



SPECIAL EDITION: Universal PreK (UPK) Café Issue 4 – April 29, 2024

Dear Colleagues,

During this fourth month of 2024, the Early Education Team would like to continue with our theme of sharing historical insights into Our 10th Anniversary of Act 166. We hope you enjoy this special edition of the UPK Café, featuring **Equity and Inclusion** in Vermont.

AOE Early Education Purpose Statement

Each and every young child and their family are diverse in culture, language, geography, values, beliefs, and circumstances. To support individual growth, development, and continuous learning over their lifetime, the AOE is committed to fully including each and every child in a continuum of high quality, evidence-based early learning experiences, from birth through grade three.

AOE Inclusion Coordinator

In 2016, Vermont legislators allocated a full time Inclusion Coordinator position to the Early Education Team at the Agency of Education. In effort to support each and every Vermont child within equitable and inclusive high quality learning environments, the position was tasked to work in both early childhood special education and early childhood general education within Vermont's mixed delivery system. Topics that continue to be a main focus are

- Include children with disabilities in early childhood programs they would participate in if they did not have a disability, so they can learn together with their peers without disabilities.
- Provide high-quality teaching and learning environments that support each and every child's development to ensure successful outcomes.
- Intentionally promote each and every child's participation in all learning and social environments, across all routines and activities, with the use of universal, targeted, and individualized accommodations and differentiated interventions and instruction.
- Use high-quality, evidence-based services and supports that are developmentally appropriate, culturally, and linguistically responsive, and that foster each and every child's:
 - Acquisition and use of knowledge and skills.
 - Use of appropriate behaviors to meet their needs,



- Positive social emotional skills, including friendships with peers, and
- Sense of belonging.
- Provide services and supports to children with disabilities in early childhood programs with peers without disabilities, and within daily routines and learning and social activities.
- Recognize families as collaborative partners, experts, and engaged decision-makers in their children’s lives and value and treat each and every child and their families with respect.
- Promote universal screening and identification processes, early childhood program and school partnerships, access to and use of data and the data-based decision-making process, and free professional development is available for all adults in early childhood programs.

Vermont Early Childhood Guiding Principles

In 2017, The AOE Early Education Team, along with a group of diverse community partners, developed The Vermont Guiding Principles: Supporting Each and Every Young Child and Family’s Full and Equitable Participation. This document sets the tone of what our beliefs are for each and every child in Vermont. The Guiding Principles are the foundation for which public and private PreK programs follow, to ensure children with and without disabilities have full access, participation, and support within their learning environments. They promote research-based policies and practices to elevate equity, diversity, and the full inclusion and participation of each and every young child and their family. Full participation means promoting a sense of belonging, supporting positive social relationships, and enabling families and early childhood professionals to gain the competence and confidence to positively impact the lives of each and every child and their family.

Additionally, the Vermont AOE Early Education Team promotes the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) inclusion statement which reads

All children have the right to equitable learning opportunities that help them achieve their full potential as engaged learners and valued members of society. Thus, all early childhood educators have a professional obligation to advance equity. They can do this best when they are effectively supported by the early learning settings in which they work and when they, and their wider communities, embrace diversity and full inclusion as strengths, uphold fundamental principles of fairness and justice, and work to eliminate structural inequities that limit equitable learning opportunities (NAEYC, April 2019).

High-Quality Inclusion

Vermont’s beliefs and expectations of high-quality inclusion, align with [the most recent national guidance](#) highlighting the key elements necessary for promoting high-quality inclusive policies, procedures, and practices in early care and education environments. The guidance is designed to assist teams in order to ensure the implementation of high-

quality universal inclusive practices across programs for the meaningful participation and equitable access of each and every young child. Despite these positive actions and strong laws to support inclusion, such as Vermont’s Act 166 Universal Prekindergarten Education and Act 166 Ban on Suspension and Expulsion for Children Under Eight, there continues to be significant disparities in children’s access to high quality and inclusive early childhood programs.

