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Promoting Preschool Inclusion

Evaluation of Inclusion Builders

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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 pilot initiative, among other Michigan Department of Education (MDE) initiatives, 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 evaluation, which focused on the initiative's implementation lessons.

The long-term goal 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 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 benefit children with and without disabilities, ensuring that all children have the supports needed to meaningfully participate in classroom activities and thrive.

The first cohort of ISDs participating in the Inclusion Builders initiative is considered a pilot. The goal of the pilot is to identify barriers to preschool inclusion at the ISD and school district levels, explore how the Inclusion Builders model helps address these barriers, and adapt the design of the initiative and implementation processes, as needed, for future cohorts. Although the long-term goal of the initiative is to improve the use of preschool inclusion practices in classrooms, the pilot phase focused primarily on getting the initiative established within participating ISDs, including hiring and training staff. As such,

ABOUT INCLUSION BUILDERS

The goal of the Inclusion Builders initiative is 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 the preschool inclusion and equity support (PIES) specialist. Each PIES specialist provides individual and group professional development to support the implementation of evidence-based practices that promote preschool inclusion. The PIES specialists receive training in practice-based coaching and support classroom staff using this coaching model.

measurable progress in the use of classroom-level inclusion practices may not be fully observed until training is complete and staff begin to fully implement what they have learned.

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. 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 practice-based coaching and has a background in evidence-based practices that support preschool inclusion.

The Inclusion Builders Model

In the long term, Michigan’s Inclusion Builders initiative intends to reduce the number of children with disabilities served in separate classrooms, develop demonstration inclusive classrooms, and establish best practices in ISDs for replication beyond the first cohort. To achieve these goals, the 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 early childhood special education 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 implementation support regularly.

In addition, the grant funds a new staff position—the PIES specialist—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 specialist role among multiple staff, and some PIES specialists have additional roles and responsibilities in their ISDs. The state project team consultant provides intensive coaching to each PIES specialist, 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 specialists.

To train and support the PIES specialists 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 the development of shared goals, planning, focused observations, and reflection 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.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. Who was served by the Inclusion Builders 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. To what extent, and how, do the Inclusion Builders ISDs plan to sustain their work after the grant ends?

DATA COLLECTION

To understand how the program has been implemented at the ISD and classroom levels, AIR conducted key informant interviews with leaders from all seven participating ISDs, most of whom served as a supervisor of special education for early childhood. AIR also conducted focus groups with the PIES specialists (eight staff participated, representing six of the seven ISDs). In addition, AIR interviewed five teachers who had participated in practice-based coaching through the pilot initiative. All data were collected in spring and early summer 2022. Finally, AIR analyzed quarterly data submitted by each ISD to the state, summarizing implementation progress.

Findings

This section highlights important findings from the implementation evaluation of Inclusion Builders. CCRESA finalized contracts with the seven participating ISDs in December 2020, and each ISD hired their respective PIES specialist by March 2021. The findings are structured according to the evaluation's five research questions.

In its first cohort, Inclusion Builders served 19 classrooms across the seven participating ISDs.

Inclusion Builders is designed to help address the low rate of preschool inclusion in Michigan. Thirty percent of the children ages 3–5 with an IEP attend an inclusive classroom in Michigan; the national average is 46%.¹ In 2018, the average preschool inclusion rate across the seven participating ISDs was 45%.² However, preschool inclusion is much more widespread in some ISDs compared with other ISDs, based on 2018 data. 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 inclusion rate ranging between 46% and 57%.³ However, at least three ISDs shared that the Inclusion Builders initiative placed a spotlight on their preschool inclusion data, highlighting inaccuracies and inconsistencies in data entry, which prompted the ISDs to address these issues and lay the foundation for an accurate baseline that can be used to track progress in the future. As such, the ISD-specific inclusion rates presented earlier are only estimates, providing a general sense of the level of preschool inclusion across the first cohort of ISDs.

Each participating ISD in the initiative has some level of history of engaging in efforts to promote preschool inclusion. Their past work included efforts such as reducing the number of separate early childhood special education (ECSE) classrooms and participating in a state-facilitated work group to identify and address challenges to inclusion. In two of the seven ISDs, leaders indicated that they had engaged in extensive work focused on preschool inclusion in their respective districts prior to participating in the initiative. In these two ISDs, leaders reported having centralized control over most or all of their early childhood programs operated at the local level. This centralized control contrasts with other ISDs with a decentralized structure, in which local school districts control early childhood programming and policies. In these cases, ISD leaders described more challenges in shifting local approaches regarding preschool inclusion.

