ecta Early Childhood
Technical Assistance Center

Technical Assistance for Implementing, Sustaining and Scaling-up High-Quality Inclusive Preschool Policies and Practices
Community Inclusion Team (CIT)

In 2015, the US Departments of Education and Health and Human Services issued a joint position statement on the inclusion of children with disabilities in early childhood programs that included the following:

"It is the Departments' position that all young children with disabilities should have access to inclusive high-quality early childhood programs, where they are provided with individualized and appropriate support in meeting high expectations."

"Research supports the benefits of inclusion for young children with and without disabilities. Studies have shown that individualized evidence based strategies for children with disabilities can be implemented successfully in inclusive early childhood programs. Children with disabilities, including those with the most significant disabilities and the highest needs, can make significant developmental and learning progress in inclusive settings. Some studies have shown that children with disabilities in inclusive settings experienced greater cognitive and communication development than children with disabilities who were in separate settings, with this being particularly apparent among children with more significant disabilities."

Research, policies and professional organizations embrace the importance of high-quality inclusion for young children with and without disabilities. However, programs, communities and states experience challenges in providing such high-quality inclusive services and opportunities. Therefore, ECTA has launched several initiatives to assist states, communities and programs to adopt, implement and sustain high-quality inclusion services, policies and practices.

First, ECTA and the National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations (NCPMI) have engaged with stakeholders and partners across early care and education to develop indicators that address inclusive policies and practices at the four levels of a state system: state, community, program, and early care and education environment. The indicators can be found at http://ectacenter.org/topics/inclusion/indicators.asp.

Second, the four sets of indicators are used in this technical assistance (TA) opportunity to guide the work with 2 states, their local communities and programs. **The critical components of this TA are:**

1. **A focused State Leadership Team** (SLT) is an interagency, cross-sector, collaborative team to develop or strengthen policies, procedures, funding, professional development, and other system infrastructure to plan, implement, evaluate, scale up and sustain the *State Indicators of High-Quality Inclusion* for preschool aged children.

2. **A state professional development network of Program Coaches** who can provide technical assistance to Community Inclusion Teams and local program leadership teams leading to high-fidelity implementation of the indicators.

3. **School district or LEA (Local Education Agency)-based Community Inclusion Teams** to serve as demonstrations of the effectiveness of the inclusion indicators and provide a model for others in the state. A Community Inclusion Team (CIT) is a team comprised of School district/LEA administrators, implementation program administrators, implementation program staff, family members, and others as appropriate. The CIT implements action plans based on both the *Community Indicators of High-Quality Inclusion* and *Local Program Indicators of High-Quality Inclusion* that guide and support the availability of high-quality inclusive early care and education environments throughout the community.

4. **Implementation Programs** are selected by the Community Inclusion Team. Those selected will use the *Local Program Indicators of High-Quality Inclusion* to support classrooms in implementing the *Early Care and Education (ECE) Environment Indicators of High-Quality Inclusion.* This will maximize the access, meaningful participation, and developmental outcomes of young children with disabilities and to serve as demonstration Programs for the community and the state.

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Figure 1. The components of this TA effort and their relationship to one another.
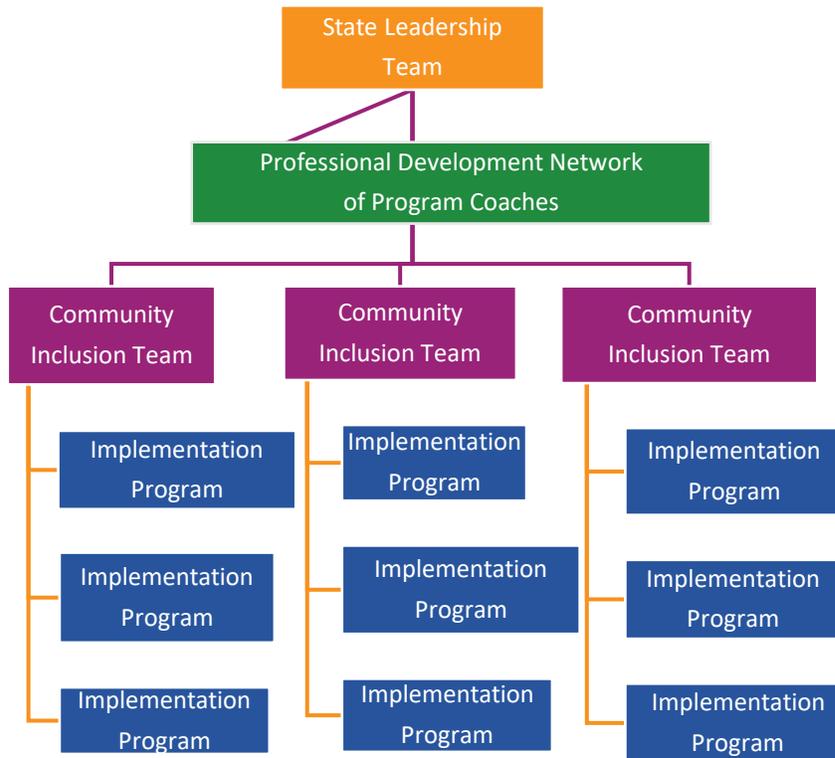
Community Inclusion Teams (CIT), with the support of a Program Coach, bring service providers and families together to build a shared vision of inclusion and to build the awareness throughout the community of the importance of preschool inclusion. The CIT helps guide the implementation programs in adopting the evidence-based practices that ensure that all children succeed. In this model no one program is expected to "do it alone". Rather, they have the sustained and planful support of the State Leadership Team, Program Coaches and the CIT to help them obtain the skills, knowledge, personnel and other resources needed for high-quality inclusion.

