

Side by Side



A playbook on centering and promoting
equity **in early education**



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Acknowledgments

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Start Here: An introduction to the *Side by Side* Playbook

Every child deserves to thrive.

The early years are a sacred time—one that should be shaped by joyful experiences, deep connections to community and culture, and rich opportunities for learning. During this vital and fleeting moment, each child's family and community form a vital ecosystem that provides the many settings, relationships, and resources that nurture the child's development. Every day of a child's early life is an opportunity to thrive.

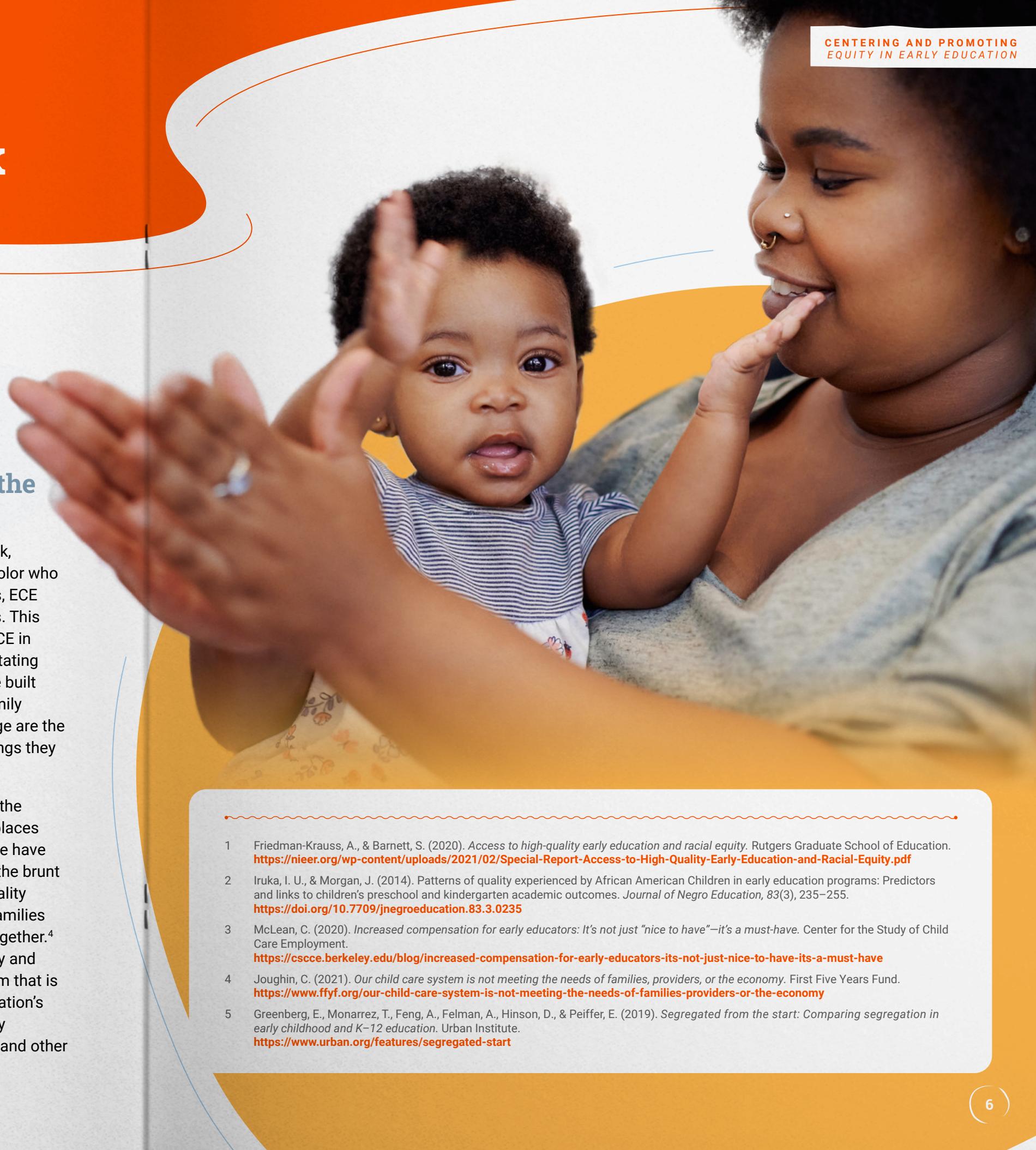
No one knows better about what young children need to thrive than those who care for children every day.

It is the role and right of families to make choices about the settings, relationships, and resources that are best for their young children. This includes the right to early childhood care and education (ECE) settings families can trust to offer safety and caring, reinforce family and community values, view children as whole and worthy individuals, and partner with families to instill the confidence and curiosity children need for lifelong learning. Likewise, it is the role and right of the dedicated professionals who devote themselves to teaching and caring for young children to do this work with dignity and in partnership with families. This includes access to the resources these professionals need to do this work well, compensation that honors their value to society, and working conditions that allow them to remain and grow within the ECE field.

And yet, when it comes to building ECE programs and systems, families, communities, and ECE teachers have been largely left out of the conversation.

This is particularly true for the many Black, Indigenous, Latine, and other people of color who represent the ECE community as families, ECE teachers, and other community members. This reality has marked the entire history of ECE in our nation and has helped to bring devastating consequences to bear. Together, we have built a system in which children's zip code, family income, racial identity, and home language are the key predictors of what kinds of ECE settings they can access.^{1,2}

We have created the conditions in which the national median wage for ECE teachers places many below the federal poverty level.³ We have created a context in which families bear the brunt of the tremendously high cost of high-quality ECE—creating financial strain for some families and pricing other families out of ECE altogether.⁴ Together, we have made a series of policy and practice choices leading to an ECE system that is even more racially segregated than our nation's K-12 system and, as such, systematically disadvantages Black, Indigenous, Latine, and other communities of color.⁵



- 1 Friedman-Krauss, A., & Barnett, S. (2020). *Access to high-quality early education and racial equity*. Rutgers Graduate School of Education. <https://nieer.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Special-Report-Access-to-High-Quality-Early-Education-and-Racial-Equity.pdf>
- 2 Iruka, I. U., & Morgan, J. (2014). Patterns of quality experienced by African American Children in early education programs: Predictors and links to children's preschool and kindergarten academic outcomes. *Journal of Negro Education*, 83(3), 235–255. <https://doi.org/10.7709/jnegroeducation.83.3.0235>
- 3 McLean, C. (2020). *Increased compensation for early educators: It's not just "nice to have"—it's a must-have*. Center for the Study of Child Care Employment. <https://cscce.berkeley.edu/blog/increased-compensation-for-early-educators-its-not-just-nice-to-have-its-a-must-have>
- 4 Joughin, C. (2021). *Our child care system is not meeting the needs of families, providers, or the economy*. First Five Years Fund. <https://www.ffyf.org/our-child-care-system-is-not-meeting-the-needs-of-families-providers-or-the-economy>
- 5 Greenberg, E., Monarrez, T., Feng, A., Felman, A., Hinson, D., & Peiffer, E. (2019). *Segregated from the start: Comparing segregation in early childhood and K-12 education*. Urban Institute. <https://www.urban.org/features/segregated-start>

But it doesn't have to be this way.

The inequities that exist in ECE are not inevitabilities. They are the result of choices: policies, practices, designs, and “ways of being” that have centered the characteristics, needs, and interests of the dominant culture—that is, White, English-speaking, and economically privileged families. But the work of advancing equity in ECE is founded on the belief that different choices have the potential to yield different results. After all, equity is an outcome—not an effort or an intention, but the result of undoing what has been done and rebuilding on the foundation of truth and justice.

We can find hope in the swell of voices rising from families, ECE practitioners, and communities.

As communities continue to build power and lead the way in calling for change, there has been a growing commitment among ECE leaders and decision-makers to listen, learn, and be transformed. This playbook stands as an example of that commitment and an invitation for ECE leaders at the national, state, and local levels to join communities and one another in the work of transformation.

The best place to start is to listen

This playbook is driven by the courageous work of families, ECE providers, and community leaders of color to speak the truth about the distance between what our children deserve and what the ECE system is offering. The playbook calls on leaders (program administrators, systems leaders, funders, researchers, policymakers, and others) to listen closely enough to be transformed by what we hear. Then, we must commit to truthful acknowledgment of what has been done, accountability for our individual and collective contributions to inequity, and action within our various spheres of influence toward a more hopeful, equitable future for ECE.



Meet the storytellers

This playbook is made possible by storytellers representing multiple identities, roles, and locations across the nation. The work has been built on the wisdom, perspectives, and experiences they so generously shared. Their voices not only provide insight into how the ECE system is (and is not) working for families and communities, but also offer hope and a vision for an ECE system that truly honors, values, and supports every child by working side by side with families and communities. Without their voices, this playbook would amount to nothing more than “noise.” So it is with the deepest gratitude that we attempt to be good stewards of their stories through this body of work. [Click through the images to learn more about each storyteller.](#)



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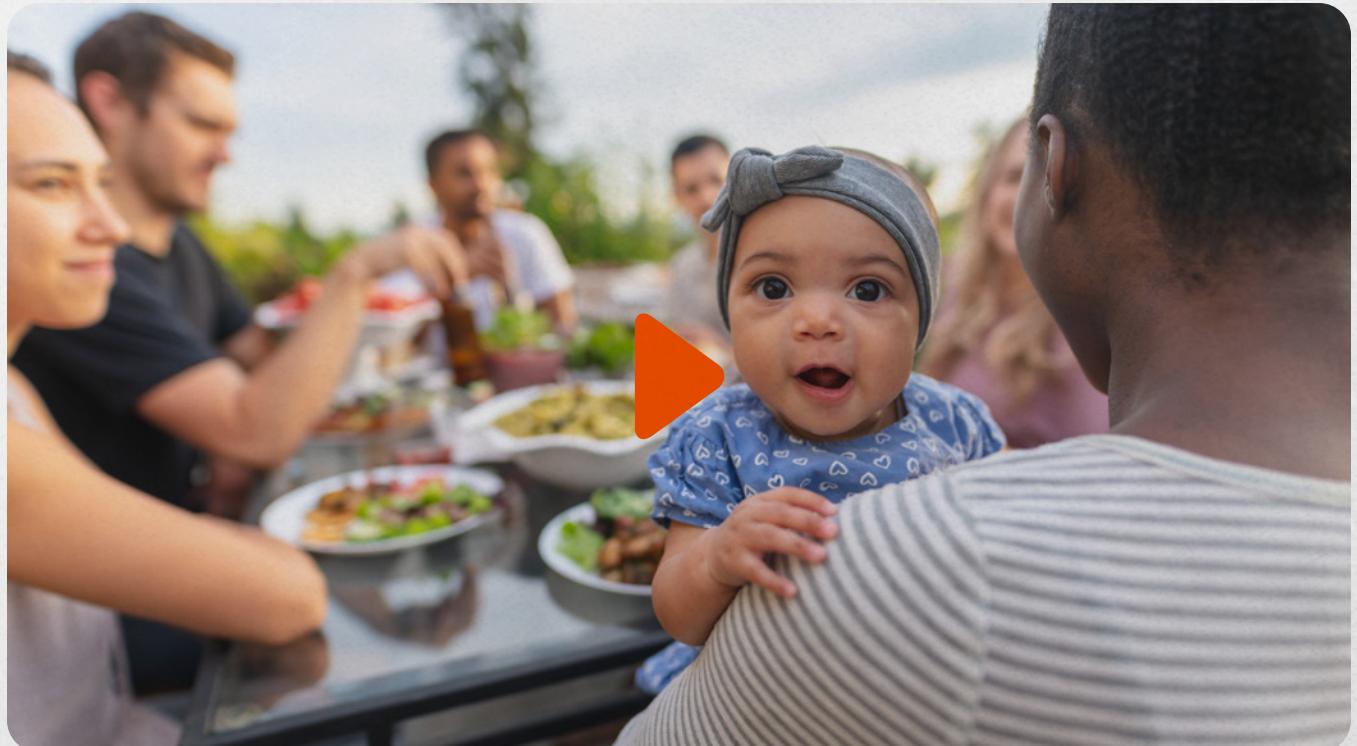
*Please note that stories were shared in various digital platforms, so not all stories are depicted via video.

Welcome.

It is our intention and sincere hope that no matter what part of the ECE system you represent, no matter where your sphere of influence is located, no matter what your role entails, you will find both hope and a relevant call to action within the pages of this playbook.

Each chapter centers powerful stories from families, providers, and ECE leaders sharing the triumphs and challenges of those who have committed to giving children a strong start. These stories sit alongside a synthesis of conversations with the storytellers who generously shared their time and expertise

with us, along with perspectives, gathered from thought leaders in the broader ECE community, on how children, families, and communities are experiencing the ECE system. Responding to these themes, each chapter includes learnings from community efforts to address challenges, which offer important clues as to how we can collectively commit to and advance equity. And finally, each chapter offers a series of practical recommendations for how leaders at the national, state, and local levels can participate in creating progress by working side by side with families and communities.



► WATCH ONLINE: Click on the video to learn more.



Setting Young Children on a Path to Success

In this chapter . . .

Programs that support children's learning and development in the early years make a difference. But for too many of our nation's young children, access to the kinds of programs that deliver on educational and lifelong benefits is uncertain at best. This chapter explores barriers to access found at the historical and sociocultural roots of our ECE system and highlights voices from the field on how we may grow toward a more equitable future.

Overcoming the historical, sociocultural, and political barriers that exclude Black, Indigenous, Latine, and other children of color from high-quality ECE opportunities



All children deserve a strong start in life.

These words are more than just an idea. For young children, having a strong start—that is, having safe, healthy, and productive experiences during the early years—can be a determining factor in how far they'll go in life.¹ The research is clear that the first 2,000 days of a child's life—the time between birth and kindergarten entry—represent the most critical period in human development. During this time, the developing brain grows at an unmatched rate to form its basic architecture and to create the foundation for all future learning and development.²

Research also demonstrates that access to high-quality ECE programming is linked to multiple short- and long-term benefits.

Among them are kindergarten readiness, school achievement, higher lifetime earnings, improved health, and lower chances of involvement with the criminal justice system.³ That's why access to early childhood programs that partner with families in giving children a strong start is so critical, and why the need to improve the availability and accessibility of ECE programming has been an increasingly prominent part of national and state policy discussions in recent years.

Indeed, the early years are a time of enormous potential, but they can also be a time of intense vulnerability for children whose access is limited by racial segregation and intergenerational poverty.

Racial disparities and segregation—once sanctioned by law and now perpetuated by racist policies and practices around housing, education, employment, policing, criminal justice, and other systems—have contributed to disparities in access to early childhood services for children and families of color (particularly Black, Indigenous, and Latine families) and others who experience socioeconomic disadvantages. To this day, systemic racism, intergenerational poverty, and chronic underinvestment in communities of color are the primary factors that keep high-quality ECE opportunities out of reach for too many young children. Part of a collective effort to achieve more equitable outcomes must be a radical expansion of ECE programming that includes targeted strategies to ensure those families who have had the least amount of access can fully participate in programs that see and serve their strengths.

1 Schweinhart, L. J., Montie, J., Xiang, Z., Barnett, W. S., Belfield, C. R., & Nores, M. (2005). *The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study through Age 40*. HighScope Educational Research Foundation.
https://nieer.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/specialsummary_rev2011_02_2.pdf

2 Harvard University, Center on the Developing Child. (n.d.). *Brain architecture*. Retrieved April 6, 2022, from <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/brain-architecture/>

3 Schweinhart, L. J., Montie, J., Xiang, Z., Barnett, W. S., Belfield, C. R., & Nores, M. (2005). *The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study through Age 40*. HighScope Educational Research Foundation.
https://nieer.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/specialsummary_rev2011_02_2.pdf



What communities want you to know

Simply put, when we ensure children have access to ECE, they are more likely to have a strong start and a clear path to success. If not, we risk leaving them behind. And even though the importance of high-quality ECE is well supported by research, the reality is that society has been shaped in ways that significantly undermined access, particularly for Black, Indigenous, Latine, and other children of color. Conversations with providers, families, and local early childhood program and systems leaders lifted up critical considerations for access to high-quality early childhood programming, including:



1.

What are the **historical and sociocultural roots of access disparities** across race, income, and other factors?

LEARN MORE ON PAGE 19

2.

How do **current policies and practices reinforce racial access gaps** and compound inequities in ECE?

LEARN MORE ON PAGE 25

3.

What is the **role of access to ECE in the “bigger picture”** of child, family, and community well-being?

LEARN MORE ON PAGE 33

1 Child care and early learning settings are segregated and exclusionary by design.

An ECE system that segregates and excludes Black and Brown children is not a new phenomenon, and it is certainly not an accident. The issue dates back as far as our modern workforce economy. An important development in the history of ECE, the 1940 federal Lanham Act, created child care programs to enable women to enter the workforce during World War II. After the war, these resources were quickly scaled back and limited to the lowest-income families—for the first time requiring families to “prove” their poverty status in order to access the benefit. A strong case can be made that this shift was driven in part by White working women of means, who preferred to distance their families from low-income Black and Brown families, opting out of publicly funded child care and, in turn, relegating public programming to the poorest communities.⁴ Thus, subsidized child care, at the time and in all of its

future evolutions, became “welfare” in the public eye and has been stigmatized through racist discourse and sparsity of resources.⁵ Just as we have seen in the K-12 education system and in communities across the nation, where programs and resources are segregated along racial lines, they are designed and delivered in ways that favor White communities over communities of color.⁶

Today, unlike K-12 education, ECE is seen by policymakers and the public as a commodity instead of a public good.⁷ As a result, access comes with a high price tag for any family who does not meet very low income thresholds. Even among families who are eligible, utilization of subsidized ECE programming is limited. States are required to offer vouchers to offset the costs of attending fee-based child care, but because of stigmatization, ineffective outreach

and engagement practices, and burdensome determination processes, only about one in six families who are eligible are accessing these supports.⁸ Head Start, Early Head Start, and state pre-K capacity is not nearly sufficient to serve all children whose families are income-eligible.⁹ Meanwhile, the average annual cost of ECE for a single preschool-age child has reached \$8,355 and close to \$11,000 for infants and toddlers.^{10,11}

As a result, children of color—particularly Black and Latine children—are the least likely to be placed in high-quality ECE settings.¹² These realities point to a clear need for redistribution of resources emphasizing equitable access to ECE programming—placing the greatest responsibility on those who control policy and resource distribution at the state and federal levels.

“It’s heartbreaking because what zip code you were born in [determines] what things you can access. I’ve heard statistics that ECE is still one of the most segregated spaces in our city, and Philadelphia is one of the most segregated cities in the country. And so we just kind of keep seeing the same gaps over and over again, affecting the same people.”

—Malkia Singleton Ofori-Ageyku, State Director,
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- 4 Johnson-Staub, C. (2017). *Equity starts early: Addressing racial inequities in child care and early education policy*. Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP). https://www.clasp.org/sites/default/files/publications/2017/12/2017_EquityStartsEarly_0.pdf
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- 6 Katzenbach, I. (2005). *When affirmative action was white: An untold history of racial inequality in twentieth-century America*. WW Norton & Company.
- 7 Wiles, B. (2021). *For the public good: Child care as economic development*. Child Care Aware of Kansas. ks.childcareaware.org/for-the-public-good-child-care-as-economic-development/
- 8 Burgess, K., Campbell, C., Chien, N., Morrissey, T., & Wolf, S. (2017). Income and employment fluctuations among low-income working families and their implications for child care subsidy policy. *ASPE Issue Brief*. US Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation. <https://aspe.hhs.gov/reports/income-employment-fluctuations-among-low-income-working-families-their-implications-child-care>
- 9 Jessen-Howard, S., Falgout, M. K., & Malik, R. (2020). *Costly and unavailable: America lacks sufficient child care supply for infants and toddlers*. Center for American Progress (CAP). <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/costly-unavailable-america-lacks-sufficient-child-care-supply-infants-toddlers/>
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- 11 Jessen-Howard, S., Falgout, M. K., & Malik, R. (2020). *Costly and unavailable: America lacks sufficient child care supply for infants and toddlers*. Center for American Progress (CAP). <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/costly-unavailable-america-lacks-sufficient-child-care-supply-infants-toddlers/>
- 12 Gillispie, C. (2019). *Young learners, missed opportunities: Ensuring that Black and Latino children have access to high-quality state-funded preschool*. The Education Trust. <https://edtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Young-Learners-Missed-Opportunities.pdf>

Available and accessible: The importance of going beyond adding slots to ensure families can access programs

Erike De Veyra's child care wish list was simple—quality, affordable, and walkable or close to public transportation. But even this seemed "too much to ask for" when the time came to start looking. "I remember it was like, 'What do we cut out so we can pay for daycare, or do we just put it on the credit card and just cross our fingers?'"

Add in wait lists, parental guilt feelings ("is it bad that you're not in a program?"), and search fatigue, and finding appropriate care can be an all but insurmountable task. However, there was one program popular in local parent groups, located on the other side of the family's neighborhood. Although the culture of affluence and exclusivity—not to mention the lack of ethnic or racial diversity and others in the community who looked like them (Erike is Filipino and her children are biracial)—were drawbacks, she was still very interested. Ultimately, the program didn't pass the affordability test. She reports, "I was excited to put my child in there, but we just couldn't afford it . . . Unfortunately we were kind of in this sector where we made too much money [to receive the scholarship]. So we had to find something else."



As a parent of young children in search of child care, Erike De Veyra didn't think that an accessible, affordable setting was too much to ask for. But her experience was far more complex and frustrating than she anticipated—and she knows that other families like hers are facing the same challenges. "How do you make [child care] available to really the kids that are in need?"

Eventually, the family was able to find a place they were happy with that was "not too far from our neighborhood." Yes, there were still trade-offs. In the end, Erike wasn't able to check all the boxes on her original wish list, though she did gain more perspective on how profoundly challenging it is for so many parents without economic or racial privilege to have access to satisfactory child care.



► **WATCH ONLINE:** Click on the video to learn more.

What can be done . . .

"The compounded effects of chronically underfunded systems and historical marginalization of generations of children of color, including Black, Indigenous, and Latine children, children of migrant/seasonal farmworkers, and others, make it necessary to approach funding equitably. Indeed, realizing racial equity requires equitable funding that considers historical and current marginalization—including on the basis of race, resource gaps in communities, and disparities in outcomes."¹³

To move forward from here, early childhood leaders and decision-makers must acknowledge our troubled national history surrounding ECE. Together, we must work to deconstruct—with eyes wide open—the ways in which the system was designed to segregate and exclude. While it is true that significant national reform is needed to address the systemic problem of underfunding and its racialized implications, the field can **work within the confines of our current system by reallocating existing funding to address access gaps**. Because the majority of funding for ECE is administered by states under broad federal guidelines, states have enormous potential and responsibility to resolve the significant access disparities that communities of color face. State legislatures control decisions about funding levels and income thresholds for state pre-K and child care subsidies, as well as supplemental investments in related federally funded programs such as home visiting and early intervention. States have the purview to strategically leverage—in ways that either perpetuate or mitigate racial and income disparities in access—Temporary

Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF), and other funding streams; temporary infusions of federal funding; and partnerships with the business and philanthropic communities. Similarly, cities and counties can leverage local funding in powerful ways to mitigate resource and access gaps. Some promising state and local strategies to expand access have emerged over time, including these:

Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships

This strategy converges the strengths of Early Head Start (EHS) and community-based child care to expand the reach of programming for infants and toddlers. Consistent funding from Early Head Start creates stability for child care programs while expanding the reach of comprehensive services that are the hallmark of EHS.¹⁴ Meanwhile, families can choose from a broader range of settings in which to receive services for their infants and toddlers.

13 Meek, S., Iruka, U. U., Allen, R., Yazzie, D. A., Fernandez, V., Catherine, E., McIntosh, K., Gordon, L., Gilliam, W., Hemmeter, M. L., Blevins, D., & Powell, T. (2020). *Start with equity: 14 priorities to dismantle systemic racism in early care and education*. Children's Equity Project. <https://childandfamilysuccess.asu.edu/sites/default/files/2021-12/14-priorities-equity-121621.pdf>

14 US Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Early Childhood Development. (2020). *Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships*. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/ecd/early-learning/ehs-cc-partnerships>

15 Bipartisan Policy Center. (2020). *Family child care networks*. <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/explainer/family-child-care-networks/>

16 Paredes, E., Hernandez, E., Herrera, A., & Tonyan, H. (2020). Putting the "family" in family child care: The alignment between familismo (familism) and family child care providers' descriptions of their work. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 52, 74–85. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2018.04.007>

17 US Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Head Start/ Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center. (2021). *Local early childhood partnerships: Coordinated enrollment across early care and education settings*. <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/local-early-childhood-partnerships/article/coordinated-enrollment-across-early-care-education-settings>

Family child care networks (FCCN)

A comprehensive strategy addressing access, quality, and workforce issues within the early childhood system, FCCNs are designed to strengthen and expand home-based child care. Through business and operational supports, outreach and marketing, quality enhancement, and connections to peers, FCCNs can help create sustainability and drive expansion of this critical sector.¹⁵ This is especially relevant for states and localities looking to overcome racial access gaps, as families of color, immigrant and migrant families, and those whose primary language is other than English are among the most likely to utilize home-based child care.¹⁶

Coordinated eligibility and enrollment

Creating linkages between the array of eligibility-based ECE programs is a way of streamlining families' connections to the setting type that best meets their needs. Often, states or localities create a single application, which reduces the burden on families to navigate the complex eligibility structure and increases the likelihood of successful enrollment. Meanwhile, strategic coordination enables systems to better place children according to their eligibility, which reduces eligibility "bottlenecks."¹⁷



2 Current structures undermine supply and access to high-quality ECE for communities already facing injustice due to socioeconomic factors (e.g., race, income, and place).