Based on ISD program reports to CCRESA, the ISDs selected 19 classrooms⁴ (as of the second quarter of 2022) for their Inclusion Builders work, with one teacher per classroom who participated in practice-based coaching. These classrooms included 15 Great Start Readiness Program (GSRP) classrooms, two Head Start classrooms, and two tuition-based classrooms (although one tuition-based teacher left the ISD in Quarter 2 of 2022). The Inclusion Builders model was designed for an ISD to have a PIES specialist who is expected to work with two classrooms (one classroom per teacher) to provide practice-based coaching. During the grant period (2020–22), three of the original PIES specialists and one teacher participating in practice-based coaching left their positions and were replaced.

To promote preschool inclusion, the initiative offered various levels of professional development.

Inclusion Builders used professional development as a core strategy to promote preschool inclusion within classrooms. The initiative trained new ISD-level staff, who in turn offered intensive training to classroom teachers and broader groups of staff.

¹ This percentage includes all children ages 3–5 with an IEP, including children attending kindergarten. These data are from fall 2018 as reported to the U.S. Congress in 2020 (U.S. Department of Education, 2020).

² MDE provided ISD-level data to AIR.

³ 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.

⁴ As of Quarter 2, the seven participating ISDs reported working across 19 classrooms (although one teacher left the ISD during the school year, and it is not clear if coaching continued in the same classroom with new staff).

The initiative created and provided intensive training to support a new ISD-level position focused on preschool inclusion. One objective of Inclusion Builders is to build the capacity of the PIES specialists, in terms of their knowledge of high-quality inclusive practices and their skills as practice-based coaches. Throughout the initiative, each PIES specialist participated in a range of professional development opportunities, including individual and joint reflective practice meetings with a state project team member to build skills in practice-based coaching, and attended national and state conferences focused on inclusion. ISD leaders and the PIES specialists identified access to high-quality professional development as one of the most valuable aspects of the initiative. In particular, the PIES specialists reported that the 2022 National Training Institute on “Effective Practices: Addressing Challenging Behavior,” was particularly helpful. One PIES specialist said, “We have been extremely thankful for all of the training and opportunities and resources that Inclusion Builders has been able to afford us.” Although ISD leaders generally described the training requirements for the PIES specialist role as manageable, some PIES specialists (four of the eight specialists who participated in focus groups) expressed minor concerns about balancing responsibilities.

The PIES specialists honed their skills as practice-based coaches with classroom teachers.

Using the skills they were learning through individual and group reflective practice with a member of the state project team, each PIES specialist provided practice-based coaching focused on inclusion to two teachers that the PIES specialist selected. Engaging classroom teachers in practice-based coaching was easier in some ISDs than in others. This appeared to vary, in part, based on the ISD’s history of inclusion, if the PIES specialists also served in the Early Childhood Specialist (ECS) role, and the extent to which the PIES specialists had to build new relationships with teachers and other coaches. For example, in one ISD that has focused on inclusion for many years, recruiting teachers to participate in practice-based coaching was relatively smooth. In another ISD, much of the PIES specialist’s time was spent on developing collaborative partnerships with staff and integrating the PIES specialist role into existing structures (e.g., ECS meetings). Relationship-building activities were particularly important in ISDs in which general early childhood and special education programming were traditionally siloed, according to both ISD leaders and PIES specialists.

The online coaching platform, TORSH, was described as useful, but ISDs may not use it beyond the end of the grant.

PIES specialists used the TORSH platform to facilitate the practice-based coaching process. Teachers used the system to upload videos of their classroom practices for review and comment by their coaches. ISD leaders, PIES specialists, and teachers described TORSH as useful, although some PIES specialists and teachers said they faced a steep learning curve with the new technology. Five of the seven ISD leaders provided feedback about whether they plan to continue to use TORSH after the Inclusion Builders grant ends. All five administrators were undecided, with some suggesting it may be cost prohibitive and/or offers more functionality than they actually need. A few of these administrators said they were exploring other systems that offer video capacity, which they (as well as PIES specialists and teachers) described as the most useful aspect of the system.

