

Preschool LRE: Inclusive Classroom Models

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires local education agencies (LEAs) to provide eligible children with disabilities ages 3 through 21 a free appropriate public education (FAPE), including special education and related services, in their least restrictive environment (LRE) to the maximum extent appropriate.¹ Placement decisions regarding a preschool child with a disability who is served under IDEA Part B must be individually determined based on the child's abilities and needs as described in the child's Individualized Education Program (IEP).² For more information, please reference the [OSEP Dear Colleague Letter](#)³ that addresses preschool LRE expectations.

Definitions:

Integrated/embedded services – special education and related services are provided within the regular education program (e.g., classroom, playground) with services delivered within the daily routines and activities in which all children in the class participate (e.g., circle time, centers). Integrated services provide contextually relevant learning opportunities and a child's access to and participation in learning experiences.

Least Restrictive Environment – (A) In general– To the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are not disabled, and special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the disability of a child is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily. 34 C.F.R. § 300.114(5)(A).

Regular early childhood program – a program that includes *at least* 50 percent of children *without* IEPs and includes Head Start, public or private preschool classes, licensed group child development centers, or licensed childcare.

LEAs must ensure IEP teams consider access to and participation in high-quality inclusive settings in determining the individualized placement decisions for all preschool children with disabilities. This document provides examples of inclusive classroom models of regular early childhood programs for preschool children (ages 3–5, not in kindergarten) in Tennessee.

State-Funded Preschool: Voluntary Pre-K (VPK)

- Priority enrollment criteria are for age- and income-eligible children, including those with disabilities.
- After districts have exhausted all efforts to enroll children who meet income eligibility, then districts can enroll non-income-eligible four-year-olds with or without disabilities.
- Support inclusionary practices by encouraging enrollment of students with disabilities.

¹ 34 C.F.R. §§ 300.101, -.114.

² 34 C.F.R. § 300.116(b)(2).

³ U.S. Dep't of Educ., Dear Colleague Letter: Updated Dear Colleague Letter on Preschool Least Restrictive Environments (Jan. 9, 2017), <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/files/idea/policy/speced/guid/idea/memosdcltrs/preschool-lre-dcl-1-10-17.pdf>.

Head Start Programs

- Federal mandates require that Head Start programs attempt to fill at least ten percent (10%) of available enrollment slots with children with disabilities.
- Some Head Start programs serve three-year-olds in addition to four-year-olds.

Community-Based Agencies

- For children already enrolled in a community-based agency, LEAs can use an itinerant approach in which the LEA goes to the community-based agency to provide special education and related services.
- LEAs can also fund program placements within community-based agencies.

LEA-established Inclusive Preschool Classrooms

- Some LEAs open typical peer slots to the community and may charge a fee to non-disabled peers. Children served by IEPs who are placed in an inclusive classroom must be provided a *free* appropriate public education.
- Some LEAs give preference to staff children to serve as typical peers and may provide this as a free benefit to staff; however, some LEAs may charge fees for this service to typical peers.

Title I-funded Classrooms

- The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) allows for Title I funds to be used to establish preschool classrooms for children with (and without) disabilities.

Collaborative Approaches

- Some LEAs have partnered with Head Start to establish joint-funded classrooms.
- Through VPK/SPED partnerships, LEAs have reconfigured some VPK/SPED classrooms to provide integrated services.
- While LEAs may allocate resources for varying types of collaborative preschool classrooms, below is an example of combining a VPK classroom(20 slots) with an existing special education (SPED) classroom. This same model can also be replicated with LEA-established programming funds (e.g., Title 1 funds, grants, fee-based placements).

Original Configuration	
Preschool Classroom A	Preschool Classroom B
20 VPK children (some may have IEPs)	12 children with IEPs
Possible Reconfiguration	
Preschool Classroom A	Preschool Classroom B
10 VPK children (some may have IEPs) + 6 children from the original SPED classroom	10 VPK children (some may have IEPs) + 6 children from the original SPED classroom

Contact Information

For additional information about preschool inclusive classroom models, inclusive practices, or other programmatic questions, contact:

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Additional Resources

- [AnLar – Tennessee’s Technical Assistance Network \(TN-TAN\)](#)
- [Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center \(ECTA\): Inclusion](#)

LRE/Inclusion Resources

- [UPDATED DEAR COLLEAGUE LETTER on Preschool Least Restrictive Environments \(January 9, 2017\) - IDEA](#)
- [Statement on Inclusion of Children with Disabilities in Early Childhood Programs - Executive Summary](#)
- [Policy Statement on Inclusion of Children with Disabilities in Early Childhood Programs](#)
- [ECTA Preschool Inclusion Fact Sheet](#)
- [Coordinated Spending Guide](#)
- [Decision Tree for Coding Educational Environments](#)

Integrated Services Resources

- [Integrating Therapy into the Classroom](#)
- [Speech Co-Teaching and Push-In Therapy Models](#) (*Adapted from Carrie Clark, CCP-SLP www.SpeechAndLanguageKids.com*)
- [ASHA School-Based Service Delivery in Speech-Language Pathology](#)