The Community Inclusion Team helps all the early childhood programs within the community "swim in the same direction". The CIT helps with information and resource sharing among programs and agencies, facilitates agreements between the school district/LEA and community programs for the provision of special education and related services in natural environments, and provides guidance and information to implementation programs on policies and procedures that support and promote high-quality inclusion. The CIT collects information on successes and challenges and shares that information with the State Leadership Team (SLT) so that the state team can better support their efforts.

What is a Community Inclusion Team (CIT)?

The CIT is a group of early childhood program personnel, family members and others in a community that are committed to providing every child with a high-quality, inclusive education. They are devoted to making sure children with disabilities are included

Community Inclusion Team (CIT)

and participate as full members in those high-quality early childhood settings. The CIT members represent their community and have knowledge of resources, so that as a community they can support all children and families.

Why do we need a CIT?

The CIT identifies what programs need to provide high-quality inclusion to all children. By working together, the community can meet these needs. The CIT supports the implementation and sustainability of high-quality inclusive practices. The CIT can help programs share professional development, staffing, and funding opportunities including how to increase, braid and coordinate resources, making the most of sparse resources, and identify new funding opportunities. The CIT builds relationships and communication among community entities. The CIT helps to build the awareness throughout the community of the importance and value of high-quality early childhood education and inclusion, and, links high-quality inclusive programs to the public, including policy makers, student teachers, media, and Institutions of Higher Education. The CIT collects and shares information annually about the community's progress in providing high-quality inclusion for all children. The CIT identifies and supports additional programs to implement evidence-based practices over time, thereby scaling-up a sustainable system of high-quality inclusion.

Who's on the team?

Each community determines the appropriate membership of their CIT. Examples of potential CIT members include personnel from: school districts, child care, community nursing, Head Start, local libraries, health and human services, early intervention, pediatricians, mental health providers, early childhood special education, as well as family members. Teams should have representatives from the above groups, therefore maintaining key voices while limiting the number of people at the table.

Although representation of key service providers is important, it's also critical to keep the membership to no more than 15 so that close relationships and efficient decisions can be made. Team members are expected to meet monthly for at least one hour. Having the support of each person's administration to attend and make decisions is imperative. Each team establishes roles for members including a convener, notetaker, and a data collector.

Why are they on the team?

CIT members are committed to high-quality ECE and inclusion. Family voices on the team represent the diverse needs of the community and increase the effectiveness of the CIT. Members possess unique knowledge of the community and its resources as well as the specific information about their type of service. While being able to represent their unique service model, they can come together and create an overall vision and view which can lead to a system that reduces redundancies and increases efficiencies and quality.

What is the difference between the Community Inclusion Team and Program Inclusion Leadership Teams?

The Community Inclusion Team (CIT) and Program Inclusion Leadership Teams each target different aspects to support high-quality inclusion. The key difference is the Program Inclusion Leadership Team facilitates and monitors the implementation of high-quality inclusion practices within their own program. Programs use the *Local Program Indicators of High-Quality Inclusion* to support classrooms in implementing the *Early Care and Education (ECE) Environment Indicators of High-Quality Inclusion*.

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The Community Inclusion Team (CIT) provides a community-wide vision of high-quality inclusion. It guides and provides information to support programs in their implementation of high-quality inclusion. The *Community Indicators of High-Quality Inclusion* guide the diverse members of this team to identify community-wide resources, specialized services, and facilitate partnerships and agreements between programs. The CIT collects, summarizes and uses data from programs and the community to form action plans and track progress in the community on increasing high-quality inclusion opportunities for all children and families. It shares data it receives with the State Leadership Team.

Program Inclusion Leadership Teams provide professional development; systematically collect and analyze data on the implementation of evidence-based inclusion practices in their program; and develop program-wide policies and procedures. This process determines quality of inclusion practices, personnel satisfaction with and perceptions of inclusion, family satisfaction, and the number of children receiving services. This data is shared with the CIT.

What's the Partnership between the State Leadership Team (SLT) and the Community Inclusion Team?

The SLT selects the Program Coaches that will help guide both the Community Inclusion Teams as well as the Program Leadership Teams at the implementation sites. The SLT selects communities to participate in the inclusion initiative and provides guidance related to establishing CITs and information on the *Community Inclusion Indicators*. The SLT establishes communication linkages or feedback loops with the CITs. This may be accomplished through CIT membership on the SLT, regular phone calls with conveners, regular presentations from CITs to the SLT, SLT visits to the CITs, CIT completion of report of activities, accomplishments on the indicators, data, and issues or challenges to the SLT, etc. The SLT serves as a "barrier buster" for the CITs and programs.

What is the general sequence of events for CITs?

February-April 2020:
- Identify Program Coaches (PCs) associated with each CIT
- ECTA staff call with PCs and SLT coordinator to talk about role with CITs.
- CIT conveners/leads identified
- All PCs and CITs get Preschool Inclusion Toolbox (Barton & Smith, 2015)

May-August 2020
- CITs participate in calls in May and June to discuss what a CIT is, what it does, recruiting members, establishing monthly meeting schedules and meeting logistics and early steps
- CITs Identify CIT members and roles (include data coordinator) and logistics
- CITs identify implementation programs and representatives from each to serve on CIT
- Monthly ECTA Webinars (Topics from Inclusion Toolbox to support implementation) begin in August.

September 2020 – December 2020
- Monthly ECTA Webinars (Topics from Inclusion Toolbox to support implementation
- Monthly CIT meetings (their Program Coach attends); begin to implement *Community Indicators of High Quality Inclusion*

January 2021 – September 2021
- Monthly CIT meetings (their Program Coach attends) continue to implement *Community Indicators of High Quality Inclusion*
- Monthly ECTA Webinars (Topics from Inclusion Toolbox to support implementation until Spring)
- Periodic calls with ECTA staff