In general, the PIES specialists described the practice-based coaching process as beneficial, for not only their own professional development but also the teachers with whom they work. One PIES specialist said, “Some of the goals and the action steps that we’ve been able to put together [with teachers] and accomplish . . . it’s night and day from where they first started, to the end.” Another PIES specialist said, “We found real change, not just temporary change where [teachers] did it because we were coming in, but real buy-in and real change. So this whole format and practice-based coaching model has been very beneficial.”

In general, teachers who engaged in practice-based coaching with the PIES specialists offered positive feedback about the process. All but one teacher interviewed described the coaching support as useful. Teachers reported that the coaching helped them learn new, concrete strategies to implement in their work, particularly in behavior management. One teacher explained, “I came away [with] more things in my toolbox to be able to bring out, to help any kids that are

struggling.” Several teachers found value in videotaping their practice as part of their coaching cycle with a PIES specialist, although two teachers noted that learning the coaching online platform took time and was confusing at first.

In addition to providing individual coaching, PIES specialists conducted training on preschool inclusion to groups of general education and special education teachers, other coaches, and administrators, covering GSRP, Head Start, and tuition-based preschool programs. Trainings included a range of topics—such as inclusion and transition practices, behavior management strategies, instructional differentiation strategies, supports for working with children with autism spectrum disorder, strategies to promote relationships among children (e.g., friendship skills), and communication and collaboration among teachers to support children—as well as a tool to measure the quality of preschool inclusion (the Inclusive Classroom Profile [ICP]) and frameworks (Multi-Tiered System of Supports and the Pyramid Model for Promoting Social Emotional Competence in Infants and Young Children). ISD leaders and the PIES specialists described these trainings as successful in raising awareness of the benefits of inclusion and building staff knowledge of inclusive practices.

To strengthen systems of support for preschool inclusion, most of the participating ISDs developed new inclusion policy statements, among other efforts.

ISD leaders were asked to describe policies, procedures, or other work they are engaged in to improve systems for young children with disabilities that stemmed from their participation in Inclusion Builders. Three of the seven ISDs developed a policy statement that promotes equitable access for young children with disabilities to general education supports and environments, and two other ISDs are currently creating policy statements. Two ISD leaders emphasized that the collaborative process of developing a policy statement helped create buy-in among stakeholders regarding inclusion. For example, one ISD leader said,

“We had gotten away from special education being part of our early childhood team and [Inclusion Builders] actually forced us to say we can coexist, and special education has a role in inclusion that you’re not just a general ed thing . . . So it helped us be more integrated.

—ISD leader

“We utilized all of our local directors to help generate our own inclusion policy, which is now in place in every state- and federally funded pre-K program in our district. We were able to provide an existing policy to some of our private childcares that were interested in support with that as well.

This ISD leader also emphasized that the policy statement served as a touchstone to guide difficult decisions related to preschool inclusion, particularly if there are disagreements among staff.

Two ISDs do not have a policy statement (as of spring 2022). A leader from one of these ISDs emphasized that they have had to first focus their energy on building awareness about the benefits of inclusion and creating buy-in, before tackling a policy statement. The second ISD leader said that they began developing a policy statement before their participation in Inclusion Builders but have not yet revisited it, given competing priorities. A state project team member emphasized that they are working with the ISDs to ensure the development of a vision and mission statement for preschool inclusion before the Inclusion Builders grant ends.

Other system-level efforts to promote inclusion across the seven ISDs include but are not limited to the following:

Increased focus on placement decisions for young children with IEPs. Two ISDs described efforts to improve the use of data in making placement decisions for children and creating more consistency across local school districts. For example, one ISD leader reported developing a new rubric to inform placement discussions: “I believe that [the] rubric has definitely helped guide decision making based on what’s best practice versus what people are feeling or what they’re anticipating the child’s needs are going to be [because] it’s based on actual data.”

Improved professional development systems. Other system-level changes include efforts to strengthen training on preschool inclusion for large groups of staff (mentioned by all the ISDs to some degree). For example, one ISD implemented new training and onboarding procedures focused on inclusive practices for general and special education staff. Another ISD began working with the local university to embed inclusive practices into preservice general education teacher coursework. In addition, this ISD expanded training to any preservice student who also is working in tuition-based or GSRP classrooms to attend inclusion professional development. The ISD leader said,

“If we’re having trainings on Fridays and at our tuition-based center, we pay the students to come in for training as well . . . so that they have opportunity to get high-quality content. And then they have the follow-up on the hands-on learning experiences.”

