

Pathway to Kindergarten

The Arc Michigan believes that special education is a service, not a “place” such as segregated buildings or classrooms and that all children have a fundamental right to an inclusive preschool environment. Michigan’s educational system must focus on individualized services that follow our youngest children with disabilities into natural, least restrictive settings that pave a Pathway to Kindergarten.

In 2019, Michigan was in the bottom 10% of states providing inclusive services to preschool aged children with disabilities. In 2020, only 1 in 5 children with disabilities received their preschool special education services alongside their same-aged, typically developing peers. With such low numbers of preschool children with disabilities in typical preschool settings, change is needed as soon as possible. Research overwhelmingly indicates improved outcomes for both children with disabilities *and* their typically developing peers when early care and educational settings are inclusive. (1)

The current educational system frequently segregates students with disabilities from their non-disabled peers. Through the Individual Family Service Plan and the Individualized Education Planning processes, school personnel often present segregated, center-based services as the most appropriate, only available service. As a result, our youngest students may never have the opportunity to experience typical environments. Research clearly demonstrates that if these children begin school in segregated programs, they are much less likely to be educated in general education classrooms with their typically developing peers.

Natural environments provide children with disabilities with the best opportunity to have integrated experiences with typically developing peers. Children who participate in inclusive settings during their preschool years are more likely to be included in general education classes throughout their educational careers. The least restrictive environment requirements under Part B of the IDEA apply to ALL children with disabilities, including preschool children with disabilities. (2)

To ensure that all children have typical childhood experiences and successful preparation for kindergarten, The Arc Michigan proposes the following:

1. a. The Individual Family Service Plan (IFSP), for children ages 0–3, will provide the option of natural environments, such as typical preschool or daycare programs, or community-based environments (e.g., home, neighborhood park, play group) appropriate for the child’s individual goals.

- b. Early intervention services for children birth through age 2 are documented in the IFSP. For most 3-5 year olds, special education services are written into an Individualized Education Program (IEP).
 - c. The Individual Education Plan (IEP) for children 5 years and older will begin with the assumption that children who receive special education services can be successfully included in their neighborhood kindergarten when they are provided with appropriate services and supports.
2. A strong family/professional partnership is crucial to support and drive the child's success in natural environments. In general education classrooms, the IFSP and the IEP will provide the necessary supports, such as supplementary aids and services and curriculum modifications.
 3. Training related to the benefits of natural environments and implementation of educational best practices will be available to typical preschool and daycare staff to ensure competent care, acceptance and participation of ALL children. This includes training on Positive Behavioral Supports and Interventions (PBIS).
 4. State licensing regulations for preschool and daycare centers will provide for the personal care needs of all children in attendance, including changing diapers and toilet training in the least restrictive environment and will comply with family-centered practices.
 5. While schools are required to monitor children's progress, The Arc Michigan supports families also monitoring the effectiveness of supplementary aids and services and curriculum modifications their child receives through the IFSP or IEP and discussing progress and concerns with the school team.

Inclusive classrooms benefit general education staff by providing access to professional development, early intervention practitioners, special education specialists, therapists, and other colleagues who bring fresh perspectives and innovative teaching methods. This increased access removes barriers to services by locating children who are potentially eligible for special education services.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which supports the needs of ALL children, begins with the earliest educational experiences. Pathway to Kindergarten promotes the least restrictive option to families of children with disabilities and improves early childhood experiences for ALL children, including those without suspected disabilities who present with challenges.

The Arc Michigan supports inclusive preschool, which improves experiences and outcomes for EVERYONE in the classroom.

- (1) [Preschool Inclusion Collective Action Plan](#)
- (2) [US DOE DCL Preschool Least Restrictive Environments](#)
- (3) [IDEA Part C Early Intervention Services](#)
- (4) [Michigan Alliance for Families - Least Restrictive Environment](#)
- (5) [US Dept of Education - Preschool Least Restrictive Environment](#)

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