- [Policy Statement on Inclusion of Children with Disabilities within Early Childhood Programs](#) by the U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (November 2023)
- [Early Care and Education Environment Indicators and Elements of High-Quality Inclusion](#), developed by the Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center (ECTA),
- The [National Center for Pyramid Model Innovation](#), and a consortium of national experts from multiple organizations funded through the Office of Special Education Programs, U.S. Department of Education.

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Vermont’s Early Multi-tiered System of Support Framework (Early MTSS)

The Early MTSS framework, promotes building the system capacity of schools and private programs to ensure the implementation of evidence-based practices to fidelity within each classroom. In their Inclusion Statement, the U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services emphasized the need for tiered supports that are proactive and preventative, and individualized interventions through the implementation of high quality, inclusive, universal, evidence-based practices. These practices increase the competence and confidence for each and every child resulting in positive outcomes and their success, as well as increase the competence, confidence, and wellbeing for each adult working within Vermont’ early childhood system.

The Early MTSS framework wraps around the intentional promotion of social and emotional skills and competencies, but because the Early MTSS framework is innovation neutral, it also includes the promotion of equitable and inclusive high-quality and evidence-based practices in early literacy and language development, mathematics, creative arts and expression, science, and social studies.

The framework measures practices at the system level, instructional level, and child level, requiring fidelity of practice to ensure each and every child has equitable access and can fully participate in daily routines and activities within their learning environment and ACROSS ALL ENVIRONMENTS.

Advancing Equity

Advancing equity in early childhood education requires understanding of this broader societal context, biases, and the ways in which historical and current inequities have shaped the profession of education. The biases referred to here are both explicit and implicit, and based on race, class, culture, gender, sexual orientation, ability and disability, language, national origin, indigenous heritage, religion, and other identities.

While explicit bias is conscious or deliberate and a person is fully aware of their attitudes and feelings, implicit bias refers to the attitudes and stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner. Unconscious associations or beliefs can develop over time, beginning at an early age, due to exposure to “messages” (direct and indirect) of what and how we are supposed to think and feel. This causes us to have feelings about others based on characteristics such as language, gender, appearance, race, ethnicity, age, disability, and class, and subtly affects how we, as education providers, perceive, interact with young children.

People who work with young child that are aware of implicit and explicit biases as they relate to their teaching, are able to better provide learning experiences that are aligned with children's cultural and familial norms.

How Do We Start Advancing Equity?

Public and private PreK programs can further promote equitable and inclusive outcomes for young children by:

- Confronting and dispelling implicit and explicit biases.
- Improving advocacy for young children and families who are often subject to biases; and
- Informing changes in policies, practices, and systems through advocacy.

Programs can adopt policies and practices that promote the use of data to identify potential issues related to bias (including data on exclusionary discipline, race, ethnicity, IEP status, and gender).

Addressing unconscious bias can make people nervous for several reasons. We can easily feel defensive about the language we use or justifying the “how” and “what” we do during everyday routines and activities. Recognizing implicit bias means we work together to change how we sift, sort, and categorize information and defying our normal patterns that might be unintentionally harmful to others. This includes becoming more aware of our unconscious thinking and the ways we use language. Words matter!

Ultimately, in order to ensure equity and high-quality inclusive learning environments for each and every child in Vermont, early education programs must:

- Provide high-quality early education programs that build on each child’s unique individual and family strengths, cultural background, language(s), abilities, and experiences
- Eliminate differences in educational outcomes as a result of who children are, where they live, and what resources their families have.

When working with young children we can use person-first language instead of disability-first language, unless the individual or family has requested something else. We can ask individuals (even our youngest learners) and families for preferences when possible, and always respect the family and child's preferences for how they would like to be referred. We should use individual preference if it is known and person-first language when it is not known.

Additionally, we can allow the classroom to comfortably embrace and support children's language development in both English and their home languages. Start by gathering information about each and every child's experience in their home language and in English. This can be accomplished by meeting with families face-to-face, or on the computer to collect this information. This also promotes relationship building between adults and children. Families can share their background and their shared interests and activities, some of which might be incorporated into daily routines and activities.

- Culturally and linguistically responsive practices involve recognizing and incorporating experiences, perspectives, assets, and strengths all children bring into the early childhood setting and ensuring that learning experiences are relevant to all children.

