Early Childhood Special Education Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)
Guidance Paper
September, 2005

Early childhood, birth-5, is a critical period in the life of every child. During this period, the foundation is laid for all later development and learning, including critical skills and dispositions for academic learning, for relating to others, and for becoming positive contributors to peer groups, families, and communities. Children develop these skills through active participation with their peers, their families, and their communities, in contexts that include but are not limited to home, preschool, child care, Head Start, play groups, libraries, parks, and places of worship. All young children, including those who have disabilities, are dependent upon the experiences and opportunities available within these everyday contexts as they build a solid foundation for development and learning.

All young children who are in early care and education, including those who have disabilities, have the right to experience settings, relationships and interactions that will support and further their development and learning. Young children with disabilities have both the need and the right to participate in and benefit from the same experiences as their peers without disabilities, including access to the same everyday contexts and opportunities for development and learning. Families of young children without disabilities have many options for the education and care of their children. Families of children with disabilities must have these same options, and should also receive any support and assistance that enable them and their children to take advantage of, and be active participants in, these same contexts.

Access to least restrictive environments:

- expands options for services and supports
- allows families to live a more typical life
- promotes community acceptance for children with disabilities
- provides opportunities for children to gain knowledge and skills that are useful in typical early childhood activities and daily routines
- insures that children with and without disabilities or other special needs have the opportunity to interact with and establish friendships with one another
- prepares children to live successfully within their communities and society

The Least Restrictive Environment in Early Childhood

A "least restrictive environment," as outlined in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and its accompanying federal and state rules, regulations and policy, requires that children with disabilities, aged 3-21, be educated with children who do not have disabilities. For school-age children, the least restrictive environment is typically the regular classroom. Applying the requirement of least restrictive environment to early childhood programs for 3-5 year olds is less clear because public school programs currently begin with Kindergarten, at age 5. Therefore, a range of options, including placements outside of the school, is encouraged in order to achieve the intent of the law.

In early childhood, "least restrictive" is often referred to as "inclusive." In early childhood, inclusive environments:

- are designed primarily for children without disabilities or special needs
- are part of the array of services available to all children in the community
- would be selected by the family if their child did not have a disability
- are suited to the child developmentally and chronologically
- are based on an appropriate early childhood curriculum using age-appropriate activities
- are individually planned to meet the unique needs of child and family, as identified in partnership with family
- are staffed by supportive, qualified educators and caregivers
- receive supports, services, and consultation from qualified early childhood special educators and ancillary personnel to insure successful inclusion
- may be provided in collaboration with non-public school community programs

Services for preschool aged children with disabilities can and should be delivered through a variety of types of programs including those available through public school early childhood programs and publicly funded universal preschool programs, as well as through collaboration with Head Start and community preschools. In Illinois, these environments include public and private child care and Head Start programs, as well as any school-based preschool programs available to all children. Inclusion means that children with disabilities have the right to participate in the same settings that are available to other children of their age, and to participate in a general education curriculum appropriate for all preschool children.

Services and supports in an inclusive environment encourage opportunities for the development of relationships with children without disabilities, and provide typically developing children with opportunities for positive interactions and relationships with peers with disabilities.

An inclusive environment is one that provides all children, including those with disabilities, with access to the general education curriculum. In early childhood, the curriculum is compatible with the characteristics and learning needs and interests of young children, and provided within the context of activities appropriate for young children.

Inclusive environments are <u>not</u> services or settings:

- chosen for administrative convenience
- chosen for personnel convenience
- chosen for budgetary reasons
- where only children with disabilities or other special needs are served
- chosen without informed family input and approval
- that place unreasonable demands on families
- without appropriate adaptations and supports
- where caregivers are not supportive and qualified

Collaboration: Cornerstone of a Least Restrictive Environment
The provision of special education services is, by definition, a partnership: between providers and families, different providers within and across entities, and different entities with different relationships with and different responsibilities for meeting the needs of children and families. Public schools are responsible for the provision of special education and related services, irrespective of the setting in which the child is served. Because children develop and learn through participation in typical, developmentally and age appropriate activities and routines, the most beneficial collaborative models are those in which all personnel work together on behalf of all children in the program, school, or learning environment.

Collaboration:

- insures that parents have a choice of high quality setting options that are useful and reasonable for meeting their own needs and their goals for their children
- insures shared responsibility for the IEP
- results in adaptations and accommodations that insure the child's access to the learning activities and environments available to children without disabilities
- insures that the individual needs of the child are met within the inclusive environment
- is flexible and matched to the responsibilities and characteristics of the inclusive setting and its staff

Responsibility
The Illinois State Board of Education and the public schools of Illinois are responsible for implementing the provisions of the IDEA. At the preschool level, "least restrictive environments" include all environments that are available to children without disabilities. For young children with disabilities, intervention services provided, irrespective of setting, are individualized services that directly address the child's individual developmental and learning goals. *It is the mandated responsibility of each child's local public school to ensure that options for the location of services represent the full range of options available to all children, and that individualized services are provided within those settings.*

It is the responsibility of each public school and district to:

- insure that high-quality inclusive options are available to families
- establish partnerships with families in order to determine services and settings that best meet their child's and their family's needs
- cultivate and establish partnerships with high quality community settings
- work with community settings to establish clear roles and responsibilities with respect to meeting the needs of the child and family, including those on the IEP
- insure staffing patterns, support and training that enable staff to support children's development and learning within the context of everyday early childhood activities and routines

It is the responsibility of the Illinois State Board of Education to:

- establish partnerships with other state, regional, and federal agencies and entities with oversight over programs that serve as potential inclusive settings
- recognize and promote placements in the least restrictive environment
- assist districts in exploring and implementing staffing and funding options that support collaboration and the provision of education in the LRE
- insure availability of training opportunities for public school, community, and other early childhood staff in models and skills to provide high quality inclusive education, development, and related services
- insure each child's right to a free, appropriate public education provided in the least restrictive environment

Public schools, districts, and the Illinois State Board of Education hold the ultimate responsibility for insuring that the needs of children with disabilities are addressed within environments most likely to result in their being able to participate in the school and in the community as productive citizens.