Community-based ECE programs (e.g., private preschools, child care centers, and home-based ECE programs) that rely on tuition payments and child care subsidy reimbursements often contend with limited and inconsistent funding. In those common cases, programs must make the difficult decision to get by with less or pass the high cost of child care onto families. In communities where ECE programs rely heavily on child care subsidy funds and cannot demand higher tuition rates from families whose resources are already stretched thin, programs often struggle to keep their doors open. This issue is exacerbated where eligibility criteria and redetermination periods create barriers for families to consistently qualify for the benefit and where providers must clear undue hurdles to receive timely reimbursements. For many providers, this instability makes it difficult to sustain their businesses—leading to program closures and further limiting the availability of programs, with an outsize negative impact on low-income communities and communities of color.

Furthermore, for providers already operating on thin margins, the cost of providing “high-quality” programming, as defined by the state quality rating and improvement system (QRIS), is often prohibitive and may include racial or other biases in definitions of quality or other aspects of regulation. Meanwhile, many states have policies that link higher QRIS ratings with higher child care subsidy reimbursement rates to providers. While this tiered reimbursement structure is intended to incentivize quality, it also has the effect of deepening resource gaps between providers in higher-income communities and those in lower-income communities.¹⁸ This system design reinforces the troubling reality that socioeconomic background (e.g., race, income, and place) determines programs’ access to vital resources, which determines the breadth of opportunities that families have to access high-quality ECE settings. The reality is that QRIS and other pillars of early childhood systems—which have not been designed for equity and have fundamentally failed to support equitable access—must ultimately be deconstructed and rebuilt if we are to address the problem of access at scale.

“I think it’s going to require us really being willing to start over, as hard as that might be. And that’s going to require courage—all kinds of courage—to begin to do that. We don’t like the notion of starting over or blowing things up. Because oftentimes we were left with a sense of, ‘we did something wrong.’ You know, it really is about, we can’t build . . . on top of something that doesn’t work or try to patch it together with some masking tape and expect that we’re going to get there. We’ve really got to re-examine and start over.”

—Carol Austin, Executive Director, First Up, Philadelphia, PA



18 Public Sector Consultants (2016, September). *Building a better child care system: What Michigan can do to help more parents and children access quality care*. Michigan Department of Education Office of Great Start. https://www.michigan.gov/documents/mde/Building_a_Better_Child_Care_System_534366_7.pdf

Separate and unequal: Stark differences between ECE programming available in predominantly White and Black communities

"At first I didn't see it." LaNeice Cole recalls a profound shift in perspective. She had switched her son from a child care provider serving primarily people of color to one serving a majority White population. Although it took a moment for the disparities to sink in, the difference was stark.

Now there were animal visits, chicken eggs hatching in class, splash time, holiday concerts, and more. "I just felt that . . . the school [serving predominantly White people] was more focused on education where the school [serving predominantly people of color] was more focused on discipline."

That's not to say that her son's first child care was a negative experience. The provider had good basics in place—safety, food and nutrition, crafts, education instruction such as the ABCs, and so on. There was just a lot more his second, majority White-serving child care setting could provide beyond that. And it came down to resources.

Her first provider accepted a child care subsidy, and the second provider did not. LaNeice sees



LaNeice Cole, the mother of a young Black son in Philadelphia and a supervising advocate for a local home visitation program, reflects on the disparities in quality between programs based on the racial makeup of the learning community. She notes that when she was first exposed to a child care program serving predominantly White children, "I then realized what my children were missing."

this impacting already under-resourced Black communities in Philadelphia even harder. "You're less likely to be able to put your child in this [predominantly White] school . . . and many of the schools that do take [the] subsidy . . . [do] not have the curriculum that's needed for them to be exposed to an extensive education."



► **WATCH ONLINE:** Click on the video to learn more.

What can be done . . .

"Without immediate action to bolster child care, too many families of color will have to choose between putting food on the table and providing their children with the close supervision and enrichment they need."¹⁹

Now, more than ever, as families of color bear an outsized burden caused by the loss of child care and economic upheaval of COVID-19, states and localities must **address the ways in which current policies and practices have created barriers to equitably building the supply of ECE settings in keeping with the growing demand.**²⁰ While there is no single strategy to undo the harm of these problematic systems across all contexts, the tide of research, discourse, and policy has certainly begun to turn. Increasingly, the voices of the providers, families, and communities most impacted, calling for change, have captured the attention of state leaders. Indeed, it has long been clear to those "on the ground" that policies and practices once billed as "solutions" now stand, large and obsolete, in the way of progress. Today, in the face of an ECE system that is more fragmented and inaccessible than ever, leaders are being called on to deconstruct current policies and practices and make way for bold steps. To do so will require the willingness to listen and learn from communities and build on the many ways communities have stepped up when formal systems have failed to provide adequate, affordable ECE opportunities. Building on initial wins coming from strategic use of state-administered funding, federal investments in state infrastructure, and public-private partnerships, states and localities can leverage these same structures to pilot strategies that are truly innovative and potentially game-changing for communities that have been most marginalized within our existing system. Potential strategies to consider include these:

Investing in family, friend, and neighbor care (FFN)

FFN—with children regularly cared for "informally" by neighbors, family members, and other trusted members of their communities—has clear benefits for families of color, those who have immigrated, and those who speak a home language other than English. For many families, cultural and linguistic familiarity is a high priority when choosing who will teach and care for their children, as it leads to more culturally responsive care and more peace of mind for families.²¹ Although state systems and legislation meet FFN care with varying attitudes ranging from modest gestures of support, to lack of recognition, to outright criminalization, in the context of a critical national shortage of formal child care, this sector is undeniably an essential part of the ECE system. As a small step in the right direction, states and localities can work toward more inclusive practices that engage FFN providers and support them as the pillars of the workforce economy that they are.

Community-based eligibility for child care subsidies

Policies that punish families for fluctuating income and employment status, rely on burdensome application and redetermination processes, and create steep benefits cliffs are among a myriad of reasons why child care subsidies have been ineffective at connecting families to ECE programs at the scale that is needed. Community-based eligibility has the potential to reduce the burden on families and on administering agencies by making this resource available based on community of residence instead of individual family income. As such, this strategy can increase stability for programs and encourage supply building within priority communities, while offering continuity of supports to families as they work to improve their economic status.

"[Communities] see the richness, they're on the ground in these communities, with their families, with their children, and they have answers. They have answers. But are we willing to listen to them? Are we willing to ask and listen to them and receive what comes out of their mouth and try to incorporate them to this thing where it is inclusive of all children and families?"

—Devonya Govan Hunt, Executive Director, Black Child Development Institute—Charlotte Affiliate, Charlotte, NC

Strategic messaging to engage "nontraditional" partners

Within every state and locality, there are a broad range of entities working toward their own goals and interests and influencing the web of policies, practices, and realities that form the fabric of our society. Just because these entities are not primarily focused on young children does not mean they have no stake. In the wake of COVID-19, we are more aware than ever of how important ECE is as a key pillar in our social and economic infrastructure—and of how fragile this pillar has become. This stark reality has not escaped the notice of employers, the business and economic development communities, chambers of commerce, and others who hold differing institutional advantages and influence from the traditional actors in ECE. By seeking alignment of goals and values, ECE leaders and other stakeholders can work together to build power and resources for change.

19 Novoa, C. (2020). *How child care disruptions hurt parents of color most*. Center for American Progress (CAP). <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/child-care-disruptions-hurt-parents-color>

20 Ibid.
21 Paredes, E., Hernandez, E., Herrera, A., & Tonyan, H. (2020). Putting the "family" in family child care: The alignment between familismo (familism) and family child care providers' descriptions of their work. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 52, 74–85. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2018.04.007>

COVID-19: A devastating blow to a fragile system

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, 53% of states reported a decline in center-based child care capacity, and an alarming 79% reported a decline in family child care between 2018 and 2019. In the months and years following the onset of COVID-19, uncertainty, rampant job loss, and economic upheaval have accelerated closures—both temporary and permanent—across ECE programs. As of July 2020, 35% of centers and 21% of family child care settings remained closed. While this has impacted children across all racial and socioeconomic groups, it has had the most pronounced impact on Black children. At the height of the pandemic, 45% of Black children under the age of 5 had been separated from their ECCE settings by program closures, compared with 30% of White children.

Sources: ChildCare Aware of America (Fall 2020), *Picking Up the Pieces: Building a Better Child Care System Post COVID-19*, <https://www.childcareaware.org/picking-up-the-pieces/#access>

Annie E. Casey Foundation (2022), *Kids Count Data Center*, <https://datacenter.kidscount.org/>

National League of Cities, Fort Worth Partnership: Becoming an “early learning city” in Fort Worth, TX

The city of Fort Worth is notoriously segregated. While many (predominantly White) communities have prospered within the oil industry, many communities of color are cut off from access to resources—both economically by limited means and physically by highways and structures that prevent access to the more thriving parts of the city. As an advocacy and systems-building organization committed to equitable access to ECE in the context of broader city-level change, the National League of Cities (NLC) partnered with Fort Worth to build it up as a national example of an “early learning city.” From their partnership came a citywide early learning alliance that has provided a consistent voice for ECE and continues to bring substantive change in the local ECE landscape. Several factors have been identified as key to this initiative’s success:

Building relationships with decision-makers based on common interests

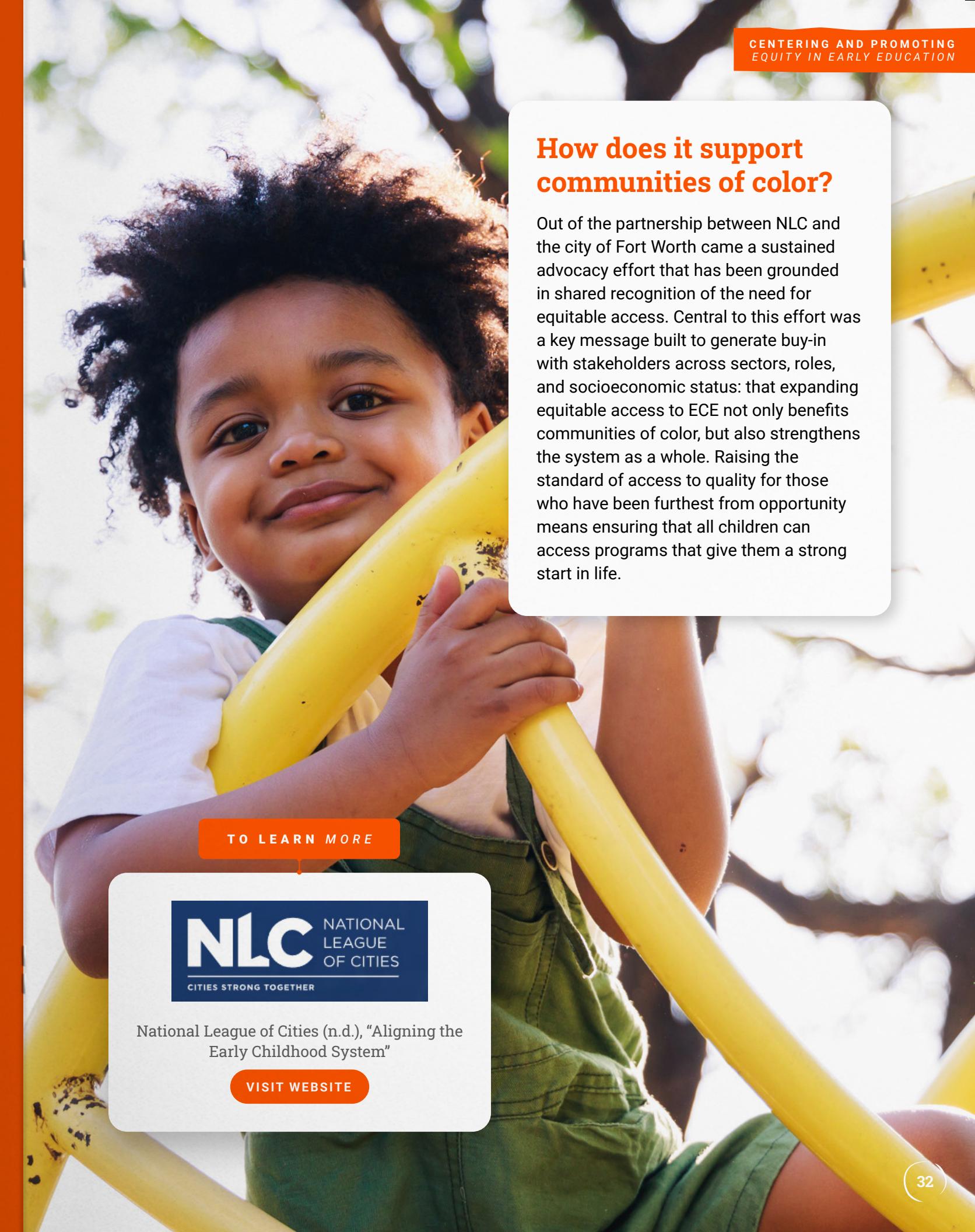
In the case of Fort Worth, it was useful to engage the mayor and city council by leading with the implications of ECE on the economic prosperity of the community as a whole. NLC made a compelling and research-backed case that investments in ECE have the potential for manifold economic returns.

Following the lead of parents and community members

NLC supported the early learning alliance in intentionally centering the voices of families and communities in their efforts—making way for those most impacted by access gaps to name the challenges and participate in generating solutions.

Engaging the business and economic development communities as key stakeholders

By emphasizing the short- and long-term impacts of high-quality child care and early learning on the workforce economy, the council gained access to additional resources and influence to advance the work of the early learning council.



TO LEARN MORE



National League of Cities (n.d.), “Aligning the Early Childhood System”

VISIT WEBSITE

How does it support communities of color?

Out of the partnership between NLC and the city of Fort Worth came a sustained advocacy effort that has been grounded in shared recognition of the need for equitable access. Central to this effort was a key message built to generate buy-in with stakeholders across sectors, roles, and socioeconomic status: that expanding equitable access to ECE not only benefits communities of color, but also strengthens the system as a whole. Raising the standard of access to quality for those who have been furthest from opportunity means ensuring that all children can access programs that give them a strong start in life.

3 While ensuring equitable access to ECE is an important step, it is not a “silver bullet.”

In the unfortunate story of how Black and Brown children and their families have experienced the consequences of racism within society and the systems that support it, access to ECE is only one chapter. While seminal research on the impacts of high-quality early learning settings has led to increased supply and access, this issue sits among a series of complex and interlocking social factors that impact children’s educational outcomes and overall well-being. Living in poverty—a profound social evil that affects nearly three Black children for every one White child—has well-documented impacts on early childhood outcomes. Economic strain and social stigmatization are correlated to a number of challenges, including domestic and community violence, food insecurity, inadequate housing, and the pervasive stress of family hardship. These circumstances undermine children’s development and learning by impeding attention, memory, executive functioning skills, and overall school readiness.^{22 23 24 25 26 27}

Generations of exposure to racism in all facets of society have deeply harmed young children and eroded the trust of communities of color in institutions, including ECE programming, as families labor to protect their children—their most beloved and valuable assets.

As part of the effort to expand access, there is much work to do to reconcile harm done to communities and allow for holistic, community-driven solutions.



22 Koball, H., & Jiang, Y. (2018). *Basic facts about low-income children*. National Center for Children in Poverty. http://nccp.org/publications/pub_1194.html

23 Omidyar Network. (2019). *Big ideas, little learners: Early childhood trends report*, 2019. https://omidyar.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Omidyar-Network_Big-Ideas-Little-Learners-2019.pdf

24 Ibid.

25 Barbarin, O. A., & Aikens, N. (2015). Overcoming the educational disadvantages of poor children: How much do teacher preparation, workload, and expectations matter. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 85(2), 101–105. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/ort0000060>

26 Lisonbee, J. A., Mize, J., Payne, A. L., & Granger, D. A. (2008). Children’s cortisol and the quality of teacher–child relationships in child care. *Child Development* 79(6), 1818–1832. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/19037952>

27 Harvard University, Center on the Developing Child. (2015). *Toxic stress*. <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/toxic-stress/>

What can be done . . .

“[Early learning outcomes] clearly demonstrate that the results of high-quality early childhood education may be significant—but still not sufficient. Findings . . . highlight the fact that multiple strategies must be employed to assure a meaningful early education for African American children, strategies that truly raise the bar for success and equalize the educational playing field.”²⁸

Strategies for increasing ECE access must recognize that society has been shaped in ways that have created and reinforced profound access and outcome gaps by race, income, and place. The ECE field is called on to address the root causes of access gaps and the barriers that are common across the multiple social systems that impact young children and their families in the early years. Recognizing this, many communities have turned to a collective impact approach, in which community leaders across multiple sectors, from health care to economic development to school districts to faith-based organizations, work as a coalition to reinforce one another’s individual missions and orient efforts toward a shared

vision and set of goals for their community. Early childhood funders and decision-makers can **promote community-based collective impact initiatives that place ECE within a web of child and family supports**—creating a “safety net” under the community so strong that no child or family can fall through. Collective impact organizations focused on early childhood are increasingly working in communities to support access to ECE and other birth-to-5 services that strengthen the health, learning, and vitality of families during the early years. Emergent learnings from early childhood collective impact organizations point to five guiding principles:²⁹

28 Rashid, H. M. (2013). Significant—but not sufficient: Quality early childhood education and the development of young African American boys. *Being Black is not a risk factor: A strengths-based look at the state of the Black child*, 28–31. National Black Child Development Institute. https://www.nbcdi.org/sites/default/files/resource-files/Being%20Black%20Is%20Not%20a%20Risk%20Factor_0.pdf

29 Tilhou, R., Eckhoff, A., & Rose, B. (2021). Collective impact organization for early childhood: Increasing access to quality care by uniting community sectors. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 49, 111–123. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-020-01047-3>

Advocacy for early childhood health and education

Through the power of coalition, community groups have been effective at using their collective voice to elevate family and program stories and to advocate for change at the city, county, or state level.

Strategic partnerships based on common goals

Often, many of the issues that are relevant to the ECE access conversation are being addressed by various community-based organizations. Early childhood collective impact recognizes that the results of these efforts could be strengthened by a cohesive, streamlined agenda.

Planning for collaboration

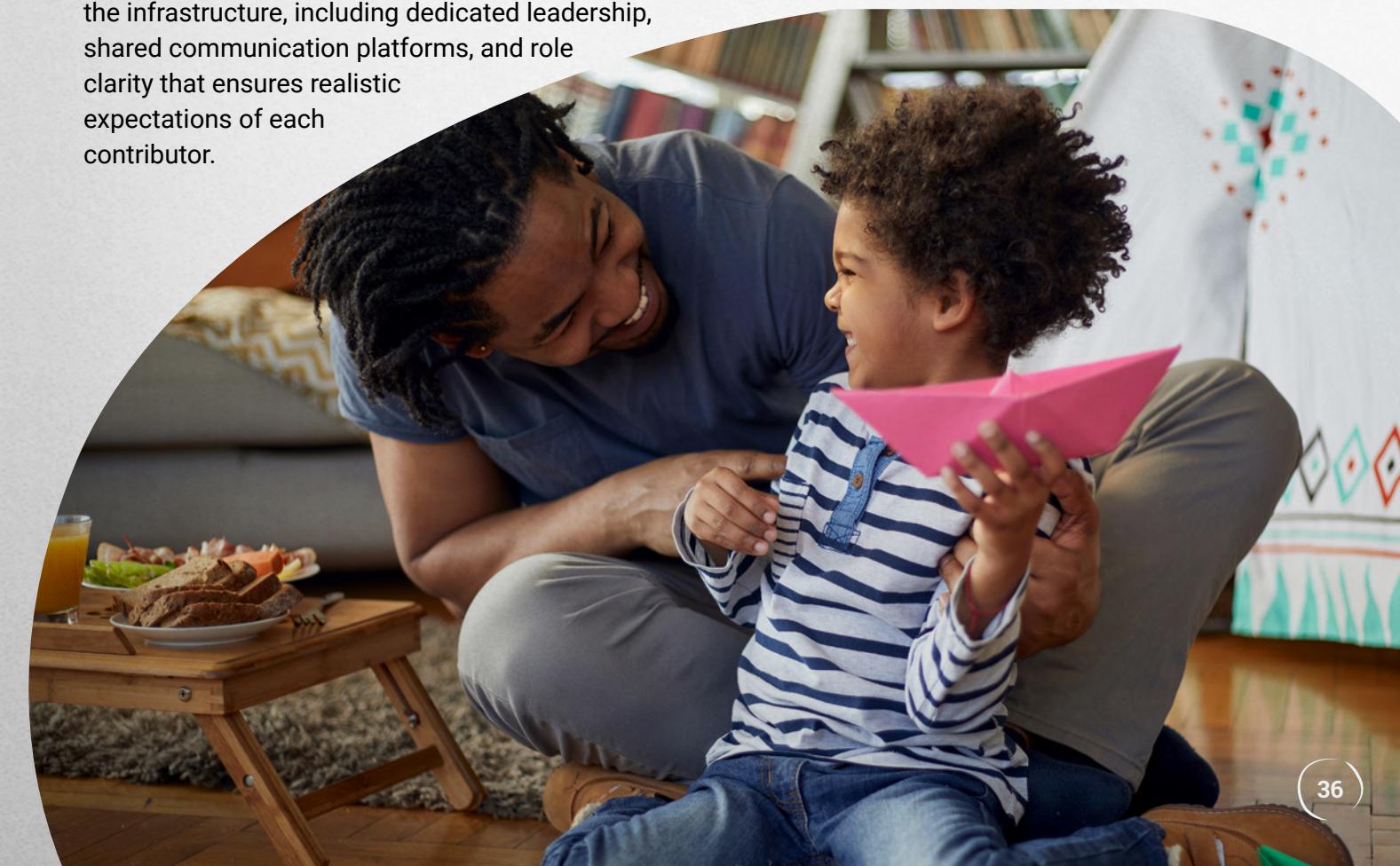
Working across multiple organizations, each with its own mission and funder-specific benchmarks, is not without challenges. It is essential to create the infrastructure, including dedicated leadership, shared communication platforms, and role clarity that ensures realistic expectations of each contributor.

Integrated resources and expertise

Reaching beyond the “usual suspects” in ECE introduces new perspectives, broader reach and influence, and opportunities to share or co-create resources that benefit families in multiple ways at once.

Systematization of efforts

The most basic function of a system is to streamline efforts toward an outcome. Successful early childhood collective impact initiatives create systems to support service providers and community members alike—for example, organizing listings of child and family events in the community to share with families via social media, or creating a hub for families to get connected to early childhood services for which they qualify.



Early Matters Chattanooga: Early childhood collective impact in Chattanooga, TN

Early Matters Chattanooga is a citywide coalition made up of more than 20 role-diverse organizations. These organizations span the early learning, child and family health, business, economic development, and philanthropic sectors, among others, and come together with the shared intention to make Chattanooga—Hamilton County the best place in the nation for a child to be born and raised. The work is driven by three primary working groups focused on key levers for change at the city-county level:

Access to quality child care

Building on the stated commitment of local leadership to address the child care shortfall writ large, the working group has recently taken on a comprehensive needs assessment to identify inequities in access to ECE programming. This effort calls leaders to implement supply-building strategies that not only increase slots, but also address the inequitable distribution of programming and other barriers that have undermined access for socioeconomically disadvantaged communities.

Advocacy

Leveraging the power of community coalitions, the advocacy working group works to synthesize multiple stakeholder voices to call for child-and-family-centered policymaking at the local and state levels. Advocacy efforts emphasize data-based messages, along with the stories of families and providers.

Early childhood health equity

Recognizing the correlation between health and early learning outcomes for young children, the working group focuses on increasing access to high-quality health care for expecting and parenting families. This includes building the presence and capacity of health care providers in communities of color while addressing issues of racial bias that too often pervade the health care system.

How does it support communities of color?

Early Matters recognizes that equitable access to the full range of birth-to-age-5 programs and services is a key factor that leads to thriving families and communities. Their stance is that advancing equity means undoing the conditions that have historically prevented many children from reaching their full potential based on race, income, and other social factors. Over the past several years, Early Matters' advocacy and systems-building work has elevated data to indicate where the current system has fallen short for historically marginalized communities, and prioritized strategies to mitigate the gaps.



TO LEARN MORE

CHATTANOOGA 2.0

Early Matters (n.d.), "What We Do"

VISIT WEBSITE

Reflection corner

The following are a few questions to consider from your vantage point on the issue of access to high-quality ECE opportunity. Whether you represent a state agency, philanthropic organization, advocacy group, or other critical

stakeholder in ECE, you have the power to participate in progress toward more equitable access. Use these questions individually or with other leaders in your organization to identify and lean into your role in this important work.

What specific/local legacies of racism have contributed to access gaps in your state, city, or community? In what ways do you see history repeating itself or manifesting in current system realities?

In what ways do the choices made about policies and structures—even “well-intentioned” ones—reinforce the status quo and prevent progress toward more equitable access to high-quality ECE?

What alternative choices or commitments on the part of leaders in your state, city, or community would make a difference? What are the key policy levers for raising the standard of access?

