



Contacts:

Andrew Mees
Montclair State University
meesa@montclair.edu
201-317-1361

Mike Yaple
NJ Department of Education
michael.yaple@doe.nj.gov
609-376-9072

Liam Oakes
NJ Coalition for Inclusive Education
liam@njcie.org
732-613-0400

Press Release

\$8M Federal Grant to Encourage Inclusive Education in New Jersey

Program to Reduce NJ's High Rate of Special-Education Students in Separate Classes and Schools

Montclair, N.J., May 7, 2020 – In an initiative designed to address New Jersey's high rate of special-education students placed in separate classes and separate schools, Montclair State University's Center for Autism and Early Childhood Mental Health (CAECMH) and the New Jersey Coalition for Inclusive Education (NJCIE) have been funded with an \$8 million, 5½-year grant through the New Jersey Department of Education's (NJDOE) annual allocation of federal funds from the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. The grant award will be used to establish the New Jersey Inclusive Education Technical Assistance (NJIETA) project to promote the inclusion of children with disabilities into PreK through 12th grade general-education classrooms in New Jersey public schools.

"This is an incredible commitment by the New Jersey Department of Education to address inclusion of children with special needs in New Jersey, so that they are fully educated with their same-age peers. Inclusion is the legal and moral starting point for all education, to minimize segregated, self-contained placements." says CAECMH Director Gerry Costa. "This is not simply about co-locating students with and without developmental and learning difficulties, but about authentic inclusive educational practices in all domains – it's about transforming the entire system. Teachers are the most critical change agents and the NJIETA will provide professional formation and support to promote inclusive practices."

"This project sets us on a new path to equitable services for our students with disabilities," said Education Commissioner Lamont O. Repollet. "Through this partnership with Montclair University and NJCIE, educators and families will get the support they need to increase the number of fully inclusive New Jersey schools."

New Jersey continues to have one of the highest rates of students with disabilities in separate educational settings in the country. The National Center for Educational Statistics' most recent public report on special-education placement data in 2017 found that nationally, 63.4 percent of children receiving special education were in "inclusive" settings – meaning they were

educated with their nondisabled peers for 80 percent or more of the school day. In New Jersey, however, only 44 percent were in this category. Although this rate rose to 47 percent in 2019, the NJDOE recognizes the need to intensify supports for school districts and families to create inclusive school communities that welcome all students.

Corinne Catalano, Assistant Director for Consultation Services at CAECMH explains, “The strengths and challenges of children with disabilities need to be understood through a multidisciplinary lens including cognitive, communication, sensory/motor, social and emotional well-being/mental health domains. Through this project, administrators, teachers and other school-based professionals will be supported in their collaboration to provide every student the opportunity to reach their full potential.”

Fred Buglione, President and CEO of NJCIE, states, “The NJIETA project represents a statewide commitment to ensuring that students with disabilities are fully included in their local schools, general education classrooms and curricula. We envision a future in which individuals with disabilities have access to equitable opportunities for learning and meaningful participation as valued members of their communities, and we are honored to co-lead this effort with our friends and colleagues at CAECMH-MSU and the NJ DOE.”

How NJ Inclusive Education Technical Assistance Will Work

The NJIETA project team will create and implement a three-pronged effort to support the development of more inclusive schools where students with and without disabilities learn, contribute, and belong. The project includes leadership development, targeted technical assistance, and the facilitation of systemic change through the development of implementation sites.

- **Leadership Development:** An Inclusion Leadership Development Group will be created, which will include stakeholders from school districts, higher education, statewide professional associations, and families. Two regional leadership conferences will be held each year to provide training school staff on topics generated by the Inclusion Leadership Development Group.
- **Technical Assistance:** Targeted technical assistance on inclusive education practices will be given through professional development, coaching and consultation to school districts across the state. Tools will include free webinars and resources provided to educators and parents to support inclusive education practices. The goals are to provide 60 technical assistance events each year, 15 to be delivered to Pre-K sites and 45 to K-12 schools. This represents 300 such services over the life of the five-year grant period.
- **School Selection:** The project will select a cohort of 15 public school sites each year – a total of 75 sites over the life of the project. Six of the 15 will be preschool sites; nine will be K-12 schools. Schools will apply, and the first cohort will be selected by June 30, 2020. The NJDOE, with input from Montclair State and NJCIE, will develop a system for selecting schools that represent various districts, counties, and grade levels (early childhood, elementary, middle and high school). Each cohort will receive support for up

to five years. Project activities will align with existing efforts to address individual needs such as the New Jersey Tiered System of Supports, or other RTI/MTSS model, or Positive Behavioral Supports in Schools. Progress at the school sites will be annually evaluated on placement data, school climate data, and other measures of student achievement and growth.

Throughout the project, Montclair State University's [Ben Samuels Children's Center](#), a model center for early childhood inclusion, will serve as a demonstration site for early childhood inclusive education. Since 2005, the Ben Samuels Children's Center has demonstrated that children with and without disabilities can learn together in high-quality, developmentally appropriate classrooms.

"For the past year, Corinne Catalano, Kaitlin Mulcahy [Associate Director, CAEMCH] and I have worked closely with NJCIE Executive Director, Fred Buglione and the New Jersey Department of Education to develop this plan," said Costa. "It's gratifying and rewarding to see it realized and endorsed with this level of support and funding, and ultimately reflects the State's commitment to providing the best possible educational practices for all children in New Jersey."

Additional information is available on the [NJIETA website](#).

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