



## **Least Restrictive Environment Spotlight on California: Creative Inclusion Program Options**

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Through the auspices of the SEEDS Project, Sacramento County Office of Education supported by the California Department of Education, Special Education Division, these stories, available exclusively on the SEEDS website, highlight the efforts of Visitation Sites or Local Education Agencies providing exemplary models of system change efforts to increase inclusive options for young children with disabilities in preschool programs. The stories provide a glimpse into the process by which each program generated new ideas to influence change in their communities serving young children. Although each program offers a distinct approach to increasing inclusive opportunities in their locales, there are key indicators evident across programs. These considerations are reflective in guidance for interagency collaborative practice (Interagency Collaboration Handbook, 2007).

- Administrative support and involvement at the superintendent level
- Philosophical statement (mission, vision) for inclusion
- Models of inclusion
- Flexible staff
- Program Manager as lead to the collaborative initiative
- Developing and Implementing an Action Plan for Success
- Fiscal support
- Professional Development
- Resources
- Public Awareness
- Evaluation and Continuous Improvement

With the interagency collaborative approach as a framework, the stories that unfold capture each program's people and efforts to better serve all children in CA communities. Enjoy the stories and browse through the SEEDS Web site to select, receive technical assistance support, and apply one or more of the models in your programs.

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**NAPA COUNTY**

**INCLUSIVE PRESCHOOL STORY**

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**Napa County Office of Education,  
Early Childhood Services Department**

**Blended County Office of Education Model**

## Background

The Napa County Office of Education (NCOE), Early Childhood Services department, is a county operated program serving young children birth to five with or without disabilities. Barbara Nemko, Ph.D., is the superintendent for all of the NCOE services and programs. Andrea Knowlton (Andi), Director, provides oversight for all of the early childhood programs run through the NCOE. The Napa Infant and Preschool Programs (NIPP) is the service component of the program focused on providing special education services to young children with disabilities and their families. Andi provided the information for the stories through an interview, a PowerPoint presentation developed on the program, program documents, and a site visit. Andi's interagency collaboration efforts are also showcased in the Interagency Collaboration Handbook (2007), available from CDE Press or can be downloaded from [www.cde.ca.gov/sp/se/fp/ecseries.asp](http://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/se/fp/ecseries.asp). The program is recognized by the State of CA through the auspices of the Supporting Early Education Delivery Systems (SEEDS) Project as one of twenty-one visitation sites offering exemplary early childhood special education.

For more information, please visit the SEEDS website at [www.scoe.net/seeds](http://www.scoe.net/seeds).

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## Introduction

The Napa County Office of Education (NCOE) operates 14 early childhood special education (ECSE) classrooms throughout Napa County. The classes are a combination of part and full day programs. Full inclusion is the model employed for each classroom setting. NIPP provides special education services at forty-nine other community locations within the county boundaries. The various community sites include: early head start and head start programs, a therapeutic childcare center, which is part of the Dept. of Health and Human Services, State preschool programs, private community preschools, family childcare settings, and a child's home. NIPP is involved with many community partnerships that support eight head start sites (Sixteen total 1/2 day classrooms) and twelve community preschool sites that house over twenty-five classrooms.

The full inclusion model was fully embraced by NIPP in 1999 and has evolved in the last decade since its inception. Andi emphasizes that the program is planned out over time. New ideas are explored and developed in a team-based manner. Program changes occur annually as a result of program evaluation and input from staff and families. Information is collected through questionnaires and program evaluation meetings held with staff. Prior to the adoption of the full inclusion model, NIPP maintained a strong working partnership with the Head Start program. NIPP staff recognized the concerns voiced by parents about the lack of community options for preschool placement for their children with disabilities. NIPP has a positive reputation in the community for serving young children.

The program espouses a full inclusion concept to service provision and avails several service options for families transitioning to preschool. Parents are provided a document outlining the various placement and service options as transition to preschool approaches. The guide assists families in considering what program options might fit with the needs of their particular children. Community support team services are offered to families through three options: direct service where the ECSE teacher or assistant provide intervention within the preschool classroom, program consultation where staff share strategies with the preschool providers, and home visits to offer information concerning child progress and community resources along with listening to parents concerns and suggestions. The special education classes are blended with the CA State Preschool Program. Another option is the integrated therapy services model offered within Napa County Child Start, the Head Start program in the area, the CA State preschool Programs and other specific community/private preschools. Speech and language pathologists and assistants conduct small group therapy sessions for children needing support in speech and language development. The child may or may not be attending an integrated therapy classroom. Lastly, the program offers a transition class for children close to turning three years old during January through May. Children and

their parents attend two two-hour sessions during the week to learn the various preschool classroom routines in preparation for entering a preschool classroom.