What perspectives and voices need a more prominent place in the access conversation? What additional insights, stories, influence, and expertise could affect more progress—both nationally and in your state, city, or community?

Reflect on your own leadership role within the ECE system. What influence do you have (interpersonal, organizational, institutional) in the effort to support equity in access to ECE programming?



Resources

For additional information and perspectives on equity in access to high-quality ECE, check out these resources from other leaders in the field.



Center for the Study of Social Policy

Ideas into Action

Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP). *Principles for Anti-racist Policymaking* (2020).

This brief outlines key principles designed to guide policymakers and advocates in making and implementing anti-racist policy, including a recommended mindset shift about which families “deserve” support in accessing ECE programs.

[LEARN MORE](#)

THE HECHINGER REPORT

Hechinger Report. *Opinion: We Can No Longer Afford to Neglect Child Care Providers and Our Littlest Learners* (2022).

This piece highlights the urgency of “fixing” the sweeping problems with our ECE system in light of post-COVID economic rebuilding efforts. Authors Lynette Fraga and Renée Boynton-Jarrett offer perspectives on how instability in access have widened the early childhood opportunity gap along lines of race, income, and place, and they prescribe strategic policy solutions for early childhood leaders at the state and local levels.

[LEARN MORE](#)

URBAN INSTITUTE

Urban Institute. *Segregated from the Start* (2019).

This analysis of ECE access trends nationwide seeks to characterize the segregation we see in ECE programs. The authors posit that ECE is even more segregated than K-12 education, and they offer straightforward data to demonstrate this reality and the harm it has caused to communities of color.

[LEARN MORE](#)

NEW AMERICA

New America. *Current Financing for Early Care and Education: Affordability & Equitable Access*.

This report offers an analysis of current patterns of family use and spending when it comes to early care and education as a way of understanding the shortcomings of the current financing structure. The report synthesizes findings of multiple studies and presents key questions for consideration by policymakers who could choose to effect change in the ways ECE is supported in states and across the nation.

[LEARN MORE](#)

LEARNING POLICY INSTITUTE

Research. Action. Impact.

Learning Policy Institute. *Building a National Early Childhood Education System That Works* (2021).

This white paper highlights the reality that despite the well-researched benefits of ECE, many children lack access to high-quality early learning experiences before kindergarten. It challenges the notion of public investment in program quality within a system where children lack access in the first place and identifies policy priorities to inform the work of state and national ECE leaders.

[LEARN MORE](#)

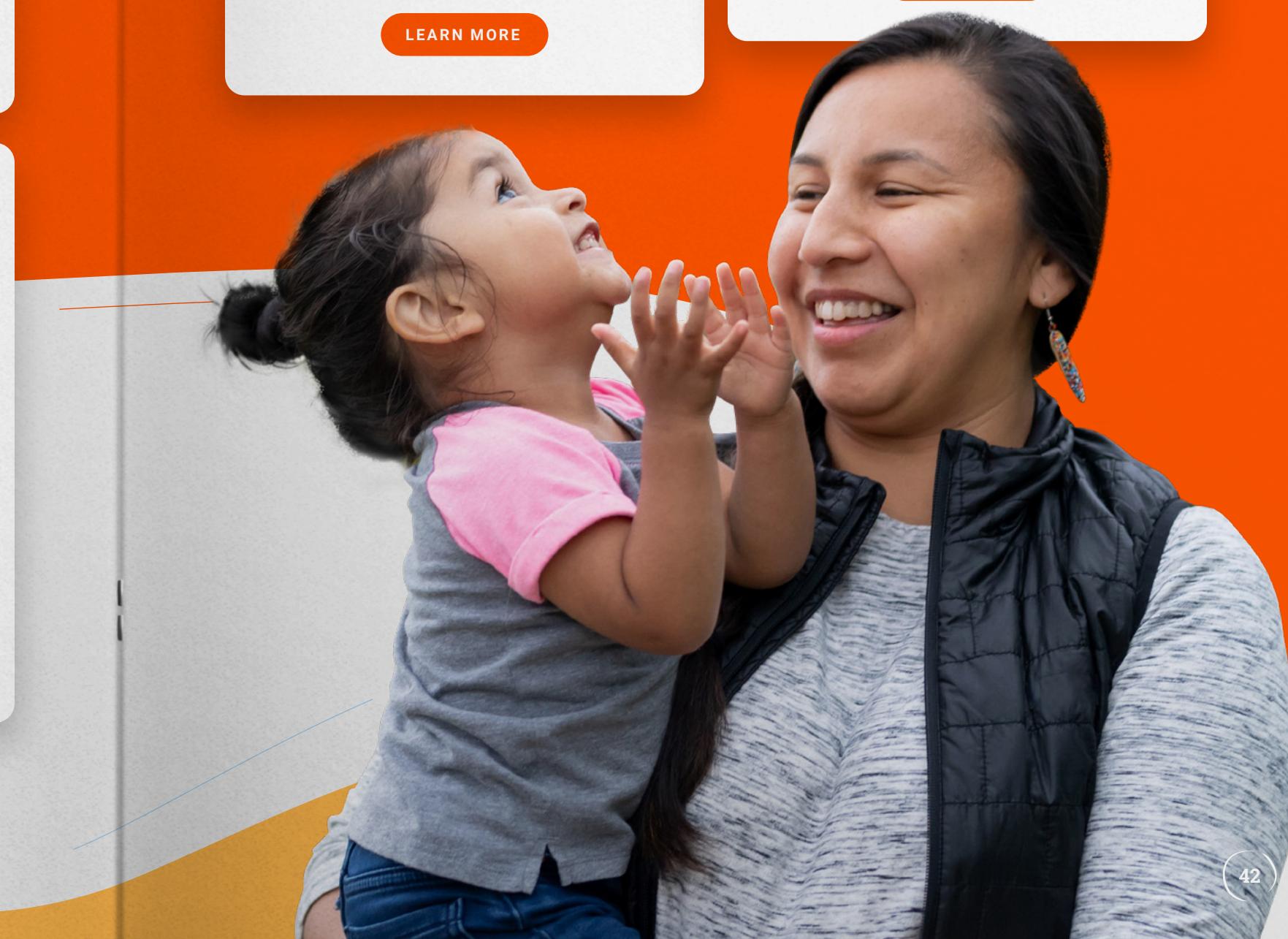
NIEER

NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR
EARLY EDUCATION RESEARCH

National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER). *State of Preschool Yearbook (2003–2021)*.

This yearly publication tracks state efforts to expand the availability of ECE programs and other key indicators of ECE system viability. The yearbook provides up-to-date data to inform policymakers, advocates, researchers, and other early childhood leaders.

[LEARN MORE](#)



Where Early Childhood Education Meets Race and Culture

Pathways forward
for culturally
responsive education



In this chapter . . .

Culturally responsive education has been defined as an approach to engaging young learners by centering their languages, cultural backgrounds, and everyday experiences in the classroom. When early childhood programs are able to connect with children and their families in this way, they foster interactions that “are personally meaningful, build purpose, counter stereotypes, and develop their ability to connect across lines of difference.”¹

All early learning occurs in the context of language, culture, and community.

Children are more likely to reach their full potential when these and other aspects of their identity are valued. From birth, young children are learning about themselves and their social identity, which shapes how they experience and interact in the world.² It is well established in research that all children benefit when ECE programming respects young children's diverse characteristics and integrates them into learning experiences. ECE experiences that help children understand and appreciate differences in themselves and others engender a strong sense of belonging. This ultimately benefits their well-being and creates a supportive climate for early learning. Beyond the classroom, the benefits of programming that celebrates human difference extend to families and communities—fostering meaningful partnerships that enable shared power in decision-making on behalf of young children, which leads to stronger early childhood outcomes.

While there might be broad consensus about its importance, the ECE field has had many ways to refer to and approach culturally responsive education.

Terms such as "culturally responsive teaching," "culturally responsive practice," or even "culturally responsive pedagogy" might come to mind. By any name, culturally responsive approaches often involve working to embed and affirm key aspects of children's identity—across race, ethnicity, language, and more—into the curriculum, daily interactions, and overall mission and operations of early childhood programs. This contributes to creating an environment where young children are able to develop positive self-esteem, stronger confidence, and overall social-emotional well-being. Children with these strengths have been shown to be more open to a variety of human differences, more likely to be optimistic, and more likely to do well in school and beyond.³

1 New America. (2020, December 14). *Culturally responsive education resources for federal, state, and local stakeholders*. <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/collections/culturally-responsive-education>

2 LeeKennan, D. (2017, November 27). What is identity development? *Highs and Lows of Parenting Blog*. Program for Early Parent Support (PEPS). <https://blog.peps.org/2017/11/14/what-is-identity-development>

3 Pulido-Tobiassen, D., & Gonzalez-Mena, J. (1999). *Supporting healthy identity development: Excerpt from A place to begin: Working with parents on issues of diversity*. Teaching for Change. https://www.teachingforchange.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/ec_supportinghealthyidentity_english.pdf

4 Van Ausdale, D., & Feagin, J. (2001). *The first R: How children learn race and racism*. Rowman & Littlefield.

In reality, though, early childhood programs and the systems supporting them currently have a long way to go to fully honor the diverse racial and cultural identities of young children.

Research tells us that by age 2, children begin internalizing and expressing messages—whether affirming or destructive—about human difference, including attitudes about themselves and people different from themselves. When

negative messages are reinforced, met with shaming responses, or ignored in a classroom environment, this can lay the foundation for negative feelings about self and others.

Uninterrupted, these experiences can discourage participation in school and fuel biased, prejudicial, and discriminatory behavior.⁴ Recognizing this as a pervasive and fundamental issue, early childhood systems leaders have a critical role in directing resources to improve practice, drive policy change, and set clear research agendas that focus on reducing bias in ECE settings. There are opportunities to address the barriers that exist within the current early childhood settings, as well as to elevate solutions that are shown to be impactful, especially for young children of color.



What communities want you to know



Indeed, while we have growing research to support culturally responsive education, there is still so much more to learn from families, local programs, and communities that have experienced or established innovative practices. Stories told of local initiatives offer authentic perspectives and powerful approaches to acknowledging culture as a key component in early development and learning. These insights can both strengthen culturally responsive education practices within ECE settings and be used to implement strategies to address inequities “upstream” that systemically threaten the learning experiences and well-being of young children of color and the adults who care for them.⁵ Conversations with families, providers, and early childhood leaders in communities offered nuanced perspectives on what works and what matters most, along with opportunities to explore the following considerations:

5 Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University. (n.d.). *How racism can affect child development*. Retrieved April 6, 2022, from <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/racism-and-ecd>

1.

What is the prevalence and impact of **racial and cultural match** between young children and their ECE providers?

LEARN MORE ON PAGE 49

2.

How does **racial bias against Black, Indigenous, Latine, and other children of color** impact their experiences and outcomes in ECE settings?

LEARN MORE ON PAGE 53

3.

What are the **implications of mainstream (White-centric) curriculum** and instructional approaches?

LEARN MORE ON PAGE 59

4.

How can ECE programs leverage principles of culturally responsive education to better meet the **needs of dual language learner (DLL) children**?

LEARN MORE ON PAGE 65

5.

How can state and local **early childhood systems support culturally responsive education** and standardize it as a practice in ECE?

LEARN MORE ON PAGE 73

1 Cultural match between child and teacher matters but is not always experienced.

There is mounting evidence that suggests that, for children of color and DLL children, there are links between teacher-child race or language and young children's outcomes. While culturally responsive education is important for all early learning settings, teachers and caregivers who reflect children's racial identity or who speak the child's home language (the language children hear at home) provide added and important benefits.⁶ For children of color, teachers who share the children's racial and/or linguistic identity are often able to pull from their own personal cultural experiences to recognize children's needs and strengths. Culturally matched teachers are often better equipped to recognize, celebrate, and foster children's racial, cultural, and linguistic identities. As a result, this cultural match between teachers and children has been associated with higher engagement in learning, sustained motivation, and enhanced social skills.⁷ It also has been shown to positively impact teachers' perceptions of children—with reported social and academic gains.⁸ And research shows that when families and providers speak the same language, there

is increased family engagement and improved communication.⁹

Despite this compelling evidence, there is currently a misalignment between the demographic characteristics of children and those of teachers and others who care for children as part of the early childhood workforce. For example, a recent study showed that White women represent 63% of center-based staff and 79% of early childhood center directors, while 50% of children under the age of 5 identify as Black, Indigenous, or other people of color.¹⁰ Stories from families mirror these findings, as families' shared experiences emphasize the benefits of interacting with early childhood providers who look like them and speak the same languages. Families describe invaluable and positive experiences when early childhood providers have firsthand experience of what it's like to have part of their shared identity. Families also name the significant barriers faced when a mismatch results in lack of representation and trust between families and their ECE providers.



6 Paschall, K., Madill, R., & Halle, T. (2020). *Demographic characteristics of the early care and education workforce: Comparisons with child and community characteristics*. Child Trends. <https://www.childtrends.org/publications/demographic-characteristics-of-the-early-care-and-education-workforce-comparisons-with-child-and-community-characteristics>

7 Rasheed, D. S., Brown, J. L., Doyle, S. L., & Jennings, P. A. (2020). The effect of teacher-child race/ethnicity matching and classroom diversity on children's socioemotional and academic skills. *Child Development*, 91(1), e597–e618. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/31231803>

8 Downer, J. T., Goble, P., Myers, S. S., & Pianta, R. C. (2016). Teacher-child racial/ethnic match within pre-kindergarten classrooms and children's early school adjustment. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 37(4), 26–38. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0885200616300254>

9 Paschall, K., Madill, R., & Halle, T. (2020). *Demographic characteristics of the early care and education workforce: Comparisons with child and community characteristics*. Child Trends. <https://www.childtrends.org/publications/demographic-characteristics-of-the-early-care-and-education-workforce-comparisons-with-child-and-community-characteristics>

10 Ibid. <https://www.childtrends.org/publications/demographic-characteristics-of-the-early-care-and-education-workforce-comparisons-with-child-and-community-characteristics>

What can be done . . .

"I've been exactly where these [mothers of young children] have been so that's why I say always try to . . . lift some parents up too. They be going through it too, especially right now. This is crazy with what is going on in the world."

—Black early childhood teacher (quoted in *Family Child Care Educators' Perspectives on Leaving, Staying, and Entering the Field*, Erikson Institute)

As families and local early childhood providers alike work to overcome these challenges, helpful community-driven solutions have come to light. Some local actions have included states taking proactive steps to **recruit, hire, and retain ECE teachers and leaders who reflect the diversity of children and families served**. In doing so, it is important to acknowledge the benefits—particularly for children whose racial and cultural identities have been historically marginalized—of seeing and interacting with teachers, caregivers, and leaders who look and speak like these children and their families. There have also been meaningful steps taken to increase the number of early childhood providers who speak the languages of children and families served. Intentional efforts to support racial, cultural, and linguistic match between ECE providers and families create opportunities to do the following:

Build children's self-esteem and positive sense of identity

When the adults who care for young children recognize and reinforce the inherent strengths,

value, and beauty associated with their cultural communities of belonging, this positive sense of self becomes an invaluable tool for learning throughout children's lives.

Foster communication and trust between families and care providers

When families know that their children are placed with providers who recognize and positively reinforce children's racial, cultural, and linguistic identities, it gives families peace of mind and encourages partnership.

Overcome language and cultural barriers that often prevent families from accessing desired services

When families experience ECE providers who look like the families and speak their languages, it creates a sense of belonging that encourages them to ask questions and get involved in deeper ways.

"We are a Black family—two working parents with two young children . . .

The provider who cares for our children is a Black woman who owns and operates a . . . program in her home with her husband and two older sons. With this provider, our son spent 3 years thriving in an environment that was no different than home.

Everyday he saw and experienced family, togetherness, enjoyed home-cooked nutritious meals, and learned and communicated with children that looked like him and shared similar experiences. This is an example of culturally responsive child care that embodies contextual learning."

—Evelyn Stevens, Parent, Philadelphia, PA



2 Young children are often targeted by racial and cultural bias, and this has a direct and negative impact on their learning and development.

Biases held and communicated by adults—as well as those embedded in the organizational practices and policies that govern institutions—lead to marginalization of groups based on identity and impact children’s learning and outcomes. Preschool expulsions, and particularly the disproportionate expulsion of Black boys, constitute one example that has gained attention in recent years. A recent study examined the potential role of preschool educators’ implicit biases as a partial explanation of disparities in preschool expulsions. Findings revealed that when expecting challenging behaviors, teachers gazed longer at Black children, especially Black boys.¹¹ Even when early childhood programs are working toward creating more diverse and inclusive environments, they do not free children from the

very real and prevalent biases that are present in our society. There is a chronic “wear and tear” of racism that children experience from being forced to constantly cope with systemic oppression and everyday discrimination that leads to lifelong impacts on learning, behaviors, and both physical and mental health.¹² Stories from community members offer examples of how biases and prejudice contribute to devaluing children’s and families’ cultural identities and result in children receiving messages that their identities are not valued within their early learning communities.



11 Gilliam, W. S., Maupin, A. N., Reyes, C. R., Accavitti, M., & Shic, F. (2016, September 28). *Do early educators’ implicit biases regarding sex and race relate to behavior expectations and recommendations of preschool expulsions and suspensions?* Yale University Child Study Center.

https://medicine.yale.edu/childstudy/policy-and-social-innovation/zigler/publications/preschool%20implicit%20bias%20policy%20brief_final_9_26_276766_54643_v1.pdf

12 Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University. (n.d.). *How racism can affect child development*. Retrieved April 6, 2022, from <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/racism-and-ecd>

What can be done . . .

“Differences do not create bias. Children learn prejudice from prejudice—not from learning about human diversity. It is how people respond to differences that teaches bias and fear.”

Louise Derman-Sparks, coauthor of Anti-bias Education for Our Children and Ourselves

At the foundation of culturally responsive education is the ability to identify and address biases—both those held individually and those embedded within programs and systems. Being a culturally responsive educator and leader requires committing to a personal and ongoing journey. Everyone holds biases and sees the world and the people in it through a “lens” based on their own experiences and intersections. Becoming a culturally responsive educator or early childhood leader requires challenging oneself to surface deeply held assumptions and beliefs about self, young children, families, and communities. This journey becomes part of the personal and professional growth of each educator and leader—shaping the ways that they show up in their own lives and in early childhood work. Ideally, this leads to increased awareness and appreciation of diversity across race, ethnicity, language, and other aspects of social identity. As progress is made, leaders are called on to directly **apply strategies to reduce bias and honor diversity as a central part of culturally responsive education practices and policies in ECE settings.** This effort could include:

Intentionally building awareness of bias and discriminatory practices

Through implicit bias training for early educators and those who lead early childhood organizations, these adults, who have such a critical impact on young children, can become self-aware and learn to monitor their attitudes and actions toward children.

Identifying biased and exclusionary policies and practices within programs

Programs can collect and observe data with a racial equity lens—seeking out disparities in suspensions and expulsions, programmatic responses to lateness and absenteeism, and overall engagement with families.

Working to dismantle the overall inequities that exist at the foundation of the early childhood system

While the behaviors of ECE providers and programs make a difference on an individual and community basis, real progress at scale will require acknowledging the larger context—

“Due to our shared identity as Somali-Americans, I am able to identify cultural barriers that show up as learning and behavioral inequities for our students . . . I am able to bridge the gap between my students, their families, and the educators who are not familiar or culturally conscious and equipped to support them.”

—Anisa Omar, Elementary Behavioral Specialist, Minnesota Math and Science Academy, Saint Paul, MN



the historic lack of access to opportunity and perpetuated mistrust in the education, health care, housing, social service, criminal justice, and other related systems that have impacted Black, Indigenous, Latine, and other families of color for generations. By recognizing and addressing the broader implications of structural racism, we can begin to forge a pathway to repair harm at the individual level and lessen the impact of structural inequities that have threatened the success of young children of color over time.

Putting trusting relationships first: The importance of prioritizing cultural humility and cultural match to support families

Malkia Singleton Ofori-Agyekum cares about the details, especially when it comes to showing care for who someone is and where they come from. “To be culturally responsive means to be aware of what culture you’re working with. Especially if it’s different than your own, but even if it’s your own culture, understanding whoever you’re interacting with, how do they define certain things? How do they experience certain things, and responding as sensitively as possible . . . and meeting whatever needs need to be met.”

Many of the individuals served at ParentChild+, where Singleton Ofori-Agyekum leads, have a deep wariness toward those in power, whether that is the government, educational systems, or even ParentChild+ staff members themselves. “[They’re] wanting to kind of stay underground, not being on the radar about anything.” Singleton Ofori-Agyekum recounts stories of people not wanting to sign release forms for photos or videos. Understandably, the feeling of general mistrust has only been heightened during the pandemic. “It’s just this distrust, this, you know, not feeling safe in your own environment. And we have to work doubly hard to recruit our African immigrant families.”



As the Pennsylvania State Director for ParentChild+, a multifaceted program that engages families and providers in support of young children, Malkia Singleton Ofori-Agyekum works with people from a variety of backgrounds. However, she doesn’t let her level of experience make her complacent in her responsibility to see every person as a unique racial and cultural being. “You can never know every single thing about somebody’s culture.”

The solution to forging connection and cultivating trust? As simple as it may sound, she’s found it’s a deep commitment to patience and understanding. “A huge part of our recruitment strategy is knowing that we have to meet folks where they are, literally and figuratively. The fact that we bring everything to a family . . . it takes away so many barriers. It takes away transportation [challenges], takes away scheduling issues and whatnot. If a family is scheduled for a visit, [and] they can’t make it, we just reschedule. That’s a big part of the way we build that relationship. We are going to work with you wherever you are. And however it’s going to make sense for this relationship to build.” She also ensures that they are providing a “cultural and linguistic match between the home visitor and the family.” ParentChild+ goes about this proactively, making sure that the organization

is hiring or planning to hire for the languages that staff members already know families speak, such as Swahili, Spanish, and French.

When all is said and done, Singleton Ofori-Agyekum returns to the basics: caring about details is what makes it possible to both meet

people where they are and help connect them with what they need. “Being aware and not just [using] a cookie-cutter approach, but just making sure as much as possible that everybody’s needs are met and people feel comfortable . . . expressing their culture in whatever way they would like to.”



► WATCH ONLINE: Click on the video to learn more.

3 Early childhood curricula have historically been created by and for the dominant (White) culture.

Early childhood leaders have a significant role in developing, selecting, and supporting implementation of curricula in early childhood programs. When a high-quality curriculum is effectively used, it provides a flexible framework that allows for warm and responsive interactions; individualized teaching; and meaningful, integrated learning activities. For any chosen curriculum, it's important to meaningfully build on the strengths, abilities, experiences, and interests of children. For this reason, curriculum materials, planned activities, and instruction should all reflect the cultures and languages of the children in the program. When early childhood curricular approaches instead uphold a single, White-centric perspective, this reinforces Whiteness as the norm and the standard for all young children's development and approaches to learning. This dangerous untruth sets in motion a series of exclusionary experiences and microaggressions that can stand in the way of children's self-efficacy and undermine their learning during these critical years.¹³

Core components of mainstream early childhood curricula have typically been researched, designed, authored, edited, published, selected, and mainstreamed by a chain of predominantly White, English-speaking, educationally and economically privileged individuals. This reality suggests that the key tools of teaching and learning continue to be defined without meaningful integration of the values, realities, and prevailing wisdom of diverse communities, and particularly without a nuanced perspective of child development across race and language. When considering the magnitude of this fundamental inequity, it is not difficult to imagine how it has contributed to the disparities in teaching and learning with which we now contend. The truth is, the majority of mainstream ECE curriculum is designed to validate the narratives and historical perspectives of White Americans—further privileging them while subtly and systematically denying the legitimacy of all other views.¹³



13 Ware, L. (2021). *Plessy's legacy: The government's role in the development and perpetuation of segregated neighborhoods*. *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences*, 7(1): 92–109.
<https://doi.org/10.7758/RSF.2021.7.1.06>

What can be done . . .

**"All instruction is culturally responsive.
The question is: To which culture is it currently oriented?"**

Gloria Ladson-Billings, Author of Culturally Relevant Teaching

Bearing in mind the critical role of race, language, and culture in defining children's development and learning trajectories, there is a considerable difference between widely accepted best practices as they are currently defined through a dominant culture lens and what works for racially and culturally diverse communities.¹⁴ Going forward, there is space to **learn about and expand the use of promising curricula and effective practices that are defined by and for racially, culturally, and linguistically minoritized communities.** Community-defined curricula that intentionally build on the assets of race, culture, community values, and developmental strengths can do the following:

Contextualize and overcome racial opportunity and outcome gaps

For young children, all learning occurs in the context of community, culture, and language—which means that learning processes, cognitive

tools, and needs differ according to race, language, and culture. When considered in this light, it is little wonder that White-centric approaches have routinely missed the mark for children who are not members of the dominant culture group. Community-defined curricula can offer important clues about what it takes to be responsive to the learning potential and needs of children of color and DLL children.

Recognize and honor the power of racial and linguistic identities for learning

In a society where children experience a variety of overt and covert messages about what racial and linguistic characteristics are most valued, teaching children to celebrate what makes them unique—as well as the common characteristics that connect them to their families, communities, and heritage—makes a profound difference in their social and emotional development.