Child Find Activities

Child Find is a continuous process of public awareness activities which may include screening, designed to identify, locate, and evaluate all children with disabilities who may be in need of early intervention programs or special education as soon as possible. Under 34CFR 300.11; VT Rule 2360.3 Local Education Agencies (LEA) are responsible for implementing a comprehensive child find system for children birth through age 21, all children with disabilities in need of special education and related services shall be identified, located, and evaluated. This includes children who are not attending public schools.

An early childhood system includes equitable and inclusive developmental screening measures, formative assessments of the child's development, measures of environmental quality, and measures of the quality of practices, and of components within the framework. Establishing an early childhood comprehensive system is the first step for early identification of children with or at-risk of developmental delays, disabilities, and reaches vulnerable populations (children who are living in poverty, culturally and linguistically diverse, rurally isolated, etc.). through appropriate universal screening and evaluation processes.

- The [Division for Early Childhood \(DEC\) recommended practices](#) indicate that assessment measures should include multiple sources and a variety of methods are needed to get a full picture of a child's functioning and skills across settings, routines, activities, and situations. When considering which assessment tool to use, Teams should consider how well the instrument provides information to them and helps to determine continuous improvements. The DEC Recommended Practices also include examples for all adults working with

children, in order to build consistency of practice across the early childhood system.

Universal and Developmental Screening

Free screening tools like Ages and Stages Questionnaire and Age and Stages Questionnaire-Social and Emotional edition, help families and educators identify a child's strengths and uncover areas for growth and supports needed in areas such as: communication, gross motor, fine motor, problem solving, and personal-social and social emotional health. It also promotes communication and relationship building between the adults working in the classroom and the family.

In order to accurately describe the strengths and areas of growth for a child and determine appropriate goals and supports, it is imperative educators understand developmental benchmarks and trajectories for children up to age 8. Administrators, educators, staff, caregivers, and families can utilize tools like the Vermont Early Learning Standards (VELS) and Teaching Strategies Gold (TSG) to help them better capture and understand the essential areas of early childhood development.

Vermont Early Learning Standards (VELS)

The Vermont Early Learning Standards (VELS) which were created for families, teachers, caregivers, related service providers and administrators, outlines learning and development milestones, birth through grade three. VELs align with Vermont's Early MTSS framework and inform how curriculum and instruction should be tailored to meet each and every child's development and growth through play-based routines and activities, across all environments. Additionally, the VELs can be used to:

- Inform families about the development of their children.
- Emphasize the importance of play as the foundation for each and every child's development and learning.
- Guide intentional teaching practices that address each and every child's uniqueness.
- Guide selection of program-wide curriculum that is equitable and diverse.
- Contribute to a shared language and public awareness about the significance of high- quality early childhood education and experiences, and the need to invest resources early and wisely.
- Support a multi-tiered preventative approach for each and every child's social, emotional, and academic development.

The VELs are not meant to put any child to a specific level of development that they must achieve by a certain time. Rather, the VELs describe and explain child development/milestones across a wide age span, and when universal screenings are completed and analyzed, and inform educators so that they may intentionally embed evidence-based practices, supports and experiences across daily routines and activities to fully support each and every child. Children develop at different rates, and some children will reach these goals earlier or later than their chronological age.

Teaming

Teaming and collaboration practices are those that promote and sustain collaborative partnerships, and ongoing interactions to ensure that programs and services achieve desired child and family outcomes and goals. The purpose of teams is to work together to systematically and regularly exchange expertise, knowledge, and information to build team capacity and jointly solve problems, plan, and implement interventions, and evaluate continuous improvement efforts. Team members can include: the family, educators, childcare providers, caregivers, Universal PreK providers, paraprofessionals, Head Start educators, related service providers, and other community members with knowledge of the child or have unique insights about the child's capabilities across a variety of routines, daily activities, and settings which can help inform about the child's overall assessment and success.

Teaming can help all adults working in the classroom. Teams can work together to determine if they are gathering data, what still needs to be gathered, and to ensure data-based decision-making for each child. Teams can also work together to determine whether proactive evidence-based practices and supports are being implemented to fidelity. Both help to establish a positive, equitable and inclusive climate.