The program promotes an integrated therapy approach to service provision. Extensive training has been provided to staff on the trans-disciplinary team method of working with the children during their daily activities. The staff includes an early childhood special education teacher, speech and language specialist, motor therapist, and an early intervention assistant. The Creative Curriculum, the CA Preschool Learning Foundations, and the Early Childhood Rating Scale are used to create a play-based environment where children learn through doing. The preschool program teams, supported by the therapists, create a preschool program environment responsive to all children's learning needs.

## **Model Components- How did you do it?**

### ***Administrative support and involvement at the superintendent and assistant superintendent level***

The program receives support and acknowledgment from the Superintendent and Deputy Superintendent. Each year the program staff develops a plan that is reviewed and approved by the Deputy Superintendent. The Deputy Superintendent has a background in special education and promotes the full inclusion philosophy. Additionally, The Special Education Local Planning Agency (SELPA) Director has a strong working relationship with the program director and staff.

### ***Philosophical statement (mission, vision) for inclusion***

The program has a fundamental belief in inclusion. The parent-guide includes an educational philosophy that promotes the focus on each child's development within "the context of family, culture, and community". The current mission is under revision to reflect the blended model and the merging of the Child Development and Special Education Programs within one department. The program plan includes a goal to revise the mission during the next program year.

### ***Models of inclusion***

Full Inclusion Model-the models can change based on the importance and necessity to families, children and staff.

- ⇒ Early childhood special education classes
- ⇒ Preschool transition class with active parent participation
- ⇒ Integrated therapy partnerships with head start, community preschools and State preschool programs
- ⇒ Community Resource Support Team
- ⇒ Speech/Language Therapy
- ⇒ Home visits
- ⇒ Parent Education Classes (English and Spanish) in language facilitation, sensory integration and fine motor development

### ***Flexible staff***

Staff are selected who promote a full inclusion philosophy. They are expected to work autonomously within the larger organizational system. Upon hiring, staff is given opportunities to choose various roles they will play in the program. The staff work independently and are supported in their efforts to be creative in program planning and implementation. Change is valued and encouraged through program planning and continual gathering of staff input. The staff is highly respected in the community and valued by families and agency representatives. The preschool options are recognized as high quality community-based programs

### ***Program Manager as lead to the collaborative initiative***

Andi is a visionary leader who has lived and worked in the community for many years. She capitalizes on her relationships and networks built over the years to maintain positive working relationships across program and agencies. Andi and her staff have been involved in many trainings and internal program discussions about the importance of inclusion. In 1999, the staff embarked on increasing their knowledge base in the area of integrated therapy. The training approach was an interagency effort including participants from Head Start, State Preschool and private preschool programs. Andi believes in interagency collaboration and relationship building as components to effective program development and implementation. She encourages independence in her staff and provides both support and latitude in staff decision-making. Andi promotes both an intra-agency and interagency planning across staff and programs. Agencies such as Family Resource and Referral and the Family Resource Center promote the inclusion model based on their trust and relationship with NIPP.

### ***Developing and implementing an action plan for success***

Program staff and administrators jointly develop a three-year program plan that is revisited annually. An external facilitator supported through the SEEDS Project, assists the staff in the review and development of the plan. The facilitator also guides a summative evaluation process at the end of the program year. Approximately fifteen core staff and administrators formulate the plan over a year period. The plan includes resources, activities, staff involved, timeline for completion, and program outcomes for four areas of focus: evidenced based practice, program design, teaming, and vision.

### ***Fiscal support***

The NCOE Chief Financial Officer assists Andi in budget monitoring. Monies are available through State Special Education funding, Child Care monies, and Napa First Five grants.

***Budget***

The classrooms are funded by both special education and child development dollars. An annual departmental budget is developed and submitted for approval. The special education preschool budget is around 2.8 million annually and the total budget including child development monies is 4.3 million. The budget planning follows SELPA timelines based on the number of children requiring services. The funding streams are managed separately although the programs are blended. Currently the NCOE uses an excess cost model for district support but is possibly moving to a fee for service model based on a per child expenditure.