14 Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2017). *Considering culture: Building the best evidence-based practices for children of color.* <https://www.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/aecf-consideringculture-2017.pdf>

Positive Racial Identity Development in Early Education (P.R.I.D.E.): Centering racial identity development as essential learning in Pittsburgh, PA

P.R.I.D.E. is a collaborative effort of the City of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development and the University of Pittsburgh School of Education. The partnership works to synthesize research and provide resources for parents, educators,

professionals, and community stakeholders to strengthen Black children's positive sense of self and connection to Black and African heritage.

Specifically, P.R.I.D.E. offers a range of supports:

Parent Village is a six-week curriculum for families and caregivers that blends child development information with Africana history and culture by using interactive activities such as drumming and dancing. The focus of Parent Village is to equip participants with the tools and knowledge necessary to have conversations and engage in activities with their children about African people, Black identity, and pride in their cultural heritage.

A speaker series engages the public in discussing topics related to race, education, and young children. By hosting powerful speakers to discuss these critical subjects, the initiative hopes to promote buy-in from families, educators, and the community to support African American children in positive racial identity development.

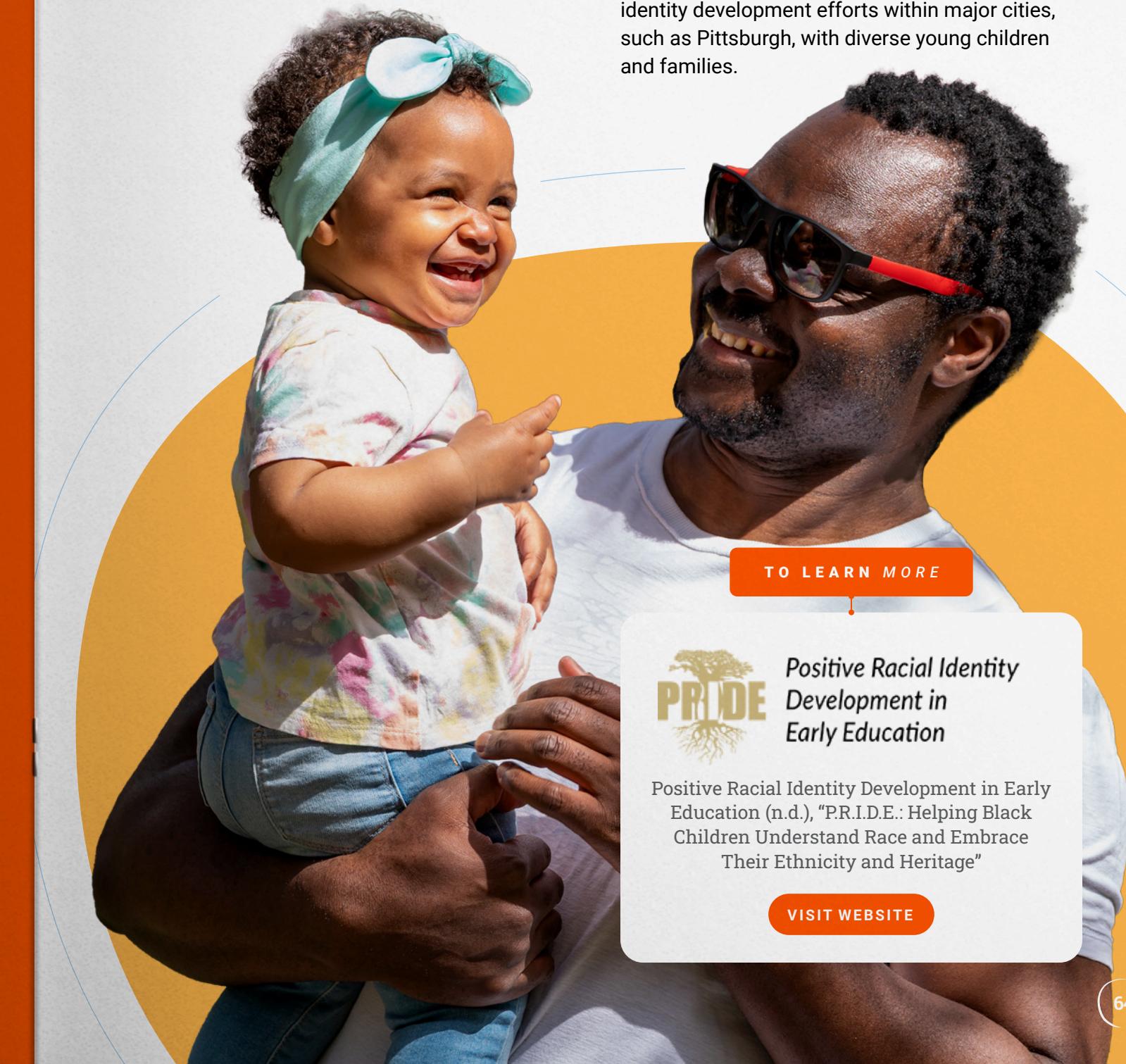
Pop-up mini art festivals are free neighborhood events created specifically for Black children ages 3–8. Trained artists and educators present engaging activities emphasizing Africana arts and culture that help Black children embrace their race, skin color, and heritage.

Professional development encourages educators and community stakeholders to examine their experiences and further their knowledge of the impacts of racial identity on themselves and the children they serve. Sessions often include historical lessons used to contextualize the present, exercises designed to facilitate professional growth, and hands-on activities that adults can use with children.

How does it support communities of color?

In response to the lack of mainstream early learning curricula centered on race and culture, P.R.I.D.E. strives to offer research, guidance, stakeholder engagement opportunities, and professional development foundations to build on. The effort seeks to leverage the evidence base that shows the links between positive racial identity development and various positive social, emotional, and academic outcomes in children

from preschool through high school. Among these benefits are stronger problem-solving skills and improved behavior. To that end, anticipated outcomes of success "will come in the form of Black children who are more confident and socially aware, as well as a city that is even more welcoming to all cultures." Further, the P.R.I.D.E. effort aims to become a national example for how higher education institutions can support racial identity development efforts within major cities, such as Pittsburgh, with diverse young children and families.



[TO LEARN MORE](#)



Positive Racial Identity Development in Early Education

Positive Racial Identity Development in Early Education (n.d.), "P.R.I.D.E.: Helping Black Children Understand Race and Embrace Their Ethnicity and Heritage"

[VISIT WEBSITE](#)

4 The unique needs of children learning more than one language are currently not being met.

Growing up immersed in multiple languages is a profound asset for lifelong learning and a gift that families give their young children. National data and community narratives tell us there is a significant and growing population of young DLL children. DLL children can be defined as “children who have a home language other than English and are learning two or more languages at the same time, or learning a second language while continuing to develop their first language.”¹⁵ Early childhood programs that serve DLL children and are committed to culturally responsive education center the linguistic identities of children (among other aspects of cultural identity) by offering experiences that recognize the benefits of bilingualism, by acknowledging the predictable learning differences, and by implementing specific approaches designed to help prepare DLL children for success. Research suggests that when bilingualism is fully supported, it can lead to important cognitive and social benefits during the early years, as well as long-term employment opportunities and benefits in the workplace

later in life.¹⁶ Yet in reality, most times there is a mismatch between the specific supports DLL children need to meet their potential and the preparedness of their early learning settings and providers to meet those needs. Most early childhood practices, policies, and systems—from classroom interactions to child assessments to professional preparation—are not structured to support and meet the nuanced needs of DLL children. Stories from families portray the barriers young children and their families face as they work to navigate and access early childhood opportunities in their communities.¹⁷ Being met with explicit biases based on English-language proficiency, the challenges of getting connected to appropriate language resources and linking with providers who understand the linguistic nuances within communities, and lack of representation in educational materials are just some of the ongoing hurdles that must be overcome in getting the services that young DLL children deserve.

15 US Department of Health and Human Services & US Department of Education. (2016). *Policy statement on supporting the development of children who are dual language learners in early childhood programs*. <https://www2.ed.gov/about/initiatives/ed/earlylearning/files/dll-policy-statement-2016.pdf>

16 Callahan, R. M., & Gándara, P. C. (Eds.). (2014). *The bilingual advantage: Language, literacy and the US labor market*. Multilingual Matters.

17 National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). (2016, June 2). Supporting high-quality EarlyEd for dual language learners. *Resources Blog*. <https://www.naeyc.org/resources/blog/supporting-dual-language-learners>

“The monolingual [education] system is not working [for DLL children]. It’s not working at a national level. Why do we insist that we should teach children in a way that is not good for them? But the other part of it is that it’s not just from a language perspective and from a cognitive perspective that you’re going to learn quicker if you understand what people are telling you—that makes so much sense. But it’s also that side of cultural pride, right?”

—Banu Valladares, Executive Director of Charlotte Bilingual Preschool, Charlotte, NC



Hearing families out: The responsibility of programs to be responsive to ALL families when it comes to their children's needs

It takes a village to raise a child. But what if the village isn't on the same page about how, or how much, to help in that process? What if everyone in the village doesn't speak the same language or understand the same systems? Jacqueline Gómez Espinoza has overcome these challenges, and more, as she has navigated obtaining support for her children.

When she had questions about her younger daughter's development, it was incredibly difficult to get her concerns addressed at school. She recalls, "The evaluations just never happened . . . you didn't have to be a professional to realize she was having some difficulties. My daughter didn't know how to count to 10 and she was 6 and then 7 years old."

While Jacqueline was eventually able to get her child the help she needed (and was better prepared to advocate for the family's youngest child when he started school), Jacqueline believes it could have and should have been a lot easier to do so from the start. Igmaliana "Iggy" Austin, Family Education Coordinator at Charlotte Bilingual Preschool, agrees. Iggy works with Jacqueline and other families like hers to make



Originally from El Salvador, Jacqueline Gómez Espinoza keeps busy running her own business and raising her four children. In her daughter's earliest school days, Jacqueline faced the challenge of learning the English language and navigating an ECE system that was new to her family, while attempting to access the special supports she knew her daughter needed. "My daughter was recently diagnosed with autism, but that took a lot of effort. It was very difficult for her to find services and to understand and to find any type of diagnosis."

sure they're getting any assistance they need in education and beyond. "And just serving families like Jacqueline . . . there is always something new to her story . . . there is always something fascinating. And just to see how she overcomes obstacles on a daily basis, it's just awesome."

Both believe that the language barrier played a role in Jacqueline's daughter not receiving assessment and accommodations quickly. In such cases, people like Iggy can make all the difference in ensuring that the aforementioned village promptly and enthusiastically supports children and their parents, too.

As Iggy puts it, "The parents . . . [are the] first educators and first providers of services and the person that advocates for the child. But the parent is not always heard and very often not heard." With each step forward, Iggy, and thousands of others like her, are working to make sure that doesn't have to be the case.



► **WATCH ONLINE:** Click on the video to learn more.

What can be done . . .

"School readiness and success for children who are dual language learners (DLLs) is tied directly to mastery of their home language. Bilingual children benefit academically in many ways. Because they are able to switch between languages, they develop more flexible approaches to thinking through problems."¹⁸

The most successful early childhood programs supporting DLL children are based on the philosophy that language diversity is an asset and a resource. These programs have the effect of deepening learning experiences, encouraging cross-cultural understanding, and fostering communication, not only among children, but also for families, educators, and leaders within the learning community.¹⁹ Strategies to enhance support for DLL children can include a range of actions, from offering guidance to implementing programs to informing statewide decision-making. Solutions emerging from community conversations urged leaders to **increase resources to foster learning environments that embrace linguistic diversity, expand professional development focused on DLL children, and improve family engagement practices and policies to be supportive of multilingualism.** Overall, such solutions point to the importance of providing educators and leaders with the necessary supports to ensure that linguistically

responsive practices are delivered through daily interactions, intentionally embedded in curriculum and instruction, and ultimately integrated meaningfully as part of all services provided to DLL children and their families. This effort could include the following:

Ensuring programs have the resources necessary to support and celebrate linguistically diverse learners

These resources include tangible ones, such as literature, listening materials, and signage that foster a strengths-based climate that values linguistic diversity within classrooms and other early learning settings.

Having a set of clearly established values and expectations to implement linguistically responsive services

This could mean providing professional learning opportunities to build the capacity of educators and others in the early childhood workforce to have specialized knowledge of developmental pathways and instructional practices—along with mindsets to value dual language development as a strength and a tool for all learning domains.

Establishing policies and procedures to strengthen partnerships with multilingual families

Such policies include acknowledging the preferred language for communication, providing translation or interpretation services, and learning from families about children's language background to comprehensively set educational goals and provide individualized learning support for DLL children.



¹⁸ National Center on Cultural and Linguistic Responsiveness. (n.d.). *The benefits of being bilingual*. US Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Head Start. Retrieved April 6, 2022, from <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/benefits-of-being-bilingual.pdf>

¹⁹ Freeman, Y. S., Freeman, D. E., & Mercuri, S. (2005). *Dual language essentials for teachers and administrators*. Heinemann.

Invisible violence: The multilayered harm caused by failure to honor children's home languages

Having grown up as a dual language learner herself, and through her work with young DLL children and their families, Jade Cintrón Báez has witnessed firsthand how a scarcity of linguistic support can cause lifelong harm. “Even growing into adults, it can signify a loss of cultural connectivity to your traditions, a loss of almost of validity thinking that your culture, whatever that might be, is not as important as this generalized American culture . . . this generalized English [-speaking] culture. And then you have people that are from that [American] culture, looking at these same children and saying, you’re not valid because you did not grow up as I did. You’re not valid because you do not speak the language. You see these people that are just caught in between worlds, neither feeling, in this context, American enough for the Americans or, you know, their culture enough for their culture.”

What’s more, not all language support is created equal. Cintrón Báez highlights the importance of cultural competence—of understanding and respecting the wide diversity among the speakers of a language and members of a culture. “There’s a lack of knowledge of the breadth and diversity of the Latine community. And I say that specifically about Afro Latinos, about Indigenous Latinos, about Asian Latinos, just the variety of people that fit that word. And it’s hard because we’re not a monolith.



Jade Cintrón Báez is a big proponent of multilingualism and its impact on young children. In addition to growing up bilingual herself, she’s a bilingual early childhood literacy specialist at the Free Library of Philadelphia Foundation and founder and director of ¡Looking Bilingüe! “Lack of resources in your maternal language can impact you in ways that people don’t even understand.”

“Racial inequities contribute to lingual inequities,” she continues. “When you have situations where you have a spectrum of people who speak a language, but because of their race, where they grew up, the part of the island, the part of the country, they speak it in different ways. And so what ends up happening is that in the Spanish-speaking community, you often hear of like in English, we hear the Queen’s English [being elevated].

“You see this in watching the news and they’re predominantly White or very light-skinned. And when you do see somebody who is darker . . . you’ll hear them in a telenovela speak in a very specific way. That indicates that that person is not as educated, not as intelligent, not as capable. So race and language is so interconnected in ways

that people don’t even imagine. And unfortunately we all perpetuate this daily in ways that we probably are not even cognizant of. And it’s so important for us to have these conversations because that’s when we recognize and we stop that, we acknowledge it and we stop it.”

Considering all the ways even well-meaning institutions can still perpetuate harm when it comes to honoring students’ languages and cultures, Cintrón Báez cites ways educators can proactively center the children and families who are being served. A potential first step would be to prioritize hiring people who are from and representative of the students’ communities. Thoughtful pedagogy is also crucial, as “ESL programs that are not culturally competent can impact a child. In many ways, as a group, the children are probably going to be fed more systematically racist language and thought beliefs . . . we need more nuance in when we teach ESL

so that folks can really grow in the way that they need to grow. Because one answer isn’t going to satisfy everybody that is there. I really feel that digging deeper into that culture and learning more as an educator is crucial and pertinent. It’s a great first step.”

And, above all, be curious and adaptive. Aim to make your programs as tailored as possible to specific kids and their families. “I think that would be so impactful for families to see that a site is saying, ‘Wow, we’ve got a group of French speakers, none of us speak French, but we’re learning about the part of that country that they’re coming from together.’ Learning about the different little words that they maybe used for their child for comfort and incorporating that into the classroom. There’s so many different ways that you can show that you care and that you’re trying. And the goal is not to be perfect. The goal is to show that you’re open.”



► WATCH ONLINE: Click on video to learn more.

5 Early childhood programs have a responsibility to provide culturally responsive education—but there are not enough systemic supports.

ECE programs and the educators and leaders who staff them have a significant role and responsibility to support diverse young children through culturally responsive education. Early childhood providers are called on to teach and care for young children in a way that respects and integrates the cultural and linguistic characteristics that children experience in their daily lives. But—as in all other aspects of providers' complex roles—without the proper preparation, tools, and mindsets, providers and programs will continually fall short. Mainstream approaches to teacher preparation in academic settings still largely treat classroom diversity as a barrier to overcome and emphasize the deficits associated with race and language. As a result, early childhood teachers who have completed formal teacher preparation are keenly aware that Black, Brown, and DLL children are at risk of “falling behind” but largely unaware of how the nuances of race and language imply differing pathways to learning. Meanwhile, child development standards and the tools available to measure children’s progress are largely normed to the expected learning benchmarks of White,

English-speaking children—reinforcing the cycle of deficit perspectives and uninformed practice. Quality rating and improvement systems, teacher competencies, and other pillars of state-led ECE systems generally contain weak (if any) guidance and considerations for what “quality” and “best practice” mean for educating young children who do not reflect the identities of those who have traditionally controlled these systems (i.e., White, English-speaking, and economically privileged). And although recent years have seen some progress in research that counteracts widely held deficit beliefs surrounding race and language in ECE, this emerging collective knowledge has only begun to traverse the distance between research and practice. There is still a long way to go toward systemically integrating culturally responsive education.



What can be done . . .

“While educators cannot singlehandedly make schools less segregated and more equitable, they can ensure that students feel valued and affirmed in schools, in the curriculum, and in their interactions with peers. They can promote engagement and achievement by connecting curriculum to students’ daily lives, cultural backgrounds, and concerns. They can deploy rigorous activities that help students make sense of the world around them and become agents for positive change. They can call attention to educational injustice and work to bolster opportunities for all learners.”²⁰

The good news is that the ECE field can point to many examples of how—through ongoing research, advocacy, and the examples of pioneering community-based providers—the things we are learning about what works for young children have been recognized and applied at scale. Examples include the value of project-based and play-based learning experiences that distinguish early learning from K-12 approaches, the power of language-rich environments, integration of children with special needs in the

least restrictive environment, and differentiated instruction to build on children’s strengths and natural propensities for learning. Although progress around culturally responsive education is obstructed by the ever-present racism, nationalism, and xenophobia that mark American society, the same mechanisms that have led to progress in other areas of best practice can continue to **forge systemic pathways to ECE teacher preparation, practices, and evaluative measures that affirm children of color and DLL children** in the very ways that White and English-speaking children have been affirmed all along in their ECE settings. To do so at scale will require the field to appropriately balance accountability for individual programs and providers with accountability of systems leaders and decision-makers to ensure adequate support. This can include the following:

Early childhood teacher preparation that emphasizes diversity, equity, and inclusion

Current and prospective ECE providers must have opportunities to learn and practice what it means to create equitable learning experiences for racially and linguistically diverse children. Beyond technical approaches, this includes ensuring that providers understand the historical and sociocultural underpinnings of structural inequities and their connections to the ECE system.

Revised early learning standards that reflect multicultural perspectives on child development and best practice

This would include more nuanced discussion of expected developmental pathways and timelines for young children, along with program quality standards that recognize that what’s best for children representing the dominant culture is not necessarily what’s best for all children.

Revised child and classroom assessment tools

Where current, widely used tools to measure child development and teacher performance assume a singular standard, more appropriate tools would be specifically adapted to what the field is learning about developmental pathways and best practices for racially and linguistically diverse children. At the same time, racial and linguistic groups are not monolithic; therefore, appropriate tools would take into account family and community values, community context, and individual attributes to present a dynamic and affirming picture of current progress and potential growth pathways.



20 Muñiz, J. (2020). *Culturally responsive teaching: A reflection guide*. New America.
<https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/policy-papers/culturally-responsive-teaching-competencies>

FirstSchool initiative: Leading the way to transforming ECE culture in Michigan, Minnesota, North Carolina, and Vermont

FirstSchool was established in North Carolina through a collaborative effort among schools, community leaders, families, educators, the North Carolina Partnership for Children, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, and the University of North Carolina (UNC) School of Education. FirstSchool partners with early learning communities to support high-quality practices for pre-K through third grade. Educators and leaders engage in frequent, job-embedded professional learning with their colleagues with a focus on implementing an inquiry-based approach to teaching and learning and utilizing data to guide instruction and monitor progress. Teacher and leader preparation and professional development focus on a social justice perspective on education and provide opportunities to reflect on practices. The approach emphasizes the application of relevant research, developmental science, and community knowledge. Additionally, the FirstSchool professional development framework prioritizes and nurtures the following characteristics of effective early learning communities:

Culture of caring:

nurture positive relationships, strengthen self-efficacy and racial/cultural identity, develop the whole child

Culture of competence:

prioritize communication, promote peer interactions, develop self-regulation, encourage independence

Culture of excellence:

balance teaching opportunities, integrate and balance curriculum, build higher-order thinking

To do so, FirstSchool works alongside districts, schools, administrators, and educators to examine teaching practices, structures, and materials, ensuring that they are accessible and meaningful for learners from diverse linguistic and sociocultural backgrounds, as well as learners with differing abilities and learning styles. By supporting professional development and comprehensive school transformation, FirstSchool strives to collaboratively promote public school efforts to become more responsive to the needs of an increasingly younger, more diverse population of children entering school.

How does this support communities of color?

The focal points of the FirstSchool initiative are to support schools in driving equitable

outcomes for African American and Latinx children and those from low-income communities, increasing the presence of pre-K programs within public schools, and sustaining high instructional quality in every ECE and elementary classroom.



TO LEARN MORE

 **UNC** | FRANK PORTER GRAHAM
CHILD DEVELOPMENT INSTITUTE

UNC Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute (n.d.), "First School"

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Reflection corner

Regardless of our positioning as ECE leaders at the program, community, state, or national level, we all have a role and a stake in culturally responsive education. The following are a few questions to help you reflect on what that means for you and your organization. Use these questions individually or with other leaders in your

organization to assess your guiding assumptions, practices, and communications surrounding culturally responsive education and what it could look like to provide learning experiences grounded in racial identity, language, culture, and community.

In the program/system you are working within, what are the prevailing racial, cultural, and linguistic characteristics of children and families? Of those providing direct services to children and families? Of those who set policies and make decisions that impact children, families, and providers?

What barriers and/or opportunities do these realities present?

How do you and/or your organization define terms such as “cultural competency,” “cultural responsiveness,” “anti-racism,” “anti-bias,” and “anti-oppression”? What efforts have been made/could be made to unify definitions and commitments surrounding these terms?

What biased and deficit-based perspectives or lack of information surrounding Black, Indigenous, Latine, and other children of color and DLL children have been perpetuated in your professional preparation and/or ongoing communications with colleagues? What power do you have to bring more affirming perspectives to light in your program/professional circles?

In what ways have you witnessed, enacted, or affirmed biased practices and/or policymaking? What have been the potential impacts on the children and families in your “care,” and what alternative choices might you make in your role going forward?

What alternative choices or commitments on the part of leaders in your state, city, or community would make a difference? What are the key policy levers for systematizing culturally responsive education as a standard for high-quality ECE?

What perspectives and voices need a more prominent place in the conversation about culturally responsive education? What additional insights, stories, influence, and expertise could effect more progress—both nationally and in your state/city/community?



Resources

For additional information and perspectives on culturally responsive education as a guidepost for early childhood practice, check out these resources from other leaders in the field.



New America. *Culturally Responsive Education Resources for Federal, State, and Local Stakeholders* (2020).

This page offers a definition of culturally responsive education, along with links to an expansive collection of resources that share multiple perspectives on standards, competencies, and practices associated with culturally responsive education in early childhood and K-12 systems.

[LEARN MORE](#)



New America. *Teacher Competencies That Promote Culturally Responsive Teaching* (2020).

New America developed a set of eight core competencies that describe the mindsets, skills, and practices of culturally responsive teachers. The framework has been used by teachers, school districts, nonprofit organizations, teacher preparation programs, and states to bolster culturally responsive teaching practices nationwide.

[LEARN MORE](#)



[Position Statement](#)

Adopted by the NAEYC National Governing Board April 2019

National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). Position Statement: Advancing Equity in Early Childhood Education (2019).

This paper—developed and widely distributed by the leading national organization for ECE policy and practice—offers a grounding for culturally responsive education in research, theory, and widely accepted best practice, plus recommendations for ECE teachers, administrators, teacher preparation programs, and other stakeholders.

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Connecticut State Board of Education. *Position Statement on Culturally Responsive Practice* (2020).

Connecticut leads the way among states in affirming and systematizing culturally responsive education through statewide policy. The position statement offers an example for state leadership by detailing the responsibilities assumed by the state education agency, as well as expectations for districts, schools, teachers, institutions of higher education, families, and students to collectively live into this commitment.

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US Department of Health and Human Services and US Department of Education. *Policy Statement on Supporting the Development of Children Who Are Dual Language Learners in Early Childhood Programs* (2016).

This widely cited policy statement creates a strong case for programmatic and systemic approaches to teaching DLL children in the early years. It brings together research and policy highlights to support states in enacting beneficial policies and practices in support of DLL children.

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Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center (ECLKC). *Curriculum Consumer Report (Preschool Criterion 11: Cultural Responsiveness)*.

This report offers a listing of common preschool curricula and assigns a rating to each based on assessment across multiple criteria for cultural responsiveness. Such a listing can be useful as a starting point for states and localities that are ready to take meaningful steps toward establishing and scaling culturally responsive education.