A third ISD discussed a new approach to training through joint early childhood and K–12 ancillary staff meetings to ensure that more staff, including general education and special education staff, receive training on inclusion. Other related efforts include the development of new procedures to promote collaboration among coaches—PIES specialists, ECSs, and literacy coaches—to discuss their work, including best practices in adult learning. These efforts are coupled with the work of the PIES specialists in all ISDs to provide training to various groups of classroom teachers, coaches, and other staff throughout their respective ISDs.

Integration of inclusion into other systems or resources. In one ISD, the PIES specialist focused on aligning inclusion practices with the ISD’s existing frameworks, which included a review of the ISD’s approach to promoting children’s social-emotional development, its HighScope Curriculum, and the Pyramid Model. Inclusion Builders offered training on the Pyramid Model to all seven ISDs, and most ISD leaders said they plan to focus on implementing the Pyramid Model practices in the coming year. One ISD leader reported that they plan to use it as an “organizational framework for how we do inclusion.”

Reduction in the number of segregated classrooms. The Inclusion Builders initiative is designed to improve the use of high-quality inclusive practices, through coaching and other professional development. The initiative’s long-term goal is to increase the number of children with IEPs who are served in high-quality inclusive settings. Five of the seven ISD leaders reported improvements in this regard. For example, one ISD reported that they had reduced the number of half-day, self-contained classroom sessions from 11 to three. The other four ISDs generally described a positive trend toward serving more children in inclusive settings, with variation among local school districts. The remaining two ISDs emphasized that they had a very high inclusion rate prior to participating in Inclusion Builders; in fact, one ISD leader reported they have a “100%” inclusion rate.

At present, it is difficult to determine specific increases in the number of children served in inclusive settings within the seven ISDs. At least three ISDs emphasized that their historical inclusion data are likely inaccurate. One ISD leader said,

“One of the things we’re able to identify is that we were working with poor data, that people were not inputting it appropriately . . . this has created a lot of cleanup, and it actually gives me something I can work with because I couldn’t work with what I had before. It was just junk.”

One benefit of Inclusion Builders has been to shine a light on these data collection and entry issues; ISD leaders and PIES specialists reported focusing on improving the data so that the information can serve as an accurate baseline to track progress moving forward.

To support system-level change, many ISD leaders focused on shifting attitudes and beliefs about the value of inclusion.

According to ISD leaders, much of their work has focused on engaging stakeholders in discussions about inclusion. These efforts 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, the Inclusion Builders initiative offered a reason to engage stakeholders about preschool inclusion to discuss the benefits of inclusion, as well as local school district barriers and solutions. An ISD leader explained,

“We had a targeted local district that we wanted to support with this. The biggest thing is we’re walking alongside them and learning along with them. We thought we had done the work right at a[n] ISD level. However, then you talk about at a local district level and there are, there are similarities, no doubt, but there are still a lot of differences in those systems . . . So, we were walking alongside of them . . . learning and learning together.”

Similarly, the PIES specialists focused much of their work on building bridges between general early childhood education and special education teachers and with coaches, most commonly ECSs. For example, one ISD created a new “coaching collaboration team” led by the ISD’s early childhood director and includes the PIES specialist. The ISD uses these team meetings to share resources and disseminate information focused on preschool inclusion. In another ISD, the PIES specialist has collaborated with early childhood coaches in their professional learning communities, as well as in weekly meetings, to support staff planning for the implementation of inclusion practices. In a third ISD, the PIES specialist participates in a monthly ISD-wide collaboration meeting with ECSs and other district coaches, with more frequent meetings with coaches and administrators in selected districts. One PIES specialist explained,

“One district . . . They only believed in self-contained . . . this role offered [allowed me to] get in there as a coaching piece for those GSRP teachers. I’ve been able to develop a really good relationship with that principal. And, in fact, we went [to] one of the sessions at the NTI [National Training Institute on Effective Practices]. I had a virtual meeting with them—with all of them—[because] they were having a student that was struggling. [The principal has] been so excited that it’s really bridged that gap with that district . . . I think down the road, it may really change how we interact and provide services because of PIES [specialists].”

ISD leaders described how their engagement efforts, coupled with professional development, have helped address negative beliefs and attitudes about serving young children with disabilities within general early childhood programs. Despite some progress, however, ISD leaders emphasized that work remains. An ISD leader explained,

“We consistently still have negativity around it. We still have people wanting to enroll children in self-contained classrooms, and we have administrators at local districts pushing for children to be in places instead of looking at services. That’s a barrier that we continue to fight.”