***Professional development***

The program employs an interagency training model. Currently the program is in its second year of training with Head Start and other preschool programs entitled “On the Road to Excellence”. The project is funded this program year through First Five monies with an emphasis on early learning in core curricular areas of language, literacy, and math as they are infused in classroom daily routines. The training includes content training and coaching along with teacher idea exchange occurring four times per year. A specialized consultant teams with one of the program coordinators to conduct the training activities. During the first several years of the full inclusion model development, staff was trained on interagency teaming and the integrated therapy approach. Andi hired the A.G.H Associates out of New Hampshire through Head Start, First Five, and Special Education funding mechanisms available at the time. Representatives from community based preschools were offered the opportunity to participate free of charge through First Five dollars to support their knowledge and skill development concerning the full inclusion philosophy and model.

***Resources***

Typically Andi accesses Child Development program monies for training and early childhood program materials for the classrooms. The program applies for Town Government mini grants for special materials and conducts various fundraising ventures. The program can access the Superintendent’s fund, which is a portion of her salary set aside for special events and field trips. The SEEDS Project visitation site hosting monies are also used for supporting staff training.

***Public awareness***

The programs are highly respected and recognized for their distinction in offering high quality preschool programs in the community. Andi is active on community boards and commissions. She previously was involved in the Local Child Care Planning Council. The Deputy Superintendent currently participates as a member. Andi is currently a commissioner on the First Five Board. Brochures about the program are placed in pediatricians’ offices and the Resource and Referral Agency. Andi presents at the annual Special Education Early Childhood Administrator’s Project (SEECAP) and is a trainer and

coach for the SEECAP Project, Excellence in Early Childhood Leadership (ExCEL) leadership seminars. The program hosts other districts to visit and learn about their blended model and receives a consultation fee from SEEDS for sponsoring the visitations.

***Evaluation and continuous improvement***

The program plan is used to guide the overall functioning of the program. The staff engages in a reflective planning discussion annually guided by an external consultant supported through the SEEDS project. Andi and her administrative team meet monthly throughout the year to measure program performance and then for four full days toward the end of the year for administrative planning based on the strategic plan.

***Other***

During this program year, five members of the early childhood teaching staff are being supported to attend the ExCEL leadership academy to build leaders within the direct service component of the program. Andi recognizes the importance of building program capacity within and outside the organization in order to assure future success. The California Services for Technical Assistance and Training (CalSTAT), a special education training project sponsored by the California Department of Education, provided fiscal support for participants attending this year. The Child Development program monies and the SEEDS Project host dollars will be accessed for next year's participation.

## Statistics

### **Number of children served per year**

175-300 children with disabilities and 600 preschool children overall (blended count); the program is non-categorical.

### **Number and type of staff required for program functioning**

62 staff members who are specific to preschool services; director of early childhood services, 2 program coordinators, 3 administrative and school site secretaries, ECSE teachers, EC teachers with child development matrix permit, associate teachers with CDD permit, instructional assistants including classroom aids, early intervention assistants and autism behavioral aids. There are also designated instructional services staff that include speech and language, occupational, and physical therapists, a school nurse, a school psychologist, and a social worker on contract.

### **Number of interagency committees to support the effort**

As reflected in the Interagency Handbook, the Interagency Committee meets four times per year to support the development and implementation of preschool programs. There are commitments from Head Start, Special Education and Child Development (NCOE) and a First Five grant to support interagency training next year. The First Five Grant provides \$30,000, Head Start commits \$10,000 and Special Education and the Child Care Program commits \$10,000 to support a blended model for training that will include staff from those agencies as well as fifteen community preschools, the NBRC, and school district staff. The SEEDS Project monies are also used to support community preschool involvement.

### **Number of MOUs and with which agencies**

At present there are only two agreements required; one with the North Bay Regional Center and the other with the Head Start Program. There will be a new MOU developed with school districts for provision of preschool services. The MOU will be through the SELPA and all involved districts will sign off on the collaborative document. The agreement will focus on the full inclusion model and a fee for service fiscal structure.

### **Number of agency representatives involved in the initiative**

There are approximately ten agencies represented in the interagency planning effort.

### **Number of meetings required for planning and implementation annually**

The number of meetings depends on whether the initiative is in the planning/building stage or the maintaining stage. For new actions, once a month is required. For ongoing efforts, four times a year is sufficient.

**Types of resources needed to support staff development**

The topic identified in the program plan determines what resources will be needed to support staff development.

**Total costs of inclusion supports and professional development**

4.8 million total preschool program expenditures.