

New Mexico Early Childhood Higher Education Task Force Inclusive Early Childhood Education Exploratory Report

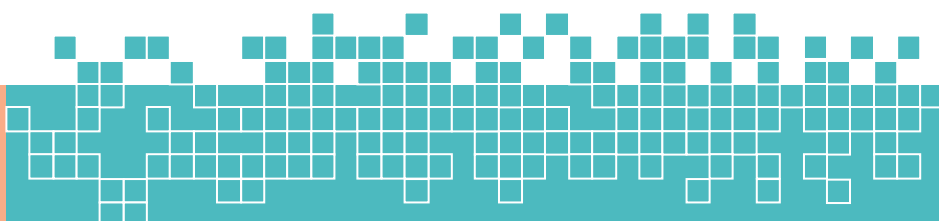
This Inclusive Early Childhood Education Exploratory Report contains reviews and recommendations produced by the New Mexico Early Childhood Higher Education Task Force (NMECHETF). The NMECHETF would like to thank the entire membership of the NMECHETF for its contributions to this document and recognize the committee chair and key authors of the document. In 2023-24, the NMECHETF met a total of eight (8) times, convening 26 institutional program representatives one half-day per month. Committees communicated between meetings and produced work within the scope of their service to the NMECHETF. The final deliverable, aligned with the 2023-24 NMECHETF Scope of Work, is meant to support institutes of higher education in New Mexico as it relates to early childhood higher education faculty, state entities, and community partners.

New Mexico is regarded as a national leader in early childhood education and care. Together, local services, state organizations, and institutions of higher education are forging a strong, collaborative early childhood system that will improve the services and experiences of New Mexico's young children and their families and communities. The NMECHETF is proud to be a recognized expert voice and steward of early childhood higher education programs during this transformative time.

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Inclusive Early Childhood Education Exploratory Report

Objective: Complete a brief report about the possibilities and challenges of developing a career pathway for licensure in early childhood and special education.

Overview: The NMECHETF produced this Exploratory Report within the scope of a committee. The collected data from the NNMECHETF included meeting discussions, discussion meeting notes, and institutional interviews. The Exploratory Report is developed from the collected data and consists of an introduction, background information specific to New Mexico, and recommendations related to the context of New Mexico’s early childhood, early childhood special education, and early intervention contexts.

Introduction

The New Mexico Early Childhood Higher Education Task Force (“Task Force”) addressed possibilities and challenges of career pathway development and the implications of a quality early childhood workforce who have competencies in special education and inclusive practices during the 2023-24 meetings. The following exploratory report describes the current state of workforce preparation as it relates to licensing in early childhood special education in New Mexico, pedagogical considerations for the field, and recommendations for implementation of future credentialing processes.

Background

Currently, there are limited career pathways in New Mexico for an early

intervention (EI) early childhood special education (ECSE) workforce. There are some options for dual licensure (e.g., completing multiple degrees, completing one degree and pursuing an alternative route to licensure); however, the program compatibility varies by institution. New Mexico does not currently have a license pathway that specifically meets the needs of young children who receive early intervention/special education services and supports.

Research shows that the quality of the early childhood workforce is one of the most important factors when reviewing program quality and child outcomes (Buysse et al., 1999). Coupled with both the mission of the Task Force to be good stewards of quality higher education early childhood programs throughout New Mexico, and the Early Childhood

Education and Care Department's strategic plan goals related to equitable career and compensation systems that improve the quality of New Mexico's early childhood programs, there are clear reasons the state should pursue a systematic and comprehensive approach to training professionals who will work with young children with delays and disabilities and their families including, but not limited to, the following:

- To meet family-identified needs for preschool access that is inclusive to children who have disabilities (Gollop & Degardin, 2023),

Current EI & ECSE Offerings in New Mexico

NMSU Elementary license with TESOL or Special Education endorsement, MA Special Education
NMSU EI (Project RISE)
WNMU Minor in Special Education
WNMU Special Education Endorsement
ENMU MA in Special Education (concentration in EC, nonlicensure)
ENMU MA in Special Education with emphasis in ECSE
UNM (pending) MA in Special Education with emphasis in ECSE leadership (dual licensure)
NMHU BA Elementary-Special Education (dual licensure)
NMHU BA Special Education
NMHU BA Early Childhood minor in Special Education
NMHU MA Special Education
NMHU MA Special Education/Gifted Concentration