[LEARN MORE](#)



National Council of Teachers of English

National Council of Teachers of English. *Working Toward Culturally Responsive Assessment Practices* (2020).

This blog post offers a teacher perspective on the limitations of mainstream assessment tools, along with examples of teacher-led solutions for more culturally responsive, individualized ways of understanding and documenting children's progress.

[LEARN MORE](#)

Equity in Early Learning Initiative. *The Early Childhood Equity-Focused Classroom Observation Tool* (2021).

This tool was developed by a collaborative of local ECE partners in Maryland, the District of Columbia, and Virginia. It offers key criteria for program leaders and classroom teachers to consider as part of an organization-wide commitment to culturally responsive education and anti-bias practices. Key areas of observation include curriculum, interactions, language use, and family engagement.

[LEARN MORE](#)



Embrace Race. *Anti-bias Education in the Early Years: Talking Race and Kids* (2020).

In this recorded webinar, Embrace Race hosts a screening of *Reflecting on Anti-bias Education in Action: The Early Years*, as well as a conversation with the film producers and two of the teachers featured in the film. The page contains the full recorded webinar (which includes the introduction to the film and the discussion), plus links to the full-length film and other surrounding content.

[LEARN MORE](#)



PBS Education. *Decolonizing Our Classrooms Starts with Us* (2020).

This blog offers a teacher perspective on what it means to be an anti-racist in the classroom, along with recommendations and tools to support others in self-reflection, planning, and implementing an anti-racist teaching practice.

[LEARN MORE](#)



Teaching for Change. *Social Justice Books* (2022).

This resource for programs, teachers, and families offers carefully curated lists of multicultural and social justice-oriented books, including listings for young children. The page also contains a guide to evaluate the culturally responsive and anti-bias quality of books—helping all of the adults who care for young children to select literature that supports culturally responsive education.

[LEARN MORE](#)



THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity. *Strategies for Addressing Implicit Bias in Early Childhood Education*. (2015).

This white paper draws from the relevant implicit bias research to provide strategies to reduce bias on both an organizational and an individual level.

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Authentic Partnership for Meaningful change

Centering families
and communities
in program and
systems design

In this chapter ...

In an equitable, high-impact ECE system, families have a central role. Honoring this role means valuing families and communities not only as beneficiaries of programs and services, but also as thought partners and co-designers. This chapter unpacks systemic barriers to engaging racially, culturally, and linguistically minoritized families, as well as strategies to move the system toward authentic partnership and co-design at the program and systems levels.



Families are experts on their children's development and are their children's most important and influential teachers.¹

Children are born into their very first learning environments—their homes. From those earliest days, children listen, observe, and interact with their families and communities. Through these early experiences, children develop awareness of themselves, their families and communities, and their racial and cultural identities. They begin to learn language, the physical properties of their environment, and the sociocultural conventions that help them to make meaning of the world around them. All of this occurs in the context of the relationships, customs, and “ways of being” that families establish for their children—and no future learning or development can fully stand outside of this early socialization.

For that reason, partnering with families to support continued early learning and development must be a priority.

Family engagement can be described as “the systematic inclusion of families in activities and programs that promote children’s development, learning, and wellness, including in planning, development, and evaluation.”² Family engagement is essential for all young children to thrive because families can contribute in

ways that increase the likelihood that children’s early learning experiences outside of the home are continuously contextualized in their culture, racial identity, family customs, and community values. Strong partnerships between ECE leaders and families can create pathways to culturally competent and informed programming, service delivery, systems design, and policy that move the needle for the children who have been failed time and time again by mainstream ECE policies and practices. Indeed, no one is better equipped than families to name and advocate for what their young children need to thrive in school and in life, making family engagement in the early years a strong predictor of children’s success later in life.³ This makes it crucial for families—particularly families of color, those who have immigrated, and those with limited English proficiency—to be in partnership with ECE leaders to create a seamless transition between their home and the formal learning environment.

This partnership—like any—is founded on trust.

ECE leaders at all levels must learn to trust the leadership, decision-making capacity, and expertise of families when it comes to their own children and communities. Meanwhile leaders must cultivate trust among families through transparency, truthful acknowledgment of the challenges that have been created, and a willingness to listen and work for change based on families’ perspectives. Recognizing both the importance and the complexity of authentic family engagement, this topic has routinely been a focal point for ECE program and systems improvement efforts.

However, while much emphasis has been placed on family engagement and partnership in recent years, there are many ways in which programs and systems continue to miss the mark.

Like many of the systemic inequities of the ECE system, this one begins with the founding of principles of family engagement in Whiteness—that is, conceptions and prevailing beliefs about family engagement and partnership that hold dominant culture (White) values, expectations, and “ways of being” as the standard for all families. In centering Whiteness, prominent practices for family engagement have systematically excluded families of color, those who have immigrated, and those with limited English proficiency or have targeted these families with deficit-based family engagement resources and opportunities. The assets that enable programs and systems to engage and partner with White and English-speaking families (e.g., leaders who share language and cultural experiences with families, opportunities for families to support their children’s learning in their home language, accessible communications, and views of families as having valuable strengths to lend to their children’s educational journey) have not been made available at scale for families who do not represent the dominant culture. In the absence of adequate resources and strengths-based views, it is little wonder that programs and systems continue to miss out on crucial partnerships with racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse families—and families miss out on the opportunity to support their young children in this powerful way.

Principles of equity-informed family engagement

- Early childhood education programs encourage family participation in decision-making related to their children’s education. Families act as advocates and take part in decision-making opportunities.
- Consistent, two-way communication is facilitated through multiple forms and is responsive to the language spoken by the family.
- Early childhood education programs and families collaborate and exchange knowledge.
- Early childhood education programs and families place an emphasis on creating and sustaining learning activities at home and in the community that extend the teachings of the program so as to enhance each child’s early learning.
- Families create a home environment that values learning and supports programs. Programs and families collaborate in establishing children’s goals.

Source: State Support Network (2018), *Strategies for Equitable Family Engagement*, https://oese.ed.gov/files/2020/10/equitable_family_engag_508.pdf

¹ US Department of Health and Human Services & US Department of Education. (2016). *Policy statement on family engagement: From the early years to the early grades*. <https://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/earlylearning/files/policy-statement-on-family-engagement.pdf>

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

What communities want you to know

It is important to make clear that the barriers we see to family engagement and partnership have been created by the shortcomings of the ECE system—but it doesn't have to be this way. Just as gaps have been created, they can and must be mitigated if we envision an ECE system in which all children can thrive. Progress to strengthen family engagement at the program and systems levels must center families who have historically faced and currently face experience barriers such as systemic racism, socioeconomic inequities, and cultural and linguistic bias—all leading to a lack of opportunities to engage as stakeholders and leaders in the systems designed to serve them.⁴ In our discussions with families and other stakeholders in the field, the following areas of inquiry surfaced as critical to address:



4 Bernard van Leer Foundation, The Hague. (2012). *Parental Involvement in Early Learning: A review of research, policy and good practice*. <https://efc.issuelab.org/resources/15860/15860.pdf>

1.

How do racism, Whiteness, and cultural and linguistic bias create **barriers to family engagement and partnership at the program level?**

LEARN MORE ON PAGE 91

2.

What are the causes and consequences of the **erasure of Black and Brown, immigrant, and non-English-speaking families' experiences and voices** in ECE systems-building?

LEARN MORE ON PAGE 99

3.

What would it take to bring the necessary depth and authenticity for **transformational family engagement practices**?

LEARN MORE ON PAGE 105

1 Racial bias and inadequate preparation of ECE program staff create barriers to authentic family engagement within programs.

The value of family engagement and partnership is widely acknowledged by ECE programs and providers. For this reason, programs take measures—often above and beyond those required by their oversight—to ensure that families are informed, invited to events, consulted about developmental goals for their children, and more. These efforts are based in widely accepted principles and standards for family engagement. Despite the intentions and efforts of programs, however, it remains true that the standards, perspectives, and prevailing practices surrounding family engagement are established primarily by White, English-speaking, economically privileged ECE leaders who possess the educational privilege to be considered “experts.” Likewise, leadership positions at the program level (i.e., those who make choices about how to execute those standards and “best practices”) are disproportionately occupied by individuals who also reflect the dominant culture and are frequently underprepared to approach this decision-making with a culturally competent, anti-bias mindset.⁵ Considering this, it makes sense

that for families who do not share the dominant racial, cultural, and linguistic characteristics, efforts aimed at engagement have, too often, fallen far short of authentic and meaningful partnership. This reality has created an unfortunate and vicious cycle: disconnection that is felt by both families and programs; research and discourse that presents family-blaming narratives about the “lack of engagement” among families of color, immigrant, migrant, and non-English-speaking families;⁶ biased and deficit-based interventions that fail to inspire true partnership with families; and eroded trust between programs and families—deepening the real and felt sense of disconnection.

“A lot of times people say they want to hear what parents and families have to say, but when it’s time for them to hear it, they shut us down. They really don’t want to hear what we have to say, but I know that—no matter what income, what zip code—parents being involved in their children’s education would make children excel.”

—Sylvia P. Simms, Founder, PARENT POWER, Philadelphia, PA



5 Simone, J. A. (2012). *Addressing the marginalized student: The secondary principal’s role in eliminating deficit thinking* [Doctoral dissertation]. University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/4838923.pdf>

6 Child Trends. (2013). *Parental involvement in schools*. <https://www.childtrends.org/indicators/parental-involvement-in-schools#:~:text=Trends%20in%20parental%20involvement%20in%20schools&text=In%202016%2C%2089%20percent%20of,to%2072%20percent%20in%201996>

What can be done . . .

"My advice is that we see our families and community members as co-creators and co-producers of the excellent schools and learning opportunities that we want for all students."

Karen L. Mapp, Author of Powerful Partnerships: A Teacher's Guide to Engaging Families for Student Success

Racial and cultural bias is a prevailing barrier to family engagement in ECE programs—one that many program leaders and staff would not care to acknowledge but that, all the same, makes it nearly impossible for families to show up as partners in their children's early learning and development. However, a truthful account of this reality is also a hopeful one. There are opportunities and mechanisms that programs can use, and are using, to bridge the gaps between the programs and the families they are privileged to serve. Many programs have turned to professional learning surrounding family engagement that focuses on deconstructing family-blaming, deficit-oriented, White-centric ideals about family engagement and partnership, as well as building the skills of providers to co-create practices with families from a place of cultural humility and anti-racism. Relatedly, many programs have implemented strategies that begin to restore trust, connection, and a spirit of partnership with families, such as ensuring there are staff on site who can communicate with linguistically diverse families, hosting parent cafés, offering multigenerational programming, and maintaining open-door policies that invite families to participate in the ways that make sense both for them and for the program.

While program efforts like these make a difference in communities, systems leaders can learn from programs' efforts to further support, systematize,

and scale these practices. Therefore, state and local ECE systems can **embed equity-informed family engagement professional learning, along with guidance and resources to support current and emerging best practices, within program monitoring and improvement systems.** A comprehensive local or statewide effort to improve equitable family engagement practices within ECE programs could include components such as these:

Promoting multigenerational programming for young children and their families

Families who are experiencing the impacts of racism, nationalism, and the complexities of navigating the ECE system with limited resources often find important connections to meet their families' needs through their ECE programs. For this reason, programs that have prioritized specific learning and capacity-building opportunities for families (e.g., English-language classes, educational advancement, peer-to-peer parenting groups) have had much success in building trusting relationships that lead to strong partnerships in support of the whole child and family.

Disseminating guidance and resources to programs or communities

This could include innovation grants, templates, toolkits, financial incentives, and more. Ideally, guidance and resources coming from states or localities would be descriptive and supportive enough to ensure the quality of programmatic or community initiatives, while being flexible enough to empower racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse ECE communities to generate effective local strategies for family engagement alongside families and a variety of other community stakeholders.

Offering professional learning to build skills for anti-bias, equity-informed family engagement

This can include strengthening current offerings on the topic delivered within degree programs, state systems associated with QRIS, and other professional development platforms at the state or local level. Professional learning offerings would have strong connections to statewide or locally developed resources, reflecting a cohesive message about family engagement across the ECE system.



Missed opportunities: What DLL children and their families stand to lose when the ECE system doesn't hold up its end of the family engagement agreement

Finding a good school can be difficult enough without factoring in language differences. So when parents Laura Elizabeth and Ángel Hernández found Charlotte Bilingual Preschool, they were elated to finally find a thriving—and linguistically accessible—educational community.

Ángel has especially appreciated the emphasis on fathers playing a role in support of their children's education from the start. "The school teaches them how to give time to their children, how to educate them and how to take quality time . . . so that the children can develop."

However, settings like Charlotte Bilingual Preschool can unfortunately be scarce. What's more, even when they are present in a community, they can be hard to find for the people who would benefit from them the most. Laura Elizabeth recalls spending long stretches at the library, trying to navigate the internet in English and find a good preschool for their oldest child.

Now, as both of their children flourish and progress in their own bilingualism, Laura Elizabeth



Laura Elizabeth and Ángel Hernández, parents of two young children in Charlotte, NC, work hard to give their two young children the best start in life. One of Ángel's favorite parts of the day is reading with his kids. "The truth is, as soon as I get to read the book, my child gets to read it to me. I feel good because I take a moment of time with my child to share a moment with him and it makes my child feel more secure, and it makes me feel more secure myself as a dad."

and Ángel turn a concerned eye to the future—one in which they're not able to be as active or helpful in an English-only environment like the local public school. Laura Elizabeth explains, "It's not that we don't want to learn English; we are attending the actual classes . . . [but] we see that they're progressing, they're going to be more bilingual . . . they are getting older and the homework is getting harder and harder." This has already been stressful

for their elementary-aged daughter. "She's thinking she's having a problem when the system is the problem. When the problem is . . . mom and dad don't understand [in order to help her]."

The solution is twofold—to address the obvious need for multilingual and multicultural school staff and teachers to be able to interact with families from all backgrounds, and to provide better educational and advancement opportunities to people like Laura Elizabeth and Ángel directly,

in English skills and beyond. For her part, Laura Elizabeth already works supporting other parents in the ECE field, and she'd like to be able to do more. But the cost and time commitment are too great for her right now.

"I wish there wasn't that barrier of a balance, of me having to choose between [buying] diapers and a career and being able to go out and work and give my children a better future."



► **WATCH ONLINE:** Click on the video to learn more.

A whole child, whole family approach: The power of multigenerational programming to support children and their parents in the moments they most need it

For mom of two Aíra Delgado, settling in the United States was an unexpected but necessary circumstance. Amidst the upheaval of relocating her family to a new country, leaving an abusive marriage, and experiencing homelessness for a time, Aíra was determined to find purpose and connection in her new home, to keep moving forward. A month after arriving, she enrolled in adult English classes at Charlotte Bilingual Preschool. This encounter led to even more opportunities. “When my daughter turned 3 years old, they gave me the opportunity for her to study here and, well, that’s when I got more involved.”

It turns out that the chance to participate unlocked a lot more for her than she could have predicted. After so much difficult change, true support meant everything. “This was the best thing that could have happened to me. I always say it, to have come here . . . this is where I made my friendships, this is where my great friendships have come from.”



Leaving behind instability in her home country, in 2017 Aíra Delgado sacrificed her career to make the move and seek political asylum in the United States. She attests, “It is difficult. It is difficult to leave your country already being established, already having your profession, already having something established and to arrive in a country to nothing, to nothing. You are no longer a lawyer, you are nothing.”

Furthermore, as one of Aíra’s daughters has a physical disability, she was even more relieved to find a welcoming and accommodating environment where bullying and other stresses did not have to be a concern. Both her daughters attend Charlotte Bilingual Preschool now and have made rich friendships of their own. And Aíra’s involvement in the parent program has brought a deep source of joy and meaning to her own life. Years after she left everything she knew behind, she found her community again. “Of course I felt at home; I felt like I was with my family.”



► **WATCH ONLINE:** Click on the video to learn more.

2 There are a myriad of systemic barriers that exclude families from participation in decision-making that affects the ECE system.

When choosing an ECE setting, every family exercises the degree of choice they have to select the setting type that makes the most sense for their young children and themselves. However, it is disproportionately true for racially, culturally, and linguistically minoritized families that the current system design makes it so that choice settings are largely unavailable or inaccessible. Beyond an injustice, this experience represents the first “invitation” families receive to be in partnership with the ECE system to support their young children’s learning and healthy development. And for many, it is a poor welcome indeed—and often a place where trust is lost due to the lack of choices that honor the preferences, needs, and financial realities of families.

Recognizing the resulting need to rebuild trust and engagement, it has become common practice to engage families in opportunities such as advisory tables, listening sessions, and advocacy to influence decision-making, policy, and practice at the systems level. While these types of efforts are presumably well-intentioned and represent important steps toward family partnership, the reality is that not all families can access these opportunities. Families experiencing poverty and economic strain, those who are targeted by racism and nationalism, and others who face any number of socioeconomic barriers are often the least likely to be reached by these kinds of

opportunities. Meanwhile, these socioeconomic barriers disproportionately impact Black and Brown children as a result of chronic divestment in their communities and the many historical and current inequities that have systematically prevented their families from thriving financially and accumulating wealth.⁷ It is also important to note that since the majority of the immigrant population are also people of color, families who have immigrated often experience racialized barriers, which are further compounded by systems that are poorly equipped to support them in navigating unfamiliar systems and the complexities of immigration status. Families struggling to make ends meet and navigate complex social systems may lack the resources of time, emotional capacity, transportation, and more, to fully participate in ways that influence the broader system. In addition, although it is true that the families who are closest to the challenges within the ECE system are well positioned to name these challenges and participate in solutions, systemic barriers often prevent them from gaining the kinds of knowledge and experience to be seen as experts—worthy of a place at the table in making decisions and of the time it takes to listen and respond in a way that transforms policy and practice. The cumulative result: Black, Indigenous, Latine, and other families of color; those who have immigrated; and those with limited English proficiency are among the least likely to participate meaningfully in systems design.

“A true system change starts by making parent participation and engagement an expectation. The Biden-Harris administration has also seen fit to provide resources to boost parent involvement. We in education—not elected officials—need to be part of how this is defined and how we prepare our teachers and parents to participate in a meaningful and constructive way. Don’t you think?”

*—Beatrix Leyva-Cutler,
Executive Director, Bay
Area Hispano Institute
for Advancement, Inc.,
Berkeley, CA*



⁷ Sauter, M. B. (2018, October 10). Faces of poverty: What racial, social groups are more likely to experience it? *USA Today*. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/economy/2018/10/10/faces-poverty-social-racial-factors/37977173>

What can be done . . .

“Families live in communities, and the re-energized and broader racial equity movement has called attention to the importance of bridging the divide between the marginalized families and communities who experience the problems in state-funded programs/services and the proposed and implemented solutions and programs.”⁸

To the degree that ECE systems leaders value and prioritize partnership with racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse families in systems design, these leaders can make choices that create viable pathways to partnership. If we seek to break the status quo, in which the families who are closest to the challenges and inequities that exist within the system are the furthest from opportunities to participate in solutions, this will require visionary leadership and participation across multiple sectors. Administrators, researchers, institutions of higher education, policymakers, and advocates all have a role to play in building partnerships with families that are rooted in trust and respect and that are growing toward authentic co-design. As a start, state and local systems leadership must **include equity-informed family engagement considerations as a foundation of current and future systems-building efforts—and leverage these initiatives to expand pathways to more meaningful partnership between families and systems leaders.** To do so will require strategic action, which could involve the following:

Addressing barriers related to language, culture, and immigration status

To engage culturally and linguistically diverse families, including those who have recently immigrated, requires specific efforts to ensure clear communication. This means offering invitational and other materials in multiple languages as relevant to the community and ensuring there are leaders or translators who can facilitate communication as needed. This could also mean clear and sensitive messaging about the opportunities themselves, who will be involved, and what degree of privacy families can expect—as many contend with concerns surrounding immigration status and the risk of visibility.

Offering a variety of opportunities for families to engage

Not all families possess the same strengths and dispositions, nor do all families face the same types of barriers when it comes to engagement in systems design. Therefore, inclusive family engagement involves multiple opportunities, such as joining listening sessions, focus groups, or sitting for an interview; participating in a survey; sharing experiences and perspectives on social media or other platforms; participating in a speaking engagement; writing a letter; or any number of other potential opportunities.

Owning responsibility for equitable family engagement

Equity in family engagement is measured in outcomes—not in efforts or intentions. Therefore, as highly empowered, highly resourced leaders in the ECE system, we must do away with language and mindsets that blame families of color, immigrant and migrant families, and non-

English-speaking families for not engaging in the ways that are most convenient for ECE leaders. We must recognize that families are not “hard to reach” simply because thus far our efforts have failed to inspire trust and a sense of belonging. Instead, systems leaders are called to a posture of cultural humility—to accept and learn from the failures of the system, disentangle best practice from White-centric norms and expectations, and approach the work of family engagement differently.



The empty seats at the table: How we fail our young children by failing to include families in decision-making

Although “equity” is a buzzword in the ECE field, Devonya Govan-Hunt reminds us that we have a long way to go to begin working toward an equitable ECE system. She sees the potential for progress, not in the popular turn of phrase, but in arguably unpopular methods—those that involve sharing power and listening to communities.

“[Equity] means really listening to what people want. It is critical in early childhood education and particularly in North Carolina, because we’re talking about our Black and Brown children right now because they’re not getting what they need . . . and they’re not getting what they need because of the way that we manage child care in this state . . . and because of the way that we define what quality child care is.”

At the core of the problem is White supremacy, and what that means for Black, Indigenous, Latine, and other communities of color at the very start of life. “It lies within this whole concept of Whiteness, of White is right. This whole idea that our system was built on top of . . . White supremacy. So that means that our children are not necessarily getting what’s culturally responsive and what’s culturally relevant for them in terms of early care and education. So when we take away the power, take away opportunities for our families to make decisions in that manner for their children, they



“Equity is sexy right now in this country. That’s what we want to talk about.” Even though this recognition is a step in the right direction, Devonya Govan-Hunt, Executive Director of the Black Child Development Institute–Charlotte Affiliate, doesn’t foresee any true progress toward equity resulting from “lip service.”

don’t have peace of mind, right? They don’t have peace of mind.”

In response to the failings of a racist child care system, Devonya has seen families either withdraw altogether to protect “their most precious asset,” or struggle through, often to their detriment. “Until we share power, until we’re willing to listen to what people want, we’re not really achieving equity, and we’re going to keep going in this circle and our children will continue to suffer.” So, she and her team practice that less attractive form of building equity. They form genuine

relationships, share space with one another, listen, reflect, and recognize the strengths families already have.

“We believe that our families, our parents, are children’s first and most important educator and lifelong advocate. So everything that we do [supports that], whether it is providing books for classroom libraries directly to our teachers,

providing books directly into the hands of our children to build home libraries, whether it is sitting around the table with a group of family child care professionals or center directors and just having conversations about what they need to grow their programs, or to make sure that their families are thriving. And we believe that we’re giving them tools so that they can advocate for themselves.”



► **WATCH ONLINE:** Click on the video to learn more.

3 Programs and systems must move beyond symbolic and tokenizing family engagement efforts toward authentic co-design

While families experiencing systemic inequities have not traditionally been centered in program and systems design efforts, they are no strangers to the work of creating systemic change in their own communities. There are many ways that families who have the least amount of access to an already starved system have forged grassroots solutions to navigating the barriers that are imposed on them and their children. From community-supported child care solutions, such as FFN care, to informal networks built to share critical information and more, families of color possess immeasurable capacity to create and leverage systems based on a culture of interdependence to meet community needs.⁹ Unfortunately, program and systems-level design efforts have largely overlooked these strengths, as well as the ways current structures have limited access to decision-making influence among families. Historically, decision-making efforts have attempted to add families to existing processes in ways that (1) ask families to do uncompensated labor (including sharing their experiences) to benefit decision-makers and their efforts, which may or may not directly impact families themselves or their young children; (2) ask individual or small groups of families to

affirm program or system decisions on behalf of broad swaths of the community—then use these minimal efforts as “cover” when there is failure or critique; and (3) ask families to meet the program or system “where it is.” For example, families may be expected to attend advisory panels alongside ECE “experts” and other highly empowered people, creating conditions in which families sense the power differential and are unlikely to dissent—and are even less likely to be heard if they do. For these and similar modes of engagement, the further a family is from power and opportunity (which is defined by Whiteness, economic privilege, expertise/qualification, English-language proficiency, etc.), the less likely the family is to be meaningfully included. For this reason, program and systems design efforts continually fail to represent the best interests of the most vulnerable young children and their families.



9 Hannon, L. V. (2020). *You don't know my story: Engaging Black parents with culturally responsive school practices* [Doctoral dissertation]. Montclair State University.

<https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1666&context=etd>

What can be done . . .