What You Do Makes a Difference!

Please remember young children are just starting to or still learning social and emotional, and developmental skills and competencies. These skills and competencies can and should be embedded within daily lessons and regarded as a wrap-around support. This form of intentional teaching involves implementing evidence-based practices to promote relationship building between adults, peers, and families, nurturing, and building culturally responsive practices, and practices that emphasize creating a sense of membership and belonging. When we do this, we are creating the best possible outcomes for each and every child, as well as setting a trajectory for their success moving forward.

A child's social and emotional needs **must** be considered prior to any other learning and can continue to be addressed while more abstract learning is occurring. It is the foundation which all other learning builds upon. When children understand what is expected and are provided the opportunity and support to engage in appropriate behaviors, they are more likely to choose this behavior, reducing the likelihood of using challenging behaviors. Remember, "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure."

Some examples of equitable and inclusive universal and targeted proactive and preventative evidence-based practices include

Friendship Skills

- Encourage preschoolers to work together.
- Make positive and specific comments about young students who are working together, helping each other, etc.
- Use a variety of strategies to specifically teach friendship skills (e.g., sharing, turn taking, helping others).

- Provide young students with planned opportunities to practice friendship skills.
- Model appropriate friendship skills in interactions with preschoolers and other adults.

Emotional Literacy

- Model and label your own emotions and appropriate ways to express emotions.
- Use a variety of strategies to teach preschoolers about emotion words.
- Use a variety of strategies to teach young students how to recognize emotions in themselves and others.
- Validate young students' emotions by labeling them and allowing them to talk about how they feel.
- Provide preschoolers with strategies to use to calm down when they are angry including self-soothing, self-regulation techniques, and replacement skills.
- Individualize instruction to meet the developmental needs of all of your young students.
- Frequent check-ins about the young student's feelings.

Problem Solving Strategies

- Specifically teach the steps in problem solving.
- Build resilience through intentionally taught strategies, matching the student's emotional need.
- Engage young students in generating solutions to common classroom challenges.
- Post visual reminders about the problem-solving steps and reference them often.
- Utilize verbal cues, in conjunction with visual cues and gestures to remind young students of intentionally taught strategies.
- Recognize and give specific feedback to those preschoolers who have been "good problem solvers".
- Help young students reflect on their own problem-solving skills.
- Individualized instruction on problem solving to meet different developmental needs.

Transitions, Rituals, and Routines

- Offer a variety of choices.
- Reduce expectations for time on task.
- Allow for extra time during transitions.
- Provide visual and auditory signals before transitions (e.g. timer; flashing lights for a 5-minute transition warning; ringing a bell; show a picture/photo).
- Involve student helpers with transitions, rituals, and routines.
- Recognize young students who are following transitions, rituals, and routines as they provide stability and consistency and can communicate values such as friendship, caring, and/or responsibility.
- Check-in frequently with students individually.
- Provide child specific positive feedback (I like the way you...).

- Post and reference often a daily visual schedule (individual and class) (e.g. First, Then Chart; Stop. Plan. Do Chart) so that the student's day is predictable.

Final Thoughts

Creating a high quality, developmentally appropriate, responsive, well-designed classroom with universal supports can help to create positive outcomes for children and families. Building a culture of inclusion for each and every Vermont child and their family begins at birth in early childhood programs and continues into schools, communities, and places of employment. Inclusion in early childhood programs can set a trajectory for inclusion across a life span.

References

[Policy Statement on Inclusion of Children with Disabilities in Early Childhood Programs, 2023](#)

[National Association for the Education of Young Children \(NAEYC Position Statement on Equity, April 2019\).](#)

[Vermont Agency of Education - Vermont Guiding Principles](#)

[Early Care and Education Environment Indicators and Elements of High-Quality Inclusion](#)

[Division for Early Childhood Recommended Practices](#)

[National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations](#)

[Vermont Early Learning Standards](#)

[Staas, C., Capatosto, K., Wright, R. A., and Jackson, V. M. \(2016\). State of the Science: Implicit Bias Review. Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity](#)