Paralleled programs (Alternative Routes to Licensure, Dual licensure)

- To increase workforce capacity to address challenging behavior through tiered systems of supports in an effort to address exclusionary practices deemed problematic by New Mexico families (Heinz & Breidenbach, 2018),
- To make certain the services and supports being provided to children with disabilities and their families are equitable and align with early intervention and early childhood special education standards (DEC EI/ECSE Standards, 2020),
- To ensure developmental specialists, who provide a majority of the Part C early intervention services in the state (Davidson, 2024) are determined and planned by professionals who are appropriately trained and mentored.
- To prepare for the proportionate increase in numbers of children with disabilities that will be associated with the growth of preschool slots, infant and toddler childcare, and home visiting that is occurring across the state (Florecer Progress and Accountability Report 2023).



Inclusion and Early Childhood Special Education

There are a variety of considerations to be made when developing an appropriate early childhood workforce, especially when addressing the needs of young children with disabilities. For example, states may approach training in early childhood special education as a specialty, requiring the field to have an endorsement or additional training in ECSE that supplements an early childhood or general education degree program. Others have a blended approach, where early childhood and early childhood special education training are a singular degree program, some with multiple training prongs embedded within the program for specializing.

Early childhood special education is the combination of services and supports designed to meet the developmental needs of young children with, or vulnerable to, disabilities. ECSE is grounded in the requirements of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA; e.g., child find, evaluation, programming, placement) in that it is most frequently used to refer to state and federally mandated programs for young children. IDEA Part B provisions and requirements apply to children with disabilities ages three through twenty-one; Section 619 of IDEA authorized additional preschool formula grants for states that are eligible for children with disabilities ages three through five; Part C of IDEA provides early intervention (EI) programs for children starting at birth; and, if consistent with state policy, IDEA funds may be used to provide services to two-year old children with disabilities who will turn three during the school year. Educational environment data suggests that, while most students with disabilities are served in schools with peers without disabilities, there has been little change in the percentage of time children spend inside general classrooms since 2009 (National Center for Educational Statistics).

Inclusion, traditionally, refers to the placement and service of children in educational settings and is often associated with services in ECSE, for children with delays and disabilities. Inclusion is traditionally used in early childhood to mean the assurance of children with disabilities receiving special education services and supports in environments that include same-aged non-disabled peers. The placement of children with disabilities in educational settings with nondisabled peers defines the inclusion spectrum and, in many states, is defined by a continuum of placements. It is imperative for those working with our youngest learners, the birth to three population, to promote

inclusive practices as well. In fact, providing Part C early intervention services within a child's natural environment to the greatest extent possible is federally mandated by IDEA (2004). These views are aligned with requirements set forth by IDEA (e.g., least restrictive environment, free appropriate public education).

However, inclusion is often misinterpreted as place alone. For decades, the field of ECSE has grappled with the necessity of inclusive models of ECSE. Discrepancies in pedagogical beliefs are often centered on who benefits from inclusion, practices and key elements of inclusion, and, more recently, interpretations of equity and social justice have framed ongoing movements for more inclusive practices and settings for young children with disabilities. A more transformative approach to inclusion, however, is defined by a response to exclusion, wherein early childhood education aims to support all children, promoting justice through actions that support equitable participation of historically marginalized populations (e.g., children with disabilities, children of color, children who are multilingual; Beneke et al., 2019).

There should be significant weight placed on the value of inclusion in the development of an early childhood special education workforce. The 2018 decision in the consolidated lawsuit of *Yazzie* and *Martinez* found failure in the NM education system to provide a “uniform and sufficient system of education” to *all* NM students, including those from low socioeconomic backgrounds, indigenous youth, multilingual students, and children with disabilities. If a workforce is meant to be equipped to address education inadequacy across all populations, it suggests that a broader definition of “inclusion” may be appropriate in New Mexico. This also relates to the need for a workforce that is responsive to New Mexico's rich cultural and demographic diversity (e.g., there are

113,367 children ages zero to nine in NM, of which approximately 61% are Hispanic and 9% are Native American) as well as the challenges presented within the state (e.g., NM ranks in the bottom ten states in the U.S. across multiple measures and has a child poverty rate 8% higher than the national average; NM Voices for Children, 2023). As such, an inclusive early childhood education training and license pathway is necessary, with a specific emphasis on training in early intervention and early childhood special education.