“It is our duty to learn from the families and programs at the center of successful early education stories. This includes showcasing innovative approaches to meaningfully communicating and partnering with diverse families, developing partnerships that are reflective of the local context and communities where young children grow and learn. When we approach family partnerships this way, the strategies and lessons learned from these community-defined approaches can be framed in a way to provide insight into how to further inform the development and implementation of larger systems-level practices, policies and supports to authentically partner with families.”¹⁰

Within equity-conscious ECE programs and systems, there has been increased attention to “design at the margins.” The concept of designing at the margins is built on the belief that co-creating systems and structures with

communities in a way that prioritizes the needs of those who are the furthest from opportunity leads to better systems and structures for all. This concept acknowledges the reality that ECE initiatives and programming designed for the majority, or the “normative” group, have routinely marginalized and excluded large populations of children and families. Building on the concept of design at the margins, authentic partnership with families and communities is more than a good idea—it is necessary to create meaningful outcomes in the lives of all children. Program and systems leaders must seek opportunities to meaningfully include families in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of initiatives, and value their input enough to make substantive change. To deepen family engagement practice, ECE leaders can focus on the following:

Creating pathways for families to build advocacy and communication skills

Although families are already their children’s best and most passionate advocates, there could be opportunities to better prepare families to know their power and use their voice effectively within existing systems and structures. ECE advocacy organizations operating at the state or local level—especially those led by families—offer an opportunity for families to build coalitions and practice communicating effectively with ECE leaders and decision-makers.

Investing in community or program-led innovation around family engagement practices

States and localities can partner with communities by providing resources to innovate around family engagement efforts that work for their communities. In addition, this would involve communication channels to (1) enable shared learning across programs and communities to build upon promising practices; and (2) translate the wisdom and successes of communities to systems leadership to bring effective practices to scale.

“I’ve been doing this kind of work for a long time—designing [with] this community. And this is a formula that you learn when you do this kind of advocacy work: It’s never going to work when you invite somebody that is uncomfortable into an area of discomfort. It’s just bad. You program, you do things where people are. And it’s in you going there that you build a trust—you being there and you seeing things and you transforming yourself by being there—that then you can begin to say, ‘What is the system that needs to be designed?’”

—Banu Valladares, Executive Director, Charlotte Bilingual Preschool, Charlotte, NC

Creating platforms to elevate families’ stories to the attention of decision-makers

States and localities can support programs and/or communities in storytelling efforts. Clear guidance from systems leadership—met with commensurate resources and support—can enable programs to be an essential link, opening channels of communication that create valuable feedback loops between families and decision-makers.



¹⁰ Caldwell, J. (2019). Centering equity: Authentic family engagement is bi-directional: Engaging in meaningful family partnerships. *Education Policy Blog*. New America. <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/edcentral/centering-equity-authentic-family-engagement-bi-directional-engaging-meaningful-family-partnerships>

Multiplying power by dividing it: The pathway to a better system for everyone forged in authentic community partnership

Sylvia P. Simms is a seasoned expert in the work of collaboration for the greater good. So it's not difficult for her to spot the many ways in which ECE systems have failed at creating the right conditions for collaboration with families and communities. "I think folks are not coming together because people are afraid to give up what they have . . . They look at the pie and they see that they have a slice and they're not willing to give up their slice to help somebody else."

Simms, unlike many "power brokers" in the ECE system, recognizes that sharing power by inviting more stakeholders to the table doesn't mean there will be less to go around. Sharing power truly means a stronger team that wins together by creating a system in which everyone can contribute and everyone can benefit. She reflects, "We have to have the community be involved. We have to have the students that live in that community be involved because if they feel as though that they are a piece of what's going on in their neighborhood, then they will have more pride into what's going on in that school or that community."

And yet, she is not yet seeing a system in which all stakeholders are valued and invited to the table. "A



Sylvia P. Simms of Philadelphia, PA, founded her own organization, PARENT POWER: What Will You Do With Yours?, as a way to help low-income families get more involved in their children's education. In her work there and as a Housing Support Coach at SELF Inc., she's found the key to community teamwork is, well, to make sure everyone is invited to the team. "How can we make sure that children are getting a quality education? . . . First of all, we have to have the parents be involved."

lot of times people just don't think people who are uneducated have any value add, which is untrue. If people knew better, they would do better, but you have to have the crucial conversations with them to understand what is going on in their lives. So then they can help you to do your job better."

To Simms and others who think as she does, it's crucial that collaborative leadership and decision-making bodies represent the communities they impact—and that they truly come alongside

community-driven efforts. "A lot of folks don't represent the community that folks are working with or working on. It's a lot of people that work for different organizations, but don't know the population that they serve . . . So if you want to

get this right, you go into the communities, get the folks that are doing the work and the communities and bring them to the tables, educate, empower, engage them. So that way, they could be a part of the policy change that we are making."



► **WATCH ONLINE:** Click on the video to learn more.

ParentChild+: Building meaningful partnership with families and providers in Philadelphia, PA

ParentChild+ is a multigenerational early childhood program delivered through direct supports to both families and ECE providers, with locally operated chapters in four Philadelphia communities. The program's work is grounded in the idea that parent-child interaction is a critical component of language and early literacy skill development in the early years, and the program's goal is to ensure that all children, regardless of their race, socioeconomic status, or zip code, have equal possibilities from the start. For families, ParentChild+ offers home visitation to build skills and resources within families to help prepare young children for success in school. For providers, the approach works in a wide variety of family child care environments to offer training, technical assistance, and other resources in support of high-quality ECE practices and family partnership. In working with families that are often the furthest from programming opportunities, ParentChild+ works both with licensed providers in family and group-family settings and with family, friend, and neighbor providers. Both aspects of the work center the following principles:

Meeting families and providers where they are

Home visitation enables families who are impacted and isolated by poverty, language and literacy barriers, and lack of transportation to participate in ECE services that they might not otherwise be able to access. Meanwhile, supporting providers through partnerships with programs ensures that the support they receive from ParentChild+ is accessible and relevant to their specific early childhood community. Early learning specialists at ParentChild+ build relationships with providers and families with the intention of learning how best to bolster their efforts to support the children in their communities.

Prioritizing the “fit” of local early learning specialists with the providers and families they serve

Recognizing the role of cultural and linguistic familiarity in successful partnership, each family and program is matched with a community-based early learning specialist who shares their language and cultural background. Making these connections with families enables them to receive culturally responsive home visits. The early learning specialists are familiar with the communities they are serving and often are knowledgeable about the unique strengths and challenges of each of the communities they work in, making it easier to connect families to resources. ParentChild+ prioritizes linguistic and cultural fit in addition to formal education when it comes to building and preparing the program's team of early learning specialists.

Expanding opportunities for families and providers

As families “graduate” from the program, early learning specialists work to ensure the young children in those families are enrolled in high-quality preschool programs. Furthermore, many parents go on to become early learning specialists themselves. Meanwhile, providers are encouraged to participate in Communities of Practice (CoP), in hopes that they may share and learn actionable lessons. This space provides an opportunity to discuss systemic issues such as policy, workforce compensation, and child care deserts. This knowledge enables providers to meaningfully participate in this discourse long after their work with ParentChild+.

How does it support communities of color?

By working with local partner agencies to carefully monitor the quality and impact of the program in these communities, the program aims to reach the most isolated and often under-resourced families in urban, suburban, and rural communities. As part of an organization-wide commitment to equity, ParentChild+ works to expand its curriculum to better represent the families and providers served and engages with staff from different geographies and racial/cultural/linguistic backgrounds to evaluate curriculum and materials being used with families and providers in communities. ParentChild+ is committed to providing all families with reading materials that are diverse, inclusive, and culturally relevant, while also prioritizing helping children to understand the importance of racial justice, be rooted in their own identity, and develop a strong sense of self and understanding of others.

[TO LEARN MORE](#)

ParentChild+
Equal Possibilities From The Start

ParentChild+ (n.d.), “If We’re Ever Going to End Inequity, We Need to Start at the Beginning”

[VISIT WEBSITE](#)



Reflection corner

The following are a few questions to consider about family engagement practices and outcomes in the community in which you have influence. No matter what part of the ECE field you represent, your leadership, systems-building, and/or advocacy efforts can be further refined through

strategies to increase meaningful partnership with families. Use these questions individually or with other leaders in your organization to identify and lean into your role of designing, implementing, evaluating, or otherwise supporting family engagement efforts.

Consider the characteristics of the families in the community or communities you serve. What makes it difficult for them to fully engage as partners in early learning? What have you learned by listening to families?

Where could strategies for listening and learning from families be strengthened?

What opportunities are there for families to participate in leadership of the ECE program(s) or system in which you or your organization has influence?

What strategies might make the most sense to engage families as partners in program and/or systems design in your communities? What unique perspectives and expertise could families bring to the table?

How could storytelling offer a meaningful channel for partnership with families, as well as valuable guidance for ECE leaders in your community?



Resources

For additional information and perspectives on family and community partnership, check out these resources from other leaders in the field.



US Department of Health and Human Services. Administration for Children and Families. Head Start Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center. Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework (2022).

This framework provides a strong model and framework for family engagement practices and implementation. This page provides additional resources to support implementation of a model that is grounded in promoting equity, inclusiveness, and cultural and linguistic responsiveness.

[LEARN MORE](#)



Center for the Study of Social Policy
Ideas into Action

Center for the Study of Social Policy. Strengthening Families (2022).

By focusing on the five universal family strengths identified in the *Strengthening Families Protective Factors Framework*, this page provides resources for system leaders, community leaders, and service providers to learn how to better engage, support, and partner with parents in order to achieve the best outcomes for kids.

[LEARN MORE](#)



Center for the Study of Social Policy
Ideas into Action

Center for the Study of Social Policy. Protective Factors Framework (2022).

The five protective factors at the foundation of *Strengthening Families* are characteristics that have been shown to make positive outcomes more likely for young children and their families. This page includes links to learn more about the research-informed framework.

[LEARN MORE](#)



TNTP reimagine teaching

TNTP, Inc. COVID-19 School Response Toolkit (2020).

This guide outlines five key steps that can support effective family and community engagement practices, especially as programs consider the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. It includes prompts and reflections to guide the development of a comprehensive community engagement plan.

[LEARN MORE](#)



naeyc[®]

NAEYC. Principles of Effective Family Engagement (n.d.).

NAEYC defines six foundation principles that have been found to effectively engage the families. This page outlines these principles in detail, as well as providing examples of programs implementing these practices successfully.

[LEARN MORE](#)

NEW AMERICA

New America and School Readiness Consulting. Centering Equity: Authentic Family Engagement Is Bi-directional: Engaging in Meaningful Family Partnerships (2019).

This blog post discusses the multifaceted benefits of strong family and community partnerships, particularly for children of color from low-income communities. It highlights exemplary frameworks, models, and programs and provokes further thinking and learning.

[LEARN MORE](#)

The “Workforce Behind the Workforce”

In this chapter . . .

The ECE workforce is made up of the people responsible for caring for children and facilitating their learning and development. It is through their dedicated work that families, communities, and the broader workforce economy can achieve stability and advancement. This chapter will

Pursuing recognition and equity for those who teach and care for young children



the

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examine the ways we conceptualize the workforce, the workforce supports necessary to achieve early childhood racial equity within the field, and the conditions needed to elevate the workforce into decision-making, advocacy, and policy roles that will serve to advance our efforts.

It is undeniable that ECE providers are an essential part of the fabric of society.

As the "workforce behind the workforce,"¹ ECE teachers support the development of young children and enable parents of young children to engage in the labor market themselves. This workforce, made up mostly of women—and in child care environments, disproportionately women of color—shows up every day to care for and educate our nation's youngest children in homes, schools, and community-based programs. The presence and availability of skilled child care providers within communities "enhances family stability and well-being, promotes children's early learning and socio-emotional development, and plays an important role in children's nutrition."²

Despite their critical contributions, the work performed by the ECE workforce has been devalued and marginalized in our society.³

There still exists a significant lack of willingness and political will to change the situation for a workforce that is ranked as one of the lowest-paying bachelor's-degreed professions—one in which more than half of the workforce must rely on public benefits due to poverty-level wages.⁴



Countering political and social apathy, the connection between the quality of ECE programs and the preparation and characteristics of ECE teachers is irrefutable.

Research continues to illustrate that children who participate in high-quality ECE programs are more likely to develop strong academic and social competencies and grow into adulthood with the skills and knowledge necessary to contribute to the economic growth and well-being of their community. And a critical—if

not the most important—ingredient in ensuring a high-quality, effective early learning program is an effective ECE teacher. Simply put, the preparation and actions of ECE teachers are key predictors of children's outcomes in ECE programs.⁵ In addition, for children of color specifically, studies demonstrate that a diverse workforce is essential to positive child development.⁶ Children of color learn best in culturally familiar settings and when they have a strong, positive sense of their racial identities.⁷ If we are to achieve equity for young children, equity for the ECE workforce will be a primary lever for that change.

1 National Conference of State Legislatures. (2021). *The early care and education workforce*. <https://www.ncsl.org/research/human-services/the-early-care-and-education-workforce.aspx#:~:text=Early%20care%20and%20education%20professionals,for%20child%20care%20outweighs%20supply>

2 Streng, M. (2021). *Child care and the benefits for our kids*. First Steps Kent. <https://www.firststepskent.org/articles/child-care-and-the-benefits-for-our-kids>

3 NAEYC. (2019). *Position statement: Advancing equity in early childhood education*. <https://www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/globally-shared/downloads/PDFs/resources/position-statements/advancingequitypositionstatement.pdf>

4 Gould, E., Whitebook, M., Mokhiber, Z., & Austin, L. J. E. (2020). *Financing early educator quality: A values-based budget for every state*. Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley. <https://cscce.berkeley.edu/financing-early-educator-quality-a-values-based-budget-for-every-state>

5 National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). (2009). *Developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programs serving children from birth through age 8*. <https://www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/globally-shared/downloads/PDFs/resources/position-statements/PSDAP.pdf>

6 James, C., Iruka, I., Williams, D. C., Dunbar, W., & Rountree, C. (2020). *Responsible transformation of the early childhood education workforce*. National Black Child Development Institute. <https://www.nbcdi.org/sites/default/files/2020-11/Responsible%20Transformation%20ECE%20Workforce%20Report.pdf>

7 White, A., & Young, C. (2016). *Positive racial identity development in early education: Understanding PRIDE in Pittsburgh*. University of Pittsburgh School of Education/Race and Early Childhood Collaborative. http://www.racepride.pitt.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/PRIDE_Scan.pdf

What communities want you to know

Achieving racial equity within the ECE workforce is important for the future of our society. The community is ready for bold solutions with follow-through that acknowledges, values, and compensates the ECE workforce in ways that honor the value of these professionals' work and that align with similar types of work. Listening to stakeholders in the field, three areas of inquiry came to the forefront:



(121)

1.

How can we **overcome the false distinctions between "caring" and "educating"** that have contributed to the marginalization of women of color in the ECE workforce?

LEARN MORE ON PAGE 123

2.

What will it take to **disrupt the centuries-old legacies of racist and sexist policymaking** that create poor and inequitable compensation?

LEARN MORE ON PAGE 131

3.

How do we directly **address the racial and linguistic inequities in workforce preparation** that keep ECE leaders of color from the most influential positions in the field?

LEARN MORE ON PAGE 135

(122)

1 The ECE workforce recognizes that care and education of young children are inextricable, but false distinctions between the two stand in the way of full recognition within the system.

While this false distinction of the ECE workforce impacts all providers, it has racist implications, both historically and at present. It has shown up in overt and covert ways in our society since enslaved Black women were forced to care for White people's children, and it has been threaded through the centuries by racist and sexist policies related to ECE settings, compensation, teacher preparation, continued training, and career advancement—all of which have negatively influenced society's perspective of the ECE workforce's professionalization.⁸ The distinction between care and education has implied a differential in the value of those roles—so that "early education" has been messaged as a more worthy profession than "child care." As a result, Black women in particular have often been exploited (both during and after enslavement) and relegated to caretaking. Therefore, while the institution of child care has advanced the lives of the "professional" class (predominantly White families) by enabling them to participate in the workforce economy, it has severely constrained the economic positioning of Black women.⁹

And while this issue has its roots in distant history, it is not an issue of the past by any means. In the present day, the distinction between care and early education has created disparities in recognition and compensation that disproportionately impact Black and Latine providers in three primary ways: (1) Among child care providers across birth-to-age-5 programs, women of color are more likely to be working with very young children (infants and toddlers), which is most likely to be considered "caring" instead of "educating," and for which compensation is lower than for preschool-age children.¹⁰ (2) The field has spent decades developing formal structures that serve to professionalize the workforce and ensure safer, higher-quality experiences for children—but these structures have largely left out and led to the marginalization of traditional and familiar forms of care in which women of color are disproportionately represented. For example, caring for one's own grandchildren, or children within one's own broader family or community (FFN care), while an important tradition in

many cultures and contexts, has been excluded from the systems defined as early care and education, and in some contexts, these familial or community-based settings are even referred to as "illegal care."¹¹ (3) Increasing professional preparation standards have failed to

create inclusive pathways for culturally diverse providers whose characteristics and experiences do not reflect the "typical" emerging ECE professional.



8 Lloyd, C. M., Carlson, J., Barnett, H., Shaw, S., & Logan, D. (2021). *Mary Pauper: A historical exploration of early care and education compensation, policy, and solutions*. Child Trends. https://earlyedcollaborative.org/assets/2022/04/Mary-Pauper-updated-4_4_2022_FINAL.pdf

9 Ibid.

10 Austin, L. J. E., Edwards, B., & Whitebook, M. (2019). *Racial wage gaps in early education employment*. Center for the Study of Child Care Employment. <https://cscce.berkeley.edu/racial-wage-gaps-in-early-education-employment>

11 Maryland State Department of Education. (2019). *Guide to regulated child care: Important information about child care facilities*. <https://earlychildhood.marylandpublicschools.org/system/files/filedepot/2/parentbrochuresdedecember2007.pdf>

What can be done . . .

"[ECE teachers] recognized their job to include both care and education. They believed that establishing comfort would create feelings of emotional security that would set the stage for learning."¹²

Young children's healthy development includes their cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development. ECE teachers know that climbing a jungle gym, working through a puzzle, and cooperating with a peer are the tasks of young children, promoting their learning and development, all within reach of a caring and trusted adult in that child's life. ECE teachers are, by definition, child care providers. As child care providers, they support young children's basic needs and provide the secure base a child requires to take risks through experiences that result in learning. ECE teachers thoughtfully consider each child's needs in the context of the environment or setting in which they care for that child and other children.¹³ Recognizing that care and education are inextricably linked, there are opportunities for ECE systems leaders to continue to **recognize and message the impacts of ECE teacher characteristics and practices that create caring and supportive early learning contexts for children prior to kindergarten**. Many states and

localities have begun to pursue more integrated standards for program quality and workforce preparation. These standards are based on key principles that account for the realities of ECE and, thus, the dual role of the ECE environment and provider to educate and care for young children.¹⁴

The time of early childhood is valuable

While the learning and experiences that children have in the early years create a foundation for development throughout their lives, early childhood is more than a means to an end. ECE programming and teaching standards—especially those aimed at remediating outcome gaps along lines of race, income, and place—have often overprioritized academics and behavior management and neglected the needs and rights of children to experience joy, curiosity, challenge, and connection facilitated by their ECE providers.

12 Ostrove, R. (2016). Examining the (false) dichotomy between "care" and "education" in early childhood program: A descriptive case study of teacher-child relationships within a standardized curriculum model [Doctoral dissertation]. Rutgers State University. <https://rucore.libraries.rutgers.edu/rutgers-lib/49133/PDF/1/play>

13 Williams, D. S., & Mulrooney, K. (2021). Guardians in the nursery: The role of early childhood educators in fostering infant and young children's positive mental health. *ZERO TO THREE Journal*, 41(3), 10–16.

14 Brooks, J. L., Gayl, C. L., & Wernstedt-Lynch, C. (2022). *Measuring the quality of early learning environments: A guide to evaluating ideal learning environments for young children*. Trust for Learning.

15 Austin, L. J. E., Edwards, B., & Whitebook, M. (2019). *Racial wage gaps in early education employment*. Center for the Study of Child Care Employment. <https://cscce.berkeley.edu/racial-wage-gaps-in-early-education-employment>

Young children learn through relationships

Beginning with their earliest connections to their parents or primary caregivers, strong, secure relationships are a constant source of learning. Attunement to others—first to adult caregivers, then, with the support of adults, to their peers—children gather and make meaning of language, physical and sociocultural realities, mathematical and scientific concepts, and more. And all of this is made possible by adults who meet children's primary needs and provide a secure base of relationship.

All ECE providers act in a dual role of caregiver and educator

Across all age groups and setting types, those who teach and care for young children offer a nurturing presence, construct the learning environment, and facilitate learning experiences. Therefore, the systems that prepare, support, evaluate, and compensate the ECE workforce must be inclusive in the ways that they reach and support ECE providers. This implies the need for a particular focus on including the providers who have historically been left out of quality and workforce support initiatives (e.g., family child care; family, friend, and neighbor care; infant and toddler care; and teaching assistants/aides)—the lowest-paying roles and the ones in which women of color are disproportionately represented.¹⁵



A culture of caring: Honoring and fostering the importance of family, friends, and neighbors as an essential part of the ECE workforce

In María Romero's Salvadoran culture, it is an honor and great responsibility for grandparents or other family members to care for the youngest children in the family. The children must be with a person whom the family can trust, and who better than an elder within the same family?

As María describes, immigrant families establishing their lives in the United States, as well as families who have suffered mistreatment from formal institutions and the people within them, may not trust the government and related systems because of the pain and tragedies they have heard about, observed, or experienced firsthand.

"In this country we do not know what can happen because we have seen many tragedies and ugly [things]. We are not . . . trusting people. If I . . . am distrustful, and my daughters are distrustful, then we are united by duty to protect our blood family."



María Romero, an *abuela* (grandmother) residing in Charlotte, NC, with her family, is the caregiver for her three great-grandchildren. María's story exemplifies the importance of recognizing the validity and significance of family, friend and neighbor care. "I have been taking care of my grandchildren for 13 years. From there to here, and I've been taking care of them."



► WATCH ONLINE: Click on the video to learn more.

EDvance at San Francisco State University: Centering providers of color in ECE teacher preparation pathways in San Francisco, CA

EDvance is an early childhood teacher preparation program at San Francisco State University. The program supports early educators in advancing their degrees and focuses its recruitment on groups who have been historically underrepresented in higher education, including Black and Latinx teacher candidates. EDvance offers two thoughtfully constructed career pathways for students—one leading to the California Child Development Teacher Permit and the other leading to a bachelor of arts degree (BA) in early childhood education. EDvance supports all enrolled students in gaining hands-on experience in early childhood classrooms. As part of their commitment to constructing equitable pathways, EDvance leaders recognize the value of ECE teachers coming from a variety of backgrounds and understand that ECE teacher preparation does not call for “one-size-fits-all” approaches in higher education. Therefore, the hallmarks of the program include:

Recognizing the value of experience working in ECE programs

To participate in the BA track, students are required to work at least part-time as an ECE teacher. Courses are therefore scheduled to enable those who work in ECE programs to attend classes at convenient times—helping to overcome a significant barrier to career advancement for in-service ECE teachers and equipping pre-service teachers with hands-on experience.

Creating multiple pathways that students can choose from according to their career goals

Two different pathways are offered in recognition that many providers are seeking professional preparation that builds their knowledge and skills while enabling them to get a “foot in the door” in the ECE teaching profession. Offering both pathways acknowledges that the BA is not necessarily the standard, nor is it an appropriate goal in every circumstance. Meanwhile, for those who would prefer and benefit from a BA track, there is a clear pathway to advance from the California Child Development Teacher Permit to the BA.

Offering flexibility to be inclusive of students of differing educational and experiential backgrounds

The BA track is intentionally designed to be inclusive of “traditional” San Francisco State students, those who transfer in from community colleges, and those who are already working in the field and are seeking to advance their degrees.

Educating students on historical and current implications of racism in ECE policy and practice

This foundational knowledge equips students to prioritize equity within their classrooms and organizations and/or to become systems leaders making decisions that help to remove systemic barriers and advance equity in ECE.



TO LEARN MORE



SAN FRANCISCO
STATE UNIVERSITY

Learning Policy Institute (2019), *Promising Models for Preparing a Diverse, High-Quality Early Childhood Workforce*, chapter 3, “EDvance at San Francisco State University: Building Pathways to a Bachelor’s Degree in ECE”

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How does it support communities of color?

Like other cities, San Francisco faces a chronic shortage of qualified early childhood educators who reflect the racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity of the communities they serve. The city also faces the challenge of retaining and graduating first-generation students from historically marginalized groups. Both pathways offered through EDvance are cohort-based and incorporate a focus on social justice and equity that offers extensive student supports, specialized academic advising and educational planning, and need-based financial aid that enables many students to attain a degree without incurring debt—with a particular focus on prioritizing and supporting students of color and those from lower-income backgrounds. Similarly, the program also intentionally recruits and utilizes faculty and staff who have experience in ECE classrooms and who reflect the racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity of the field. They support continual professional learning opportunities and collaboration for students.

