been my biggest concern over time . . . that it's tied to a person and not [an] improved systems approach."

Several ISD leaders discussed options for sustaining preschool inclusion efforts, such as embedding the work of the PIES into existing special education or ECS roles. Other recommendations included developing a toolkit to ensure that resources and guidance were available over the long term, cross-training staff across special and general education to build broad capacity for inclusive practices, and expanding the current caseload of the PIES beyond two or three classrooms.

Conclusion

Inclusion Builders is a new initiative in its early stages of implementation. A core strategy of the initiative is the use of practice-based coaches who work directly with classroom teachers to model and support the use of evidence-based inclusion practices, building their capacity to implement these practices with fidelity and change teacher practice. At the time of our interviews, many PIES had developed action plans and were conducting observations with teachers, but some were still in the stage of building relationships with teachers. Given this stage of implementation, our evaluation identifies some early lessons learned that may inform the design of the initiative moving forward.

Generally speaking, participating ISDs emphasized that the initiative has promise, particularly as a catalyst for moving preschool inclusion efforts forward. ISD leaders and PIES described Inclusion Builders as a vehicle for collaboration, bringing together stakeholders and addressing siloed special education and general education systems. Some ISDs described their progress in changing policies and procedures to support preschool inclusion. In its early stages, Inclusion Builders has provided intensive professional development for the PIES, who are beginning to shift their work to the classroom level. In the future, it will be important to understand if and how classroom teachers change their practices as a result of the support they receive.

The success of Inclusion Builders may partly depend on the state's progress in addressing complex, system-level issues regarding young children with disabilities. These may include developing a statewide policy on preschool inclusion, addressing barriers in the special education funding system to preschool inclusion, and strengthening teacher preparation and professional development for all early childhood educators to support preschool inclusion. The state project team, as well as some of the Inclusion Builder ISD leaders, are currently working to address these types of barriers in a state Preschool Inclusion Collection Action Plan, which is under development.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As the Inclusion Builders initiative matures, the state might consider the following recommendations:

1. **Continue to promote stakeholder engagement.** ISD leaders and PIES emphasized the importance of engaging administrators, teachers, and others in a discussion about the value of inclusion. These conversations are particularly important in settings in which special education and general education are siloed and when there is a need to build relationships across systems to help facilitate change.
2. **Identify opportunities to coordinate and collaborate with other efforts with similar goals.** These may include Multi-Tiered System of Supports and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports—if and where there is alignment around preschool inclusion issues. In general, the state may consider how to leverage resources, administrative capacity, and funding from other professional development and quality improvement efforts with Inclusion Builders to maximize the promise of the initiative and minimize any burden on ISD staff and preschool educators.
3. **Create a roadmap to show how the PIES role can be integrated into different staffing scenarios.** The PIES described challenges integrating their work with that of the ECSs or balancing PIES and ECS responsibilities if one staff member holds both roles. ISDs may benefit from a roadmap to help them consider how best to structure the PIES roles and responsibilities, based on their staffing structures and needs. This type of guidance may be most useful to ISDs that are new to the initiative.
4. **Develop a plan to share best practices from model inclusive classrooms (within and across ISDs).** The goal of Inclusion Builders is to develop two or three demonstration inclusive classrooms within each ISD. The initiative is early in its implementation but could benefit from a plan to use these model sites as a learning lab for other staff. After demonstration sites are established, the state might consider how learnings from these classrooms can be disseminated.
5. **Expand unified professional development opportunities for both special education and general education staff, to train more staff in preschool inclusion practices.** Given ISD concerns about sustainability, the state might consider how to use the grant to broaden participation in training supported by the grant. Similarly, the contracted consultant with the state project team who provides coaching to the PIES is at capacity. The state needs to determine how to support each PIES (and train new PIES as practice-based coaches) across time and potentially with new ISDs.
6. **Develop materials that will be accessible beyond the life of the grant.** To support sustainability, Inclusion Builders might consider developing resources or a toolkit to promote inclusion practices once the grant ends (particularly given staff turnover and workforce shortages that are a significant barrier for many ISDs because of the COVID-19 pandemic).
7. **Collect more detailed information about PIES activities to inform the future of the role.** At this stage, the PIES have focused on participating in professional development to build their own capacity and providing practice-based coaching to classroom teachers—to varying degrees. The PIES role is new; tracking its scope and focus may be useful in understanding how well it can impact change and what is a reasonable caseload for these staff to carry. Moreover, if ISDs move toward merging the ECS and PIES role, understanding the extent to which the PIES' focus on inclusion can be maintained (rather than “watered down”) will be important to know.
8. **Implement a measure to determine changes in teachers' practice.** After a general early childhood teacher receives practice-based coaching with a PIES, do they change how they serve young children with disabilities in their classrooms? Originally, Inclusion Builders intended to use the ICP to measure progress. Unable to use this tool because of the pandemic, the initiative shifted to the Pyramid Model and its accompanying assessment tool, the Teaching Pyramid Observation Tool. Given that the Pyramid Model does not focus specifically on inclusive preschool practices, it cannot measure the impact of Inclusion Builders. If the ICP is not available in the near future, the state should consider alternative approaches to measuring if and how the work of the PIES is truly changing teacher practice.

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