Context of New Mexico's Systems



New Mexico's Family Infant Toddler (FIT) program provides Part C early intervention services to eligible infants and toddlers and their families. In 2022, the FIT program served 13,827 infants and toddlers in

New Mexico and were ranked first in the nation in identifying and serving infants under 12 months. However, there is a great need for early intervention providers, specifically developmental specialists, as a vast majority of families in the FIT program are receiving services by a developmental specialist. Because there is not an early childhood special education license in the state of New Mexico, a developmental specialist must hold a degree in one of 19 related fields such as psychology, nutrition, social work, or early childhood education. However, even with these broad requirements, almost 10% of the FIT program's developmental specialists were hired on a waiver, meaning they did not have one of the 19 related degrees. There is also a great deal of turnover in Part C. A 2022 cost study for the FIT program revealed an 18% turnover rate for developmental

specialists. What may contribute to this turnover is the pay parity that exists between early intervention providers and licensed early childhood educators. In summary, there is a great need to attract and retain early intervention providers, and there is a great need to better prepare our future early intervention workforce.

There are 113,367 children ages zero to nine in New Mexico. The National Center for Educational Statistics shows that, in 2021-22, the number of three- to five-year-olds served under IDEA (not yet in kindergarten) was 2,930. Within the past five years, the state has failed to meet targets for children with disabilities, including ensuring students are evaluated within 60 days of receipt of parental consent (i.e., Child Find) and early childhood transition (the percent of children referred prior to reaching 3 years of age that are found eligible for services under IDEA-B and have IEPs implemented by their third birthday (LESC, 2020). Further, children being served in Part B 619 (ages three to five), are served by educators who hold a license in Special Education Pre-K- 12th grade, which does not have a focus on students ages three to five.

Recommendations

The following recommendations of the Task Force should inform the next steps of early childhood special education planning in the state of New Mexico.

Recommendation 1: Follow national competencies

The state's current Articulation Catalog of Courses and Programs is aligned with the Division of Early Childhood Early Interventionist/Early Childhood Special Educator (EI/ECSE) Standards 2020 and NAEYC Professional Standards; however, requires a more recent revision. There is guidance for using early intervention and early childhood special education personnel preparation

standards to revise teacher preparation programs (e.g., Love et al, 2022). This would also ensure that the work of institutions seeking NAEYC Accreditation for existing programs are integrated and honored in the development process.

Recommendation 2: Collect more information

There is a plethora of information that would support the work of the state as it moves toward a more inclusive early childhood education workforce. This includes better understanding of the existing special education workforce in early childhood classrooms, the numbers, demographics, and characteristics of children in early childhood classrooms who receive early childhood special education supports, the experiences of children served by supports from Part C of IDEA, and the experiences and buy-in of the existing and future workforce, including leadership.

Recommendation 3: Consider career lattice and related impacts

One strength of the early childhood education programs across the state is the ability to articulate coursework through a career lattice and build professional knowledge in a stepwise approach. Any revision or change to licensure should protect the existing framework. At the same time, consideration must be given to the impact that any changes to requirements could have on the existing workforce. This includes understanding that increasing degree requirements in early intervention and early childhood special education could have devastating effects if rapid change occurs. Related impacts also include the direct implications for institutes of higher education that will result from a shift in competencies or

requirements (e.g., program policies, course catalog processes, increased staff and faculty needs).

Recommendation 4: Align state initiatives and motivations with the work

It is important to keep in mind other initiatives that are happening as we move forward in pursuing an early childhood special education license in this state.

Special attention must be paid to requirements to work as a developmental specialist for the NM FIT program, and how a license would impact their workforce. In addition, we must address pay parity as we suggest changing the qualifications to become a developmental specialist or potentially a service coordinator. As Part B 619 moves into the ECECD it is specifically important to consider transition from Part C to Part B and how inclusive coursework could support children and families as they go through this process. We must also consider the bilingual pathway as we study potential programmatic changes. It will be important to partner with this group to understand the overlap and how to collaborate moving forward.

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