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EDvance California (2021), “Pathways to Success”

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2 Lack of political and social progress toward equity is the primary barrier to a well-supported ECE workforce

Race and gender differences in the education workforce paint a picture of deep marginalization and oppression. "Compensation issues cannot be understood without examining the ways in which three dominant themes—race, gender, and class—have fundamentally shaped perceptions of child-rearing more generally, which in turn has affected the laws and policies related to ECE compensation."¹⁶ While the K-12 workforce is about 75% White and 25% male, the ECE workforce is almost entirely female and 60% White, with women of color holding a majority of lower-paying ECE jobs in community-based and home settings (outside of schools). Although the ECE workforce performs work similar to that of teachers in elementary school settings, wages lead to these teachers experiencing poverty rates an average of 7.7 times higher than teachers in the formal schooling system.¹⁷ On top of that, Black ECE teachers are currently being paid on average \$0.78 less per hour than their White peers for equivalent work.¹⁸ The poverty-level wages that ECE teachers are typically paid are often compounded by a lack of access to basic health and well-being supports such as health insurance and paid sick leave. The pandemic brought into

focus the severe consequences of these long-standing realities, as many ECE teachers have been forced to choose between a paycheck or their own health and safety and that of their families.¹⁹ These realities result in high levels of financial and professional insecurity for women and particularly for Black and other women of color, many of whom rely heavily on their earnings to support their own families.²⁰

The reality is that ECE teachers are placed within a patchwork system marked by inadequate funding and compensation strategies, differing educational requirements, and varying terminology about what their work is and how it impacts the community. This insecurity creates significant hardships for both the workforce and ultimately also the field, leading to persistent issues such as high turnover and mobility, lack of access to continuing education and professional development, and poor outcomes surrounding overall career longevity and development,²¹ all of which negatively impact the overall quality of systems and services for the young children and families who rely on them.

"Systemic racism and sexism are to blame. Everything else is a by-product of these problems. Racial equity in the early childhood workforce will be realistic when the powers who govern the policies and regulations recognize how and why racial inequities exist in the first place."

—Tonia McMillan, Owner, Kiddie Depot, Bellflower, CA

By the numbers: Compensation disparities in ECE

- Nationwide, 53% of child care workers were on at least one public assistance program between 2014 and 2016. In 2019, the median wage for US child care workers was \$11.64 per hour, or \$24,230 annually, which is not considered a living wage for a single adult with one child in any US state.^{22 23}
- One in four child care providers reported having at least one other job, and over 40% of them reported that providing child care accounted for less than half of their income.²⁴
- One in three child care providers has experienced at least one material hardship (e.g., food, housing, utilities) during the pandemic.²⁵
- Family, friend, and neighbor care providers reported significantly more material hardship (43.8%) than providers in center-based (32.6%) or home-based (32.9%) child care settings.²⁶



16 Lloyd, C. M., Carlson, J., Barnett, H., Shaw, S., & Logan, D. (2021). *Mary Pauper: A historical exploration of early care and education compensation, policy, and solutions*. Child Trends. https://earlyedcollaborative.org/assets/2022/04/Mary-Pauper-updated-4_4_2022_FINAL.pdf

17 McLean, C., Austin, L. J. E., Whitebook, M., & Olson, K. L. (2021). *Early childhood workforce index 2020*. Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley. <https://cscce.berkeley.edu/workforce-index-2020/report-pdf>

18 Ibid.

19 Gould, E., Whitebook, M., Mokhiber, Z., & Austin, L. J. E. (2020). *Financing early educator quality: A values-based budget for every state*. Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley. <https://cscce.berkeley.edu/financing-early-educator-quality-a-values-based-budget-for-every-state>

20 McLean, C., Austin, L. J. E., Whitebook, M., & Olson, K. L. (2021). *Early childhood workforce index 2020*. Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley. <https://cscce.berkeley.edu/workforce-index-2020/report-pdf>

21 Caven, M. (2021). *Understanding teacher turnover in early childhood education*. Yale School of Medicine. <https://medicine.yale.edu/news-article/understanding-ece-teacher-turnover/#:~:text=Using%20data%20from%20the%202012,high%20as%25E2%80%9330%20percent>

22 Bureau of Labor Statistics, Department of Labor. (2021). *Occupational employment and wage statistics*. <http://stats.bls.gov/oes>

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

What can be done . . .

"Addressing workforce compensation requires a more comprehensive transformation of the financing and organization of the ECE system in the US. Fragmentation of the system at local, state, Tribal, and federal levels has resulted in challenges within ECE structures and institutions that contribute to inadequate compensation and racial inequities for the workforce."²⁷

Considering the barriers to equitable compensation, ECE teacher compensation is being addressed by national advocacy organizations and communities alike. For instance, a recently passed mandate for an ECE pay equity fund in the District of Columbia would require the workforce to be compensated in accord with cost estimates that align child care and early education with other systems of education.²⁸ Despite this and similar localized efforts and policy intentions, however, the needle has not moved for most of the workforce. Making meaningful progress at scale will require bold steps to **ensure that all members of the ECE workforce are compensated and supported such that the ECE field is experienced as a viable, long-term profession.** This includes not only salaries, but also benefits and working conditions.²⁹ Thus, effective strategies would align federal, state, and local efforts toward the following goals:

Elevate the standard of compensation for the workforce

Leveraging the same mechanisms that the state and federal government use to fund other priorities, standardizing "living wage" compensation for the ECE workforce is a choice that policymakers could make—and one that must be made in order to secure a sound financial outlook for the current and future ECE workforce.

Eliminate racial compensation gaps

Setting clear standards for racial pay parity within and across programs, addressing the pay differentials across age groups and setting types, and improving pathways to higher-paying roles for women of color in the profession would be important initial steps toward mitigating racial pay disparities.

27 Lloyd, C. M., Carlson, J., Barnett, H., Shaw, S., & Logan, D. (2021). *Mary Pauper: A historical exploration of early care and education compensation, policy, and solutions*. Child Trends. https://earlyedcollaborative.org/assets/2022/04/Mary-Pauper-updated-4_4_2022_FINAL.pdf

28 Council of the District of Columbia. (2022). *Code of the District of Columbia § 1-325.431: Early Childhood Educator Pay Equity Fund*. <https://code.dccouncil.us/us/dc/council/code/sections/1-325.431>

29 Meek, S., Iruka, I. U., Allen, R., Yazzie, D., Fern, V., Catherine, E., McIntosh, K., Gordon, L., Gilliam, W., Hemmeter, M. L., Blevins, D., & Powell, T. (2020). *Fourteen priorities to dismantle systemic racism in early care and education*. Children's Equity Project. <https://childandfamilysuccess.asu.edu/cep/initiatives/start-with-equity-14-priorities-dismantle-systemic-racism-early-care-education>



3 ECE practitioners, especially women of color, do not have a clear pathway to leadership or policymaking spaces

Those who do the daily work of teaching and caring for young children have unique insights about what families and communities need and value because these ECE practitioners are working alongside families and communities every day. However, members of the workforce also face a number of obstacles that they must overcome to advance along a career path that leads to leadership and decision-making positions. The Institute of Medicine's 2015 *Transforming the Workforce* report discussed common barriers identified by practitioners, which include insufficient time and lack of funds to pursue professional learning, absence of a supportive professional community outside of school systems, staff turnover, and lack of access to policy- and leadership-focused professional learning activities.³⁰

The lack of access to policy- and leadership-focused learning begs the question, *Where are the opportunities for women, especially women of color, and especially those who are already working*

in the field, to take their seat at decision-making tables within their own communities, at the state level, and/or at the national or federal legislative level? The importance of leadership that is inclusive of women of color, particularly those who have had experiences directly within communities as providers and teachers themselves, goes beyond representation. These women are best positioned to design and lead *with* communities rather than *for* communities. They are most equipped with the knowledge to push our field toward naming and implementing equitable policy solutions around issues that directly impact their own families and communities—such as racialized access and outcome gaps, lack of culturally responsive curriculum and pedagogy, and highly segregated programming based on race and class. To move forward, our field must ensure that leadership is truly inclusive and that the people most directly impacted by policy choices have pathways to influential roles in systems leadership and decision-making.

"Also, we need, like, more teachers, more financial aid. There are many people with many abilities in the families, many moms who want to learn to continue, they want to move forward, they like that job, but they don't have financial help to go take a course at the university. College costs quite a bit of money and it's something that we also need to have more families or more people working in the bilingual area."

—Laura Elizabeth Hernández, Parent, Charlotte, NC



30 Institute of Medicine (IOM) and National Research Council (NRC). (2015). *Transforming the workforce for children birth through age 8: A unifying foundation*. National Academies Press.

Keeping an “ear to the ground”: Leading for equity by listening and learning from communities

Allegra Simms-Marshall keeps busy—very busy—doing the multifaceted work of supporting young children and their families: “I sit on a lot of boards. I’m very involved. I partner with the Free Library of Philadelphia, anything that has anything to do with parents.” In her role with the STEP initiative in Philadelphia, she sees to it that children and families are supported by tailored, consistent, and culturally responsive services that drive toward better outcomes in the classroom and in the community—including mental and behavioral health and other social services.

From navigating Individualized Education Plans, to running a Facebook page for parents, to making sure everyone’s up-to-date on the search for the new superintendent in their school district, Allegra has many opportunities to build a deep understanding of what families need, want, and are dealing with these days. Her expertise has been developed over years—beginning with her time as a student in the same schools parents in her community send their children to, and including time spent working in child care and pre-K programs. She knows from experience, and from listening to the families in her community, that parents are tapped out right now. And by her observation, there is little happening at scale to improve conditions.



As a Peer Support Specialist at the Support Team for Educational Partnership (STEP) initiative at the School District of Philadelphia, Allegra Simms-Marshall works hard to make sure families in her community are connected to what they need, whatever that may be. “I try to just keep my ears and feet to the ground so that I can let the families know what’s going on, how you can better advocate for your families, what you need to do. The processes that you need to take.”

“I’ve seen a change by being in the schools for so long. Of course, I was educated in the Philadelphia school district system, but just the overall staff, I just feel like as a city, we are stressed. We’re stressed as parents, we’re stressed as workers. We don’t know what’s going on with this COVID thing. And it’s stressful. One, everyone, has classrooms that are oversized. Everybody is just going through so much at this time. And I don’t feel like as a community, as a city, that we are trying to come together to help each other. Everybody talks about equity and what they want to see and what should be done in our neighborhoods and communities and the amount of violence. But it seems like it’s just talk. Nobody is actually doing anything to try to solve the problem.”

It’s leaders such as Allegra who help families stay afloat and keep programs moving forward. She believes in the parents she works with—believes they just need better resources, more information, more pay, more time with their kids. And most of all, she believes in the children. “Every student that I treat with, that I interact with, even if they’re not students at my school, I treat them as if they were my own. You just have to, because like I said, we don’t know the backgrounds or dynamics that

these children come from, what they’re dealing with over the past night, the course of a week. And everybody just wants somebody to feel like they care for them.”

It’s leaders such as Allegra who hold the kind of experience, insight, and intention that is so often missing from the highest tiers of leadership in ECE systems.



► **WATCH ONLINE:** Click on the video to learn more.

What can be done . . .

"[Leaders of color in the field] urged the development of clear, accessible pathways to policy and advocacy positions through systems work such as state early childhood career lattices and creating more connections to networks, internships, and fellowships with intentionality on the need to attract and support people of color to early childhood education policy work."³¹

It has long been part of the ECE workforce development agenda to open more pathways—expanding our collective thinking about what viable career trajectories in ECE can look like. For instance, in its analysis of policies needed to create effective pathways toward leadership in our field, the Center for American Progress, citing the US Department of Health and Human Services Policy Statement on Career Pathways, stated: "Pathways should articulate the skills and competencies required to be promoted to a new position or to remain in the same role but move to a new program or serve a different age group of children. As staff advance, the pathway should also reflect opportunities for increasingly specific tracks or specialties, such as program management and business administration, coordination of educational programming, or early childhood special education."³²

To expand on that idea, the Institute of Medicine's 2015 *Transforming the Workforce* report recommended that ECE systems "create clear pathways to leadership, policy and advocacy spaces that are accessible to women of color, particularly those women who are currently practitioners in the field, working directly with children and families."³³ Next steps could include:

Support for states to build on these recommendations within specific state and community contexts

In response to the *Transforming the Workforce* report, the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine funded implementation teams in several states focused on realizing specific recommendations from the report.³⁴

31 Robinson, A. (2020). *Reflections and recommendations from interviews with eight early childhood education policy leaders of color: Why is everyone at the policy tables so white?* University of Maryland School of Public Policy. <https://spp.umd.edu/research-impact/publications/reflections-and-recommendations-interviews-eight-early-childhood>

32 Ullrich, R., Hamm, K., & Schochet, L. (2017). *6 policies to support the early childhood workforce*. Center for American Progress (CAP). <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/early-childhood/reports/2017/02/06/298085/6-policies-to-support-the-early-childhood-workforce>

33 Institute of Medicine (IOM) and National Research Council (NRC). (2015). *Transforming the workforce for children birth through age 8: A unifying foundation*. National Academies Press. <https://nam.edu/programs/innovation-to-incubation>

34 Ibid. The states that participated were California, Colorado, Illinois, Indiana, Minnesota, Nebraska, New York, Virginia, and Washington. Also participating was the region of Washington, DC; Maryland; and Northern Virginia.

Development of fellowships, mentoring, and other intentional, funded efforts to diversify leadership tables

Several philanthropic organizations (Irving Harris Foundation, Annie E. Casey Foundation), national organizations (National Black Child Development Institute, Zero to Three), and states (Oregon, Washington) have funded fellowships to increase exposure, facilitate access for those who have historically been underrepresented, and create mentorship and learning opportunities.

Cultivation of policy and advocacy "tracks" within higher education programs

These would allow both those who are entering the field and those who are serving in programmatic roles to engage in coursework and preparation designed to prepare them for leadership roles in local, state, and federal policy and advocacy spaces.



Emerging Leaders Fellowship for Race Equity: Preparing and equipping equity-informed decision-makers in Alameda County, CA

The Alameda County (California) Department of Education implemented a pilot, "Emerging Leaders Fellowship for Race Equity," which supports early childhood teachers from diverse backgrounds to build their capacity to advance in the field and lead for equity. This fellowship was developed based on an analysis of the early childhood workforce that found that while classroom teachers often reflected the make-up of the community they served, ECE leadership—from center directors to the most influential leaders in ECE systems—did not. The fellowship aimed to create a deep understanding of racial inequities and disparities and the impact of such institutional barriers on children, families, and communities, as well as strengthen participants' leadership skills through in-depth, inquiry-based learning. While the initial fellowship was only an 18-month pilot, this model serves as a national example of the power of cohort-based leadership development for the early childhood workforce. The project is transitioning into the California Early Childhood Mentor Program, which will eventually be part of the state's QRIS system. As a result of participation, fellows reported upon completion

that they (1) were better prepared to employ more equity-informed approaches and perspectives within their spheres of influence as leaders; and (2) felt more empowered to discuss and challenge systems of marginalization, oppression, and racial inequities at the individual, organizational, and institutional levels.

How does it support communities of color?

In 2014, the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment at UC Berkeley found diverse communities and cultures were poorly represented in director, supervisor, and other leadership positions. This fellowship was created to respond to the vast racial and cultural diversity of the communities of Alameda County and the limited options for early childhood providers of color to advance to leadership positions. Furthermore, the fellowship served to forge a stronger connection between educators and administrators and their communities—creating opportunities for ECE leaders to meaningfully partner with families and communities to make lasting change.



TO LEARN MORE

Build
INITIATIVE

BUILD Initiative (2018), "The Alameda County Emerging Leaders Fellowship"

VISIT WEBSITE

Reflection corner

The following are a few questions to think about as you consider your individual and/or organizational role to support the ECE workforce. These questions are offered to help individuals or leadership teams reflect on opportunities to

reduce inequities, improve conditions within the workforce, and create advancement opportunities for leaders of color. They are intended to generate discussion and collaboration on how we, as ECE leaders, can work collaboratively toward progress.

In what ways, and at what scale, can you or your organization promote the recognition and support of the full range of early childhood care and education arrangements that families prefer and choose?

What do you notice about the racial, cultural, and linguistic identities of the leaders around you? What ideas do you have about how to create pathways for more ECE leaders of color to advance to influential roles?

How does your organization or policy environment define ECE providers? Who is included and who is not included in workforce development efforts in your professional context?

What are the prevailing messages about the contribution and value of the ECE workforce?

What needs of the workforce are best addressed by workforce development efforts in your community, state, or area(s) of focus? What needs are most overlooked?

How do you see the historical and current context surrounding the false distinction between "educating" and "caring" show up in your community, state, or area(s) of focus? In what ways have you seen this impact ECE policies, especially surrounding the workforce?



Resources

For additional information and perspectives on equity in the ECE workforce, check out these resources from other leaders in the field.



Education Commission of the States, Strengthening the Early Childhood Education Workforce (2020).

This policy brief identifies five policy levers, in addition to funding opportunities, that states employ to attract, support and retain quality talent in the early education workforce. It provides state examples throughout each of the policy areas to provide insight into how these strategies are being implemented across the nation.

[LEARN MORE](#)



Center for the Study of Child Care Employment. *The Early Childhood Workforce Index (2020).*

The Early Childhood Workforce Index provides a state-by-state look at policies and conditions affecting the early care and education workforce. This biennial report has tracked state progress since 2016. The report typically provides updated policy recommendations and spotlights state examples, including, more recently, responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Early Childhood Workforce Index. *State Profiles (2020).*

This page provides state workforce data, including median wages and poverty rates for ECE teachers and what each state is doing to support ECE teacher preparation, compensation, and working conditions.

[LEARN MORE](#)



NAEYC. *Power to the Profession and the Unifying Framework for the Early Childhood Education Profession (2020).*

Leading national organizations that represent members of the ECE field have created a consensus framework that articulates the career pathways, competencies, qualifications, standards, compensation, and infrastructure that will lead to a unified and diverse ECE profession serving children birth through age 8 across states and settings. The work has been particularly informed by intentional outreach to and engagement with ECE teachers from communities of color, those who speak Spanish, and those living in rural communities. This framework has resulted in specific recommendations and guidance.

[LEARN MORE](#)

Power to the Profession

Power to the Profession website.

Dive deeper about Power to the Profession on its dedicated website. It showcases the breadth of consensus and decision cycles, stakeholder engagement, and supporting documents.

[LEARN MORE](#)



NAEYC. *Increasing Qualifications, Centering Equity: Experiences and Advice from Early Childhood Educators of Color (2019).*

This paper explores responses, reactions, and recommendations from 50 ECE teachers of color located in three states: New Jersey, North Carolina, and Wisconsin. The report's findings indicate that policy changes not only better support ECE teachers of color in tangible ways, but also make strides toward a future in which ECE professionals are diverse, effective, well prepared, and well compensated for their valuable and complex work.

[LEARN MORE](#)



NAEYC. *Preparing a Profession: Perspectives of Higher Education Leaders on the Future of the Early Childhood Education Workforce (2021).*

This report shares perspectives about the current state of the ECE field and the role of higher education institutions in strengthening the profession.

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NATIONAL ACADEMIES

Sciences
Engineering
Medicine

Institute of Medicine and National Research Council. *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation* (2015).

The report explores the science of child development, particularly looking at implications for the professionals who work with children, and examines the current capacities and practices of the workforce, the settings in which these professionals work, the policies and infrastructure that set qualifications and provide professional learning, and the government agencies and other funders that support and oversee these systems.

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NATIONAL ACADEMIES

Sciences
Engineering
Medicine

Webinar: *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation* (2016).

The webinar features members of the study committee that authored the report and discusses the report's conclusions and recommendations.

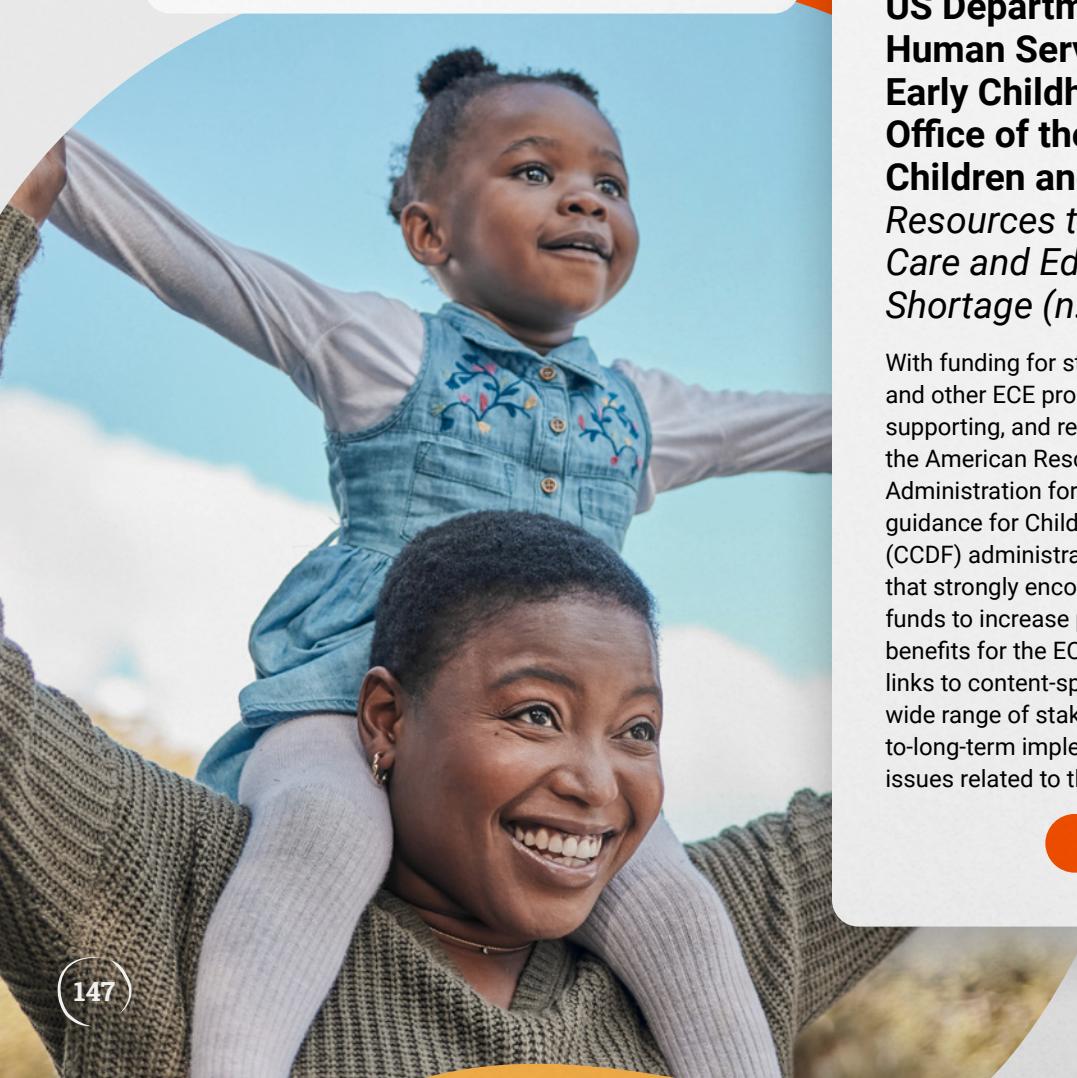
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ADMINISTRATION FOR CHILDREN & FAMILIES

US Department of Health and Human Services. Office of Early Childhood Development. Office of the Administration for Children and Families. *Strategy Resources to Address the Early Care and Education Workforce Shortage* (n.d.).

With funding for states, Head Start programs, and other ECE programs to invest in recruiting, supporting, and retaining staff through the American Rescue Plan (ARP) Act, the Administration for Children and Families published guidance for Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) administrators and Head Start programs that strongly encourages these entities to use ARP funds to increase payments and compensation and benefits for the ECE workforce. This page includes links to content-specific resources that support a wide range of stakeholder audiences seeking short-to-long-term implementation solutions to address issues related to the ECE workforce.

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Telling a More Hopeful Story

Deconstructing ECE research and data practices to tell the truth about the system and the potential of young children



In this chapter . . .

Data includes many types and sources of information: lived experiences, discussions, statistics, survey responses, documents, written communications, photographs, statements, and more. *Research* is used to gather and interpret data using a systematic process. Drawing from the experiences and perspectives of early childhood leaders in multiple communities and the efforts of researchers in the field, this chapter will examine the power of research and data to drive or undermine an early childhood racial equity agenda.



Research designed and implemented with equity at the center has the potential to drive progress.

Research that yields relevant, disaggregated data can identify widespread inequities impacting marginalized racial, cultural, and linguistic communities. One example is Gilliam's work to uncover the prevalence of implicit bias and its impact on rates of exclusionary discipline across race and gender in the early learning classroom.⁵ Research that applies a race-conscious lens to build on existing research and discourse, such as Barbarin and Iruka's exploration of socio-emotional competency in boys of color, can shed light on how prior research initiatives and norms have missed the mark for children, families, and communities of color.⁶ Research that contends honestly with system realities and offers a truthful account of community experiences holds incredible power to move an ECE equity agenda. That is, it has the power to inform effective policymaking that removes barriers, calls for redistribution of resources, and drives toward more equitable access to high-quality ECE opportunity. To the degree that the process and outcomes of ECE research are inclusive, truthful, and community-affirming, they serve as the underpinning of our efforts to advance equity in ECE systems.

By and large, ECE leaders agree on the critical importance of research and data to drive systems-building with an equity agenda.

Over the past several decades, research has empowered leaders in the field to understand and communicate the positive impacts of investing in early learning. Seminal research such as HighScope's Perry Preschool Project,¹ the Abecedarian Project,² the Chicago Child-Parent Center Program,³ and the body of work behind the Heckman Equation,⁴ among others, has created a foundation for advocacy and generated support for investments in the early years—and particularly for prioritizing investments to historically marginalized ECE communities.