ISD leaders and the PIES specialists identified different stakeholder groups that pose the greatest challenge in terms of negative attitudes about inclusion (and there was no discernible pattern in these groups across the seven ISDs). For example, one ISD leader focused on teachers:

“I think [Inclusion Builders] uncovered more of misunderstanding about [preschool inclusion]. We did a survey that went over attitudes, practices, and beliefs, and what we see within the classroom, it isn’t matching . . . The teachers believed more strongly [in inclusion] than what we see that they’re doing all the things.”

“We’re not going to just fill up segregated, special ed preschool anymore. I am really starting to see a philosophical shift amongst special education. I think that’s a slower hill to climb. The attitudes and beliefs as a barrier are very entrenched in early care and education.”
—ISD administrator

“I think where the struggle still continues is on that larger scale . . . in the community where people had experiences before and they haven’t yet had [inclusion] experiences now. So they just view it as “This was the way we always did it and that was working and it was good for my child, so it’s good for everybody.”
—ISD administrator

In one ISD, a PIES specialist said, “The local superintendents . . . the higher level of administration . . . they’re the hardest to change those perspectives . . . they don’t want to change their philosophy of how they are doing things.” Conversely, in another ISD, the PIES specialist emphasized, “A lot of the people at our upper levels believe in [inclusion]; it’s actually the grassroots people, the people writing IEPs that still don’t have those beliefs and are still writing IEPs [that] segregate students.”

Only one ISD administrator brought up their work regarding the role of families in the Inclusion Builders initiative:

 We did presentations to our school board that included parent components. We had parents, some who had wrote letters or sent little video clips about their experiences, very positive for their children that year, and [we] tried to use that as a way to create the ripples at the administrative level . . . and to get parent input out there because it’s so valuable.

Another ISD leader noted that they plan to focus more on family engagement in the 2022–23 school year.

ISD leaders and PIES specialists pointed to access to high-quality professional development as one of the key successes of the initiative.

Both ISD leaders and PIES specialists emphasized that, in addition to new policies and procedures in support of inclusion, as well as some progress toward changing attitudes, the professional development supported by the initiative was one of its key successes. For example, the ISD leaders praised the support of their peers from other ISDs and appreciated the opportunity to connect and share with them in regular meetings facilitated by the state project team. An ISD leader reflected, “I’ve learned a lot from the ISDs that are very different from ours . . . and then being able to bounce ideas off of those ISDs that are built a little bit more similar.” The PIES specialists repeatedly reported that one of the greatest benefits of the initiative was that it enabled them to participate in high-quality professional development. Several PIES specialists noted that they would not have had these types of opportunities, particularly attending national conferences, without the support of Inclusion Builders.

Across time, the PIES specialists resolved some early challenges they faced in their new roles.

The PIES specialists had to navigate understanding and working in a new position within the ISD, including meeting ongoing professional development requirements and learning the new TORSH technology. In the first year of Inclusion Builders implementation, the PIES specialists identified some initial implementation challenges about clarifying and aligning their role within the context of other early childhood coaches and support staff within the ISD. At the time of our first round of data collection (spring 2021), at least three of the PIES specialists also served as an ECS within their ISD. The ECS role involves providing support to GSRP early childhood classrooms, including monitoring and evaluating program quality. In other ISDs, the ECS and PIES specialist roles were separate, although the level of collaboration between these staff positions varied. For example, in one small ISD, the PIES specialist and the ECS worked as a team to provide inclusive supports to classrooms. In a larger ISD, in which the general education and special education systems are siloed, the PIES specialist 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 specialist first had to navigate existing relationships between classroom teachers and the ECSs, before moving forward with providing practice-based coaching focused on inclusion.

By our second round of data collection (conducted in spring 2022), the PIES specialists reported that they had strengthened relationships with other coaches, as needed, and worked through how their role would fit within existing ISD systems and personnel.

The major implementation challenges for Inclusion Builders reflect broader system-level issues focused on special education funding structures and general workforce challenges.

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. Another ISD leader argued that the state system financially incentivizes ISDs to maintain separate special education classrooms. This issue relates to the structure of special education programs and services and how they are funded. A state project team member described that a classroom in an ECSE program that is operating under R340.1754 of the Michigan Administrative Rules for Special Education [MARSE]⁵ serves only those 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 receive reimbursement for one full-time equivalency (FTE) pupil for a child who only attends half-day sessions.

