

## Coming Together for Children with Disabilities: State Collaboration to Support Quality, Inclusive Child Care

By Jennifer Mezey, Katherine Beh Neas, and Kate Irish

**C**hild care is an essential work support for families, and it also can provide quality, early education opportunities for young children. However, families with children with disabilities have difficulty finding high-quality, appropriate child care for their children—and this is particularly true for low-income families.

States use funding from many different programs to provide child care, special education, early intervention, and supportive services to children with disabilities and their families; these programs include the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the Child Care and Development Fund block grant (CCDF), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF),

Medicaid, the Maternal and Child Health Program, Head Start, and various state and local programs. This policy brief focuses on the two early childhood programs funded through IDEA (Part C for infants and toddlers and their families and Section 619 for preschoolers) and CCDF.

Congress is currently considering the reauthorization of both CCDF and IDEA. The importance of quality services, the adequacy of funding, and the need for collaboration among early childhood programs have all been a part of these and other early childhood debates. Against this backdrop, CLASP and Easter Seals conducted a survey of CCDF and IDEA administrators in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. The resulting report discusses the challenges low-income families face in attempting to access quality child care for children with disabilities; discusses the importance of and barriers to collaboration; presents the findings of the CLASP-Easter Seals survey; and suggests policy recommendations for federal and state governments.

### *About the Authors*

Jennifer Mezey is a Senior Staff Attorney at the Center for Law and Social Policy. Katherine Beh Neas is an Assistant Vice President of Government Relations at Easter Seals. Kate Irish is Programs Manager at Docs for Tots.

### ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION

**This policy brief summarizes a new study of policies to provide special education and early intervention services to low-income children with disabilities in child care programs. It presents the results of a survey of state Child Care and Development Fund and Individuals with Disabilities Education Act program administrators, which was conducted by CLASP and Easter Seals. A full report, with the same title, is available from CLASP, [www.clasp.org](http://www.clasp.org), (202) 906-8000.**



*Creating solutions, changing lives.*

### **The Challenge: Quality Child Care for Children with Disabilities Is Scarce**

The increased participation of mothers in the labor force has led to an increased need for child care among families at all income levels. However, research shows that difficulty in finding child care for young children with disabilities can be a barrier to work. One study reported that 45 percent of mothers of infants with disabili-

ties do not return to work because they cannot find appropriate child care.

The availability of quality, inclusive child care—that is, care that adequately serves children with and without disabilities together—is especially important for children with diagnosed and undiagnosed disabilities. Research shows that inclusive settings provide higher quality early education services than classrooms serving only children with disabilities. Additionally, well-educated or well-trained providers are more likely to identify and address previously undiagnosed disabilities in young children earlier in their lives. In fact, a child care setting might be the first opportunity for a childhood disability to be identified and addressed before children experience difficulties in school.

### Why Collaboration Is Necessary

In order to provide quality services that address the needs of children with disabilities and their families, states must overcome several challenges, including:

- Insufficient funding.
- Different program missions.
- Different target populations.
- Different service delivery mechanisms.

Collaboration among agencies at all levels of government on program and planning issues can help to overcome these challenges and

promote the provision of complementary, inclusive services.

### The Results of the Survey

CLASP and Easter Seals sent surveys to CCDF, Part C, and Section 619 administrators in every state and received responses from at least one agency in 39 states, with 62 total responses. All of the responding agencies reported some level of collaboration:

- In most states, the same agency does not administer all three programs, but collaboration occurs within and among agencies.
- The most common form of collaboration states report is joint training on child development and on the inclusion of children with disabilities in child care programs. Thirty-four of the responding states reported that their CCDF agency and at least one of their IDEA agencies collaborate to provide at least one type of joint training. Thirty-one states have provided collaborative technical assistance to providers.
- States also reported conducting collaborative planning. Twenty-seven states reported that they have engaged in joint strategic planning. Twenty-two states reported that their CCDF agencies have consulted with the Section 619 and/or Part C agencies in the development of biennial CCDF state plans.
- Some states, including Hawaii, Minnesota, and North

Carolina, have comprehensive coordinated initiatives aimed at improving the quality of child care provided to children with disabilities.

Many states perceived no barriers to collaboration, while others identified a few specific issues:

- Difficulty in cross-agency collaboration. Surprisingly, the collaboration within a state is not necessarily directly correlated with the programs being administered by the same agency. For instance, in Minnesota, a state with a high degree of collaboration, all three programs were administered by the Minnesota Department of Children, Families and Learning at the time the survey was administered. In Hawaii, another state that engages in a lot of collaboration, none of the programs were lodged in the same agency.
- Disconnected state and local collaborative efforts. For instance, one respondent wrote that her state department of education could not require local school districts to collaborate with child care providers to provide services to Section 619-eligible children.
- State or federal legal requirements. For example, one respondent stated that IDEA's requirement that early intervention service providers meet the highest standard in the state forces many private preschool teachers and child care provid-

ers who are not certified to be excluded as providers under Part C.

## Recommendations

### Federal Reauthorization

- More funding is needed for CCDF and the IDEA early childhood programs. Collaboration alone cannot make up for insufficient funding levels. Child care programs across the country are facing budget cuts and other threats to funding due to state fiscal crises and the declining availability of TANF reserves. IDEA funding is currently insufficient to fully meet the developmental needs of children with disabilities.
- The Senate CCDF reauthorization legislation is more supportive of collaboration than the House bill; the Senate bill includes an explicit requirement that CCDF and IDEA early childhood programs describe how they will collaborate.
- The data provisions in the Senate CCDF reauthorization legislation would allow for better tracking of unmet need by requiring the collection of data on receiving IDEA-funded services.
- The Senate IDEA reauthorization legislation supports collaboration by requiring that the state agency responsible for child care partner with the state education agency to develop professional development plans.

### Federal Administrative Activities

At the present time, it is unclear whether CCDF or IDEA will be reauthorized during this fiscal year. However, there are actions that the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and Department of Education (DOE) could take in the absence of statutory changes to improve collaboration between CCDF and IDEA programs:

- DHHS and DOE should collaborate further on technical assistance about using IDEA and CCDF funds together, promoting inclusive child care, and meeting legal requirements around accommodation of children with disabilities.
- DHHS and DOE should ask states to report on state activities to increase the skill and expertise of early education and care staff to meet the needs of young children with disabilities in child care programs; DHHS and DOE should then disseminate this information to other states and the public.
- DOE must improve its efforts to enforce IDEA's early childhood programs to ensure that all eligible children are appropriately identified and served.

### State and Local Activities

- States should examine how their state and local policies are coordinated to support the creation of quality, inclusive child

care settings for children with disabilities.

- States should continue to invest collaboratively in professional development.
- States should work to ensure that state and local collaboration efforts support and complement each other.

## Conclusion

The CLASP-Easter Seals survey has found that state CCDF and IDEA programs are collaborating at both the state and local levels in an effort to provide quality, inclusive child care services for children with disabilities. While state respondents identified barriers to collaboration at both the federal and state levels, these barriers have not precluded collaborative efforts in the surveyed states.

However, in the current fiscal climate, great unmet need remains for quality child care that can support the healthy development of children of all abilities, as well as the work of their parents. States face tremendous challenges in just maintaining current levels of accessibility and quality of child care, special education, and early intervention services—let alone expanding services or creating new collaborative activities. This survey indicates that, while progress is being made to bring together child care and IDEA services, more needs to be done to build on these efforts. Additional resources will be needed to close the gaps that exist.

## Child Care and Early Education Series

December 2003  
Brief No. 4

The Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP), a national nonprofit organization founded in 1968, conducts research, legal and policy analysis, technical assistance, and advocacy on issues related to economic security for low-income families with children. CLASP's child care and early education work

focuses on promoting policies that support both child development and the needs of low-income working parents and on expanding the availability of resources for child care and early education initiatives. CLASP examines the impact of welfare reform on child care needs; studies the

relationships between child care subsidy systems, the Head Start Program, pre-kindergarten efforts, and other early education initiatives; and explores how these systems can be responsive to the developmental needs of all children, including children with disabilities.

CLASP POLICY BRIEF  
Child Care and Early Education Series, No. 4

www.clasp.org  
202.906.8000 main  
202.842.2885 fax  
1015 15th Street, NW, Suite 400  
Washington, DC 20005

# CLASP