The other service delivery model under which the ISD may collect one FTE for preschool-aged children with 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 the least restrictive settings, but the FTE calculation often does not fully cover the cost of doing this work. Some ISDs that do not 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 possible uncertainties in funding) are deemed too challenging, according to a state project team member.

Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic generated stress on the ISDs, including workforce shortages. One ISD leader reported,

 One recurring challenge the PIES [specialists] have experienced this year is staffing struggles and the direct impact that has had on coaching . . . A majority of the PIES [specialists'] time this past quarter was spent filling in in the classroom, working towards finding new staff and onboarding new staff.

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 three PIES specialists and two ISD leaders from the original Inclusion Builders cohort left their roles. As such, the state team had to train the new PIES specialists, which created delays in classroom coaching and training. In addition, turnover among ISD leaders created some uncertainty about the extent to which preschool inclusion would remain a priority at the leadership level.

The impact of Inclusion Builders at the classroom level is difficult to determine in its first few years of implementation within an ISD.

A core strategy of Inclusion Builders is to hire and train an ISD-level staff person (the PIES specialist) to focus on inclusion, providing coaching to a select number of teachers and larger groups of staff. Once hired, the PIES specialists receive intensive professional development to build their understanding of high-quality inclusive practices and the practice-based coaching model. The state project team emphasized that each PIES specialist learns and practices their coaching skills with two teachers during the 2-year grant period. As such, measurable progress in the use of classroom-level inclusion practices may not be fully observed until the PIES specialists have moved beyond their own initial training

⁵ See https://www.michigan.gov/documents/mde/MARSE_Supplemented_with_IDEA_Regs_379598_7.pdf for the MARSE specifications.

period. That said, both the PIES specialists and ISD leaders have already reported an increase in the use of effective inclusive practices during the 2-year grant.

In addition, the PIES specialists select teachers to participate in coaching during the grant period. In other words, the grant did not include any specific criteria for teachers' participation in coaching from the PIES specialists. The evaluation team interviewed five teachers as part of the study, and it is important to note that they all indicated they had experience with preschool inclusion, particularly one teacher who worked in an ISD with a long history of inclusion. As such, these teachers did not describe major changes in their practices as a result of the coaching. It was helpful, according to the teachers, but it did not shift their practices significantly. One teacher suggested the coaching would be more useful for new teachers or teachers lacking experience in inclusion.

In addition, Inclusion Builders originally intended to use the ICP, a tool to measure the quality of inclusive practices, as part of its model. ICP data could have been used to measure change among participating classrooms, but the COVID-19 pandemic delayed training on the ICP. However, some participating ISDs received training on the ICP in spring 2022, and ISD leaders reported they plan to use the tool moving forward.

The first cohort of Inclusion Builders ISDs plans to continue their work after the grant ends, with some modifications to the initiative's design.

All seven ISD administrators indicated that they plan to continue their work promoting preschool inclusion after the Inclusion Builders initiative ends. Five of the seven ISDs offered specific comments about changes they plan to make to the Inclusion Builders model. These ISDs focused on expanding the scope of their work to train more staff on inclusion practices, including increasing the coaching caseload of PIES specialists from two teachers (as required by the grant) or integrating the responsibilities of the PIES specialists into the ECS and/or special education staff roles. One ISD leader explained that, although the intense focus on two teachers was valuable, this focus was not necessary to lead to changes in practice. Another ISD leader similarly remarked that the grant would have been more effective by placing a greater focus on systems change in support of inclusion, rather than focusing on just two teachers within their ISD in regard to practice-based coaching. At the time of our data collection (spring 2022), ISD administrators were not yet certain about which funds would support the PIES specialist role after the grant ended; two ISD leaders mentioned using ECSE funds, and another leader indicated the role would be funded with GSRP funds.

 We're moving into our last phase where this is supported financially through PDG, but it's given us the information that we need to move forward in our district and to justify continuing to fund this position. So moving into next year, we're going to continue to our expand our continuum, and we're hiring an additional person.

—ISD administrator

Conclusion

Participants in the first cohort of Inclusion Builders generally described the initiative as a success. The creation of a new ISD-level role and the infusion of high-quality individualized and group professional development has helped address misconceptions about inclusion, provide needed support to teachers, and build new partnerships with administrators and staff. ISD leaders and PIES specialists repeatedly emphasized stronger collaboration between ISDs and local districts, as well as between general education and special education staff and coaches, as one of the key benefits of the initiative. In addition, the ISDs have made headway on system-level policies and procedures to improve their

approaches to preschool inclusion. Examples include developing ISD-wide policy statements and creating more consistency and use of data in making placement decisions for young children with IEPs.

Challenges to implementation of the initiative include addressing misconceptions about the value of inclusion; navigating local school district systems to promote change; building relationships with administrators and staff, particularly in districts with siloed general education and special education departments; and finding the time and focus necessary to integrate the PIES specialist role within existing staffing structures. In addition, measurable shifts at the classroom level, as a result of the initiative, may not occur until the PIES specialists are fully trained and provide coaching to more teachers, including teachers without extensive experience delivering inclusive services to young children with IEPs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

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

Consider increasing flexibility in regard to the PIES specialists' caseloads during the grant period. The PIES specialists are responsible for providing practice-based coaching to two teachers within the ISD during the 2-year grant period, along with broader training to other groups of staff. Moving forward, the initial PIES specialist caseload might be increased, or tailored to each ISD, based on the ISD's history of inclusion and the skills and content knowledge of the professional serving in the PIES specialist role. For example, more experienced PIES specialists with content knowledge in inclusion may be able to work with more than two teachers and/or shorten the amount of time they work with two teachers, before expanding to coaching more staff.

Develop specific system-level goals and objectives for ISD leadership into the grant. As part of their application for funding, ISDs had to submit an ISD-wide plan for supporting and promoting inclusive opportunities for preschool-aged children with disabilities. The grant has specific requirements for the work of the PIES specialists, related to their own professional development and the coaching they provide to teachers. At the broader systems level, the ISDs varied in the extent to which, and how, they focused on strengthening policies and procedures in support of preschool inclusion. It is clear, from the first cohort of Inclusion Builders ISDs, that the history of inclusion and the unique structure of each ISD played a role in how each ISD approached the work (e.g., ISDs with centralized control of early childhood programming could make changes more easily compared with ISDs with decentralized authority among local school districts). However, to better track progress across time, the state might consider building in specific system-level requirements that are concrete and measurable for participating ISDs.

Provide more support to ISDs in documenting the number of children with disabilities served in inclusive settings. The federal government requires states to annually report on the percentage of preschool-age children with IEPs who receive the majority of special education services in regular early childhood programs and the percentage of children attending a separate special education class, attending a separate school, or living in a residential facility. ISD leaders reported that participation in Inclusion Builders shed light on issues with the accuracy of preschool special education data reported to the state, which has prompted them to improve their data collection and entry procedures. To inform state efforts and ensure accurate data are provided to the federal government, the state should consider providing more guidance and support to ISDs statewide to improve the quality of preschool inclusion data.

Invest in stakeholder engagement within and across ISDs to address misconceptions about preschool inclusion.

ISD leaders and PIES specialists emphasized the importance of engaging local school 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. The first cohort of Inclusion Builders demonstrated that negative beliefs about inclusion are significant, and much more work needs to be done in this area.

Expand unified professional development opportunities for both special education and general education staff to train more staff in preschool inclusion practices.

Given some ISD concerns about the narrow focus of Inclusion Builders on two teachers, the state might consider building in more flexibility on how to use the grant to broaden participation in training supported by the initiative. Similarly, the contracted consultant with the state project team who provides coaching to the PIES specialists is at capacity. To support scale-up, the state will need to determine how to support each PIES specialist and train new PIES specialists as practice-based coaches across time and potentially with new ISDs.

Develop and share 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. Universal resources could be helpful, given staff turnover and workforce shortages that are significant barriers for many ISDs because of the COVID-19 pandemic. CCRESA is currently developing an Inclusion Builders implementation manual, but some of the training and guidance developed by the first cohort of ISDs may be useful for new ISDs participating in the initiative, as well as those ISDs that are not participating.

Implement a measure to regularly determine changes in teachers' practices.

Originally, Inclusion Builders intended to use the ICP to measure progress, but implementation of this tool was delayed because of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, training became available in spring 2022, and ISD leaders indicated they plan to use the tool moving forward in the 2022–23 school year. ICP data can be used to systematically understand the strengths of early childhood classrooms in regard to preschool inclusion and guide professional development efforts to address areas for improvement.

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