1 HighScope. (2022). Perry Preschool Study. <https://highscope.org/perry-preschool-project>

2 Carolina Abecedarian Project. (n.d.). The Abecedarian Project. University of North Carolina, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute. Retrieved April 6, 2022, from <https://abc.fpg.unc.edu/>

3 Reynolds, A. J. (1999). The Chicago Longitudinal Study: A study of children in the Chicago Public Schools. University of Minnesota Institute of Child Development. <https://innovation.umn.edu/cls/wp-content/uploads/sites/23/2018/04/Clsweb.pdf>

4 García, J. L., Heckman, J. J., Leaf, D. E., & Prados, M. J. (2017). Quantifying the life-cycle benefits of a prototypical early childhood program (NBER Working Paper No. 23479). National Bureau of Economic Research. <https://heckmanequation.org/www/assets/2017/01/w23479.pdf>

5 Gilliam, W. S., Maupin, A. N., Reyes, C. R., Accavitti, M., & Shic, F. (2016, September 28). Do early educators' implicit biases regarding sex and race relate to behavior expectations and recommendations of preschool expulsions and suspensions? [Research study brief]. Yale University Child Study Center. https://medicine.yale.edu/childstudy/policy-and-social-innovation/zigler/publications/preschool%20implicit%20bias%20policy%20brief_final_9_26_276766_54643_v1.pdf

6 Barbarin, O., Iruka, I. U., Harradine, C., Winn, D.-M. C., McKinney, M. K., & Taylor, L. C. (2013). Development of social-emotional competence in boys of color: A cross-sectional cohort analysis from pre-K to second grade. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 83(2–3), 145–155. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajop.12023>

However, research and data initiatives too often fall short of these and other standards for equity-centered approaches.

Misuses of research and data mark the historical and current landscape of our nation's ECE system and have driven the conversation about children, families, and programs in all the wrong directions. Research initiatives have routinely missed the mark on providing contextualized data that acknowledges the implications of race and

culture on child development and have instead reinforced White-centric norms and standards. These initiatives have failed to create awareness and accountability for those entrusted with decision-making and have instead fueled racist beliefs and practices surrounding children of color and their families. At times, research initiatives have led to "solutions" that systematically disadvantage communities of color—and at other times, these initiatives have kept the field stagnant in cycles of "learning" without generating any actionable solutions at all. With these and other systemic failings in mind, the ECE community is calling for change.



What communities want you to know

While research and data are necessary components of an ECE equity agenda, the field must also recognize their history of misuse and the many harmful and counterproductive consequences that communities have faced. Conversations with members of the ECE field yielded three primary considerations for leaders seeking to conduct or utilize research and data to inform ECE systems-building:



1.

How are **research agendas** established, by whom, and for what purposes?

LEARN MORE ON PAGE 155

2.

Do our **research methods** honor, include, and fairly represent communities of color?

LEARN MORE ON PAGE 163

3.

What is the real impact of **data messaging** to and about communities of color?

LEARN MORE ON PAGE 169

1 Research agendas and topics are determined by significant “power brokers” in the ECE field.

When it comes to ECE research, federal and state agencies, foundations, academic institutions, and independent researchers are typically in the driver's seat. These entities hold the power to determine what research initiatives will be funded, what questions they will seek to answer, and on which communities the research will focus. While these “power brokers” are presumably well-intentioned and are usually identified as experts in the ECE field, they do not typically represent the demographics or share in the lived experiences of those who have historically been (and currently are) the furthest from opportunity.⁷ At the same time, families and communities of color have been living with and solving for the problems created by structural racism within these same institutions for generations. Within such communities lives a wealth of wisdom and resources largely unacknowledged and unsupported by the ECE research community—the demonstrated capacity to design systematic and far-reaching solutions that benefit young children and strengthen the social fabric of communities. Yet, in the process of establishing research agendas—even those

that focus on early childhood conditions and outcomes within Black, Indigenous, Latine, and other communities of color—communities are rarely consulted on what kinds of data are most important and relevant to them. There is rarely an earnest examination of what strategies can be built upon, what families and community leaders want to learn, and what stories they wish to tell about young children and families. As a result, even well-intentioned research initiatives fail at the most fundamental aim of any serious racial equity agenda—a leveling of power and control of resources, so that Black and Brown children and their families may no longer be prevented from reaching their full potential for learning, prosperity, and human becoming within the context of culture and community. Where the power to direct research agendas is controlled by ECE “power brokers,” research and data become tools to make decisions for and about communities whose truths have been repeatedly discredited and ignored.

7 Chakravarthy, P., Kuo, R., Grubbs, V., & McIlwain, C. (2018). #CommunicationSoWhite. *Journal of Communication*, 68(2), 254–266. <https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqy003>

“I think too often we are the ‘know it all expert’ and we have a lot of excuses for why we don’t engage communities, why we don’t engage people. We say, oh, you know, they don’t really have time. That’s why they’re paying us. They need us to do this. They don’t. And we use that as an excuse. And then we make these assumptions about what’s best for people based on that.”

—Carol Austin, Executive Director of First Up, Philadelphia



What can be done . . .

“Community-based participatory research is a process that has shown considerable promise . . . because of its emphasis on building trust and genuine collaborative partnerships, and on using study findings to help bring about changes in programs, practices, and policies.”⁸

Used as a tool for equity instead, ECE research agendas focused on communities of color can be co-designed to reflect the values, interests, and prevailing wisdom of their focal communities. In recent years, pioneering researchers have offered the field models of research co-design that involve communities in every stage of the process, beginning with identifying research topics. In an emergent and promising approach, researchers can **advance community-based participatory research involving partnership between research institutions and communities to address community priorities for ECE through collaborative research**. Where decades of traditional research have further concentrated power within White-dominated research

institutions, community-based participatory research has the potential to shake the foundations of inequity in the relationship between ECE researchers and communities of color. Why? The reason is this: while traditional approaches to research have created some important initial “wins” for young children, it is simply not good enough to continue with a system in which the questions, answers, and “solutions” associated with research lie in the hands of the same institutions that have created the conditions for generations of oppression. A commitment to racial equity in the ECE system requires a redistribution of power—including the power to influence which child, family, and community stories are told through research.

⁸ Minkler, M., Garcia, A. P., Rubin, V., & Wallerstein, N. (2012). *Community-based participatory research: A strategy for building healthy communities and promoting health through policy change*. PolicyLink. <https://www.policylink.org/sites/default/files/CBPR.pdf>



“[Equity] doesn’t mean pouring money into [programs] that are governed and managed by the state. It means really listening to what people want . . . We believe in a grassroots approach, and that means that all the power lies within those people who are not typically invited to the table, which is our families, our parents, our family, child care practitioners, sometimes our center teachers who are not invited to the table in the room when it comes to making decisions about what families need to thrive.”

—Devonya GovanHunt, Executive Director, Black Child Development Institute—Charlotte Affiliate, Charlotte, NC



When communities tell their own stories: The power of storytelling to “get it right” with children and families

Carol Austin knows that stories are at the heart of true connection—and key to nuanced, community-affirming data. “I heard a quote that once you know somebody’s story, it’s kind of hard to not love him.”

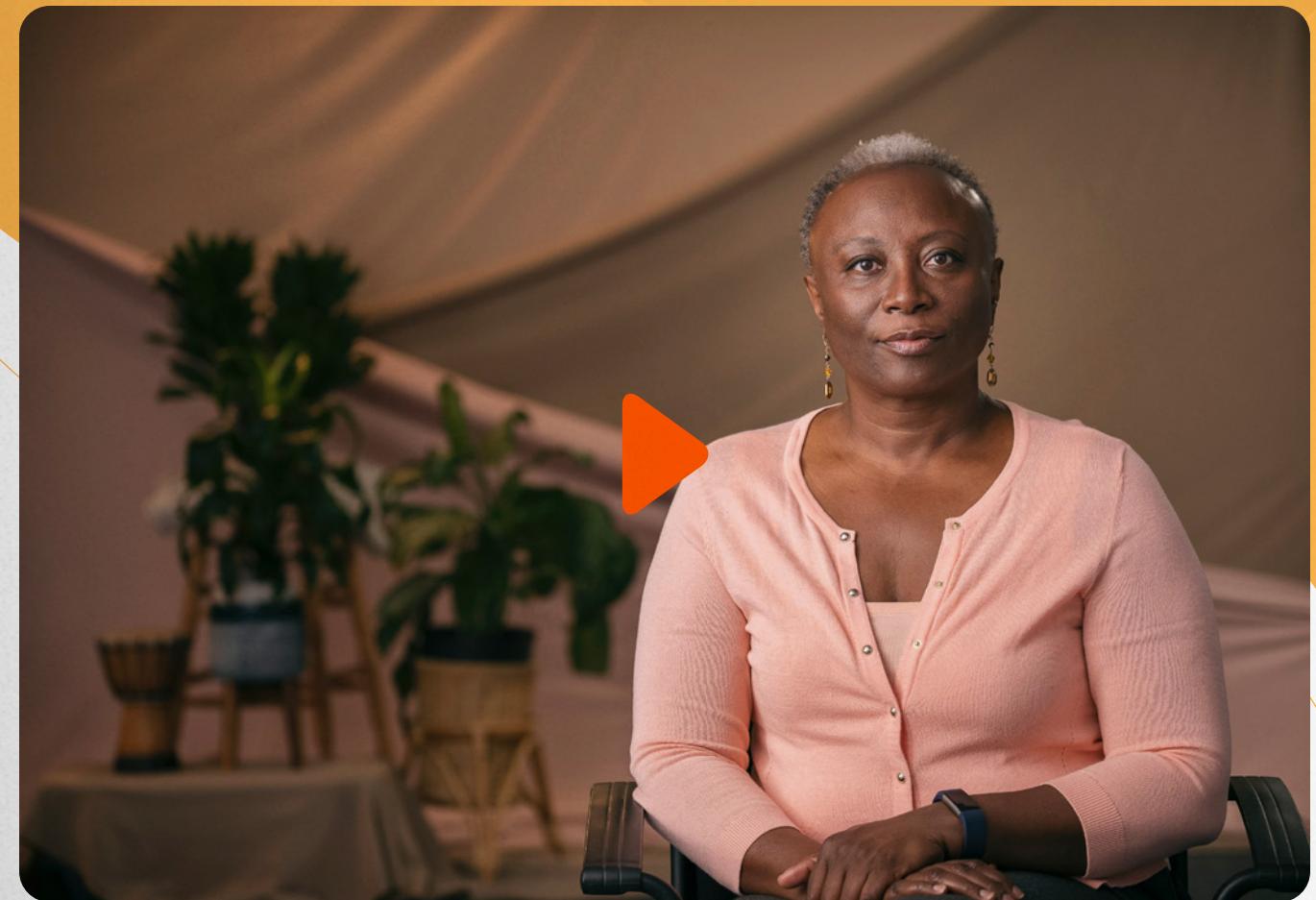
All ECE research and data tell a story. But what if the stories being told are incomplete? Austin notes the historical pressure that organizations like hers have faced from funders and traditional nonprofit measurements to flatten complex community experiences into tidy little digestible columns of data—or worse, into narratives of deficiency.

Her team at First Up decided to tackle this issue head-on, starting with rethinking their entire approach to data and storytelling. “We’ve started to look at ‘What do we want to measure and why?’ which could be very distinct from what a funder may want you to measure. We don’t tend to measure what are the assets; we tend to measure, ‘What are the deficits? What’s the crime rate?’ What did we see in terms of positives, that children are doing well? Developmentally, we tend to too often look at what they’re not [doing well]. What does this child bring? What did these teachers bring to the table?’”



Carol Austin is the Executive Director of First Up, a nonprofit ensuring children in southeastern Pennsylvania have access to the highest-quality early learning opportunities available. In her more than 25 years of working with families, teachers, and children, she has seen firsthand the power of good storytelling—a power to relate to and build empathy for one another. “It’s kind of hard to not get connected because when you start to hear another’s stories, you realize just how much we are alike.”

She knows her organization is not alone either in facing these challenges or in seeking solutions. Austin hopes that strength-based storytelling becomes the norm when providing the usual data to funders and the public. “There’s a place to have both, to ensure that there are success stories [too], to ensure that we talk about the assets that are available in communities, what those communities come with, and to start there.”



► **WATCH ONLINE:** Click on the video to learn more.

Harvest for Healthy Kids: Community-based participatory research in action in Portland, OR

Harvest for Healthy Kids represents the work of a partnership between the Mt. Hood College Head Start program and the School of Community Health at Portland State University. The initiative was designed to simultaneously promote healthy eating habits through exposure to a variety of fruits and vegetables and contribute to a vibrant and sustainable local food system. Head Start teachers were integrated in each stage of planning and implementation of the initiative. Key takeaways from this community-based participatory research process included:

The importance of building in adequate time and resources

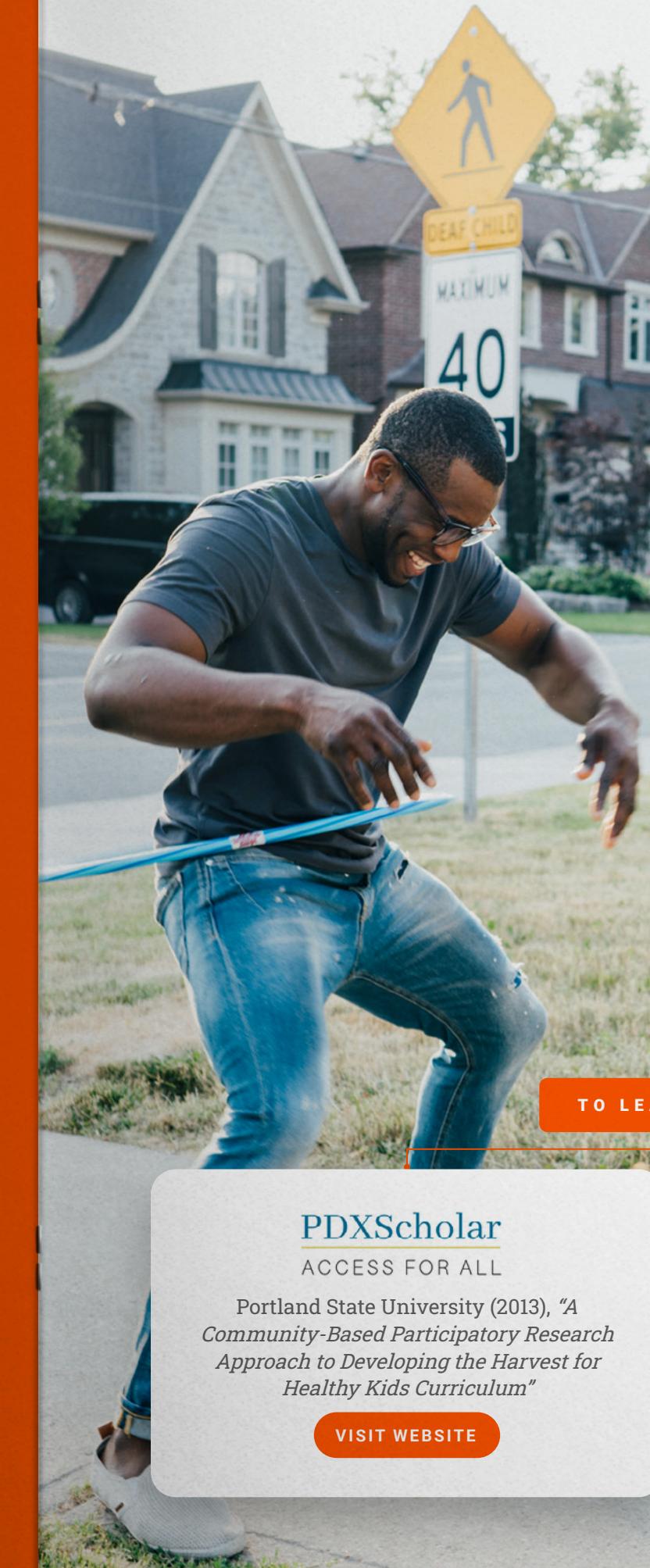
A disciplined process of accessing and authentically integrating multiple perspectives requires significant time and resources. Researchers must be willing to prioritize engagement and collaboration over expediency and allow for multiple iterations of solutions through a cycle of trial, assessment, and refinement. The development of the Harvest for Healthy Kids curriculum involved collaboration around (1) establishing research questions and methods, (2) reviewing relevant literature, (3) drafting curriculum with flexibility for teachers to apply their own strengths and interests, (4) piloting the delivery of the curriculum, (5) evaluating and refining the approach, and (6) finalizing and operationalizing the intervention.

The value of diverse voices among contributors to research

While it may be unrealistic to account for every possible perspective, an intentional effort to engage a diverse group of “end users” in research and evaluation makes a difference. The Harvest for Healthy Kids curriculum, and the degree to which it was implemented, were enhanced by the participation of Head Start teachers representing a variety of teaching experience levels, varying levels of initial interest in the subject matter, and differing classroom environments.

The benefits of using multiple evaluation methods

Providing multiple modes of engagement for data collection enables communities to participate in ways that are responsive to their availability and preferences, which can increase the quality and quantity of data as well as the diversity of data sources. Using multiple concurrent methods of data collection enabled the Harvest for Healthy Kids research partnership to be nimble in capturing, analyzing, and documenting stakeholder experiences and perspectives.



How does it support communities of color?

Using a community-based participatory research approach required full engagement of community partners and “end users” of the initiative from the development phase. In securing that engagement, the research team was able to fully integrate the values, priorities, and interests of the community and avoid the pitfalls of paternalism and cultural incompetence that too often plague initiatives developed “for” communities of color. Through community-based participatory research, partnerships such as the one described here can design approaches to data collection and analysis that honor communities and lead to collaborative action and sustainable change. This is an example of leveraging the collective resources and knowledge that academic institutions and communities each bring and utilizing them to build power and solutions together.



TO LEARN MORE

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ACCESS FOR ALL

Portland State University (2013), “A Community-Based Participatory Research Approach to Developing the Harvest for Healthy Kids Curriculum”

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HEALTHY
KIDS

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2 Approaches to data collection and analysis have notoriously failed to be inclusive of historically marginalized racial, linguistic, and cultural groups.

This has been the case not only in terms of overall representation, but also in terms of equitable, culturally relevant, and appropriate methods. While progress has been made in establishing diverse representation as an industry standard, the field still contends with the need to ensure that diverse representation includes fair engagement practices and leads to truthful and nuanced stories about the characteristics, strengths, and growth pathways for diverse communities. As a foundational ideology guiding much of our existing ECE research, the behaviors, habits, and norms associated with Whiteness have been centered as the standard within the White-dominated ECE field—the singular desired outcome for all children, families, and communities. This is proof of how Whiteness has been made invisible, even as it pervades all aspects of our society, through White supremacy culture.⁹ But to those who are seeking it out, Whiteness is evident in many aspects of data collection and analysis—from a lack of cultural relevance in the questions and tasks posed to research participants; to expectations of communities to meet researchers' preferences surrounding timing, language, and other structural components of research; to the unfair practice

of "norming" assessment tools based on the characteristics of White, economically privileged, or English-speaking children, and more.

Often, communities have been tapped to participate, expending their own time and resources without compensation, as researchers reap the benefits of publishing their findings and communities see little or no resulting change. In some cases (and despite increasing protections for human research subjects), White supremacy in ECE has led to the exploitation of historically marginalized communities through failure to fully explain the risks and implications of the research, or through blatant disregard for participants' safety and human rights. The failure of researchers to prioritize *equitable* inclusion of diverse communities has done harm to communities and helped to perpetuate a vicious cycle of deficit-based conceptions of children and families of color met by misguided and ultimately failing initiatives aimed at remediating the gaps.¹⁰ In the meantime, this process continues to erode families' and communities' trust in research initiatives—pushing equitable inclusion further and further out of reach.

"I think it is critical to recognize the wide range of factors that can influence how questions are interpreted and how questions are answered. It is ideal to review questions and findings with multiple stakeholders, including family members and team members, to make sure that questions are being asked the right way and that you are considering all possible interpretations of the results."

—Andrew Gadaire, Research and Evaluation Director,
Charlotte Bilingual Preschool, Charlotte, NC



9 Okun, T. (2021, May). White supremacy culture—Still here. Dismantling Racism Works Web Workbook. https://www.dismantlingracism.org/uploads/4/3/5/7/43579015/white_supremacy_culture_-_still_here.pdf

10 Renzulli, J. (2022, January 3). A change in pedagogy is the answer. National Association for Gifted Children Blog. <https://www.nagc.org/blog/change-pedagogy-answer>

What can be done . . .

"The early childhood development field, like many others, is striving to embrace research that dismantles racial inequities. To do so, our foundational techniques need to evolve—and that means embracing anti-racist scientific methods."¹¹

The community of researchers and those who leverage research to make decisions about the ECE system must own the collective responsibility for equitable inclusion. As a start, leaders are called to an ideological shift: the recognition that for communities of color, practices that center the behaviors, habits, and norms associated with White children, families, and communities are not, and should not be, held as standard. Nor should communities participating in research be expected to accommodate to the dominant culture-centric norms, preferences, and convenience of researchers who are relying on and benefiting from their participation. Progressive strategies call upon researchers to **reduce bias and injustice in the ECE data collection and analysis processes** in the following ways:

Interrogation of methods that center Whiteness as the norm or default

When the research team reflects critically on the lenses and frameworks used in their work, it reinforces the recognition that there is no such thing as neutrality and impartiality—or any universal standard for "achievement" across all communities of young children. Instead, the characteristics, developmental pathways, and opportunities for children can be understood only in the context of culture and community.

Explicit recognition of researchers' privileged positionality

This could include racial identity, economic status, educational attainment, positional power, and more. By owning their limitations as "outsiders" seeking to understand communities, researchers can be more transparent and accountable to one another and to communities.

A commitment to "do no harm" and to treat communities justly

The process of research necessarily has an impact on participants and communities involved—and that impact is magnified for young children and for vulnerable communities. It is incumbent on researchers to collaborate with communities to mitigate undue disruption, identify appropriate ways to compensate participants for their participation, and balance potential risks with direct benefits to the community.



11 Iruka, I. U., & Bruno, E. P. (2021, December 29). Why we need a proactively anti-racist scientific method. The Hechinger Report. <https://hechingerreport.org/opinion-why-we-need-a-proactively-anti-racist-scientific-method/>

Designing research “at the margins”: What it means to truly center communities in the research process

“It’s really about going out there and being in the margins with people.” When Banu Valladares thinks about equitable and inclusive research, she knows that the ways we engage participants is critical.

“It’s never going to work when you invite somebody that is uncomfortable into an area of discomfort, it’s just bad.” A longtime arts and education leader, she elaborates on lessons learned in developing programming alongside families. “It’s in you going there that you build . . . trust and you being there, and you seeing things, and you transforming yourself by being there that then you can begin to say, ‘What is the system that needs to be designed?’”

But this can be more easily said than done. True listening, relationship building, and collaboration go against the traditional power structures at play. This means researchers often default to performative and cursory attempts at engaging communities that stop far short of transformative listening. Valladares easily recalls instances when she herself has been asked to share her thoughts on initiatives, with no meaningful results.



Banu Valladares is the Executive Director of Charlotte Bilingual Preschool. She proudly describes her school as a place “where we prepare Spanish-speaking children for success in school and life by providing superior, dual language, multicultural early education with strong partnership with their families. As a first-generation immigrant from Venezuela, Valladares knows firsthand the impacts of race, culture, and language on the learning experience.

She describes the experience this way: “I make you incredibly uncomfortable. I ask you some questions and then I’m like, bye. And then I’m still going to design whatever the heck I want to design because I’m designing for the majority. That’s been my experience in general.”

Moreover, sound bites gleaned from this type of listening session tend to skew dismal. And, ultimately, they’re incomplete. “It’s typically on what’s missing, right? ‘What’s wrong? What’s the problem?’ And we really need to just completely stop that and ask people, ‘What are the priorities? What are their values?’”

“So if we’re going to design *with*, designing *with* really means I give up my idea of what’s the thing that should happen because we all have great ideas. And I relinquish that power and allow people to make decisions for themselves because they are capable and they know what they want.”



► WATCH ONLINE: Click on the video to learn more.

3 Research and data have been misused and even weaponized against historically marginalized groups.

The consequences of misuse of research and data have reverberated across time and communities and continue to show up in many forms: through messages that ignore the rich and diverse ways that families invest in their young children (e.g., the family-blaming messages that persist surrounding the “30-million-word gap”); through shortsighted “interventions” to address outcome gaps while ignoring the current and historical inequities that cause them (e.g., drill and practice approaches aimed at closing the “achievement gap”); and through the use of high-stakes evaluation to drive funding away from under-resourced communities (e.g., state policies linking funding decisions with a biased and White-centric quality rating and improvement system).

These and other misuses of data have served to perpetuate biased ideologies and further exclude marginalized communities from ECE opportunity. They have fortified racism as a lens through

which individual providers and ECE organizations interact with the children and families in their care.¹² “Colorblind” discussions of data have been used to divert the field’s attention away from the need to address systemic inequities.¹³ Misused research and data have catalyzed policies that degrade ECE as part of our social infrastructure and undermine support for the ECE workforce.¹⁴ They have stymied progress by championing the need to “learn more” through additional research, to the detriment of data-based action. These are among the many legacies of failure that punctuate our nation’s history surrounding ECE. These are some of the ways research and data have failed in their most basic function—telling the truth about the ECE system and generating action toward positive change.

“Going through [the state QRIS] means that you have some strangers coming into your program and counting how many blocks you have in your center, how many learning centers you have available, talking about degrees and interviewing teachers, and really just kind of lurking in the back of the classroom, making observations. So if a smaller program—typically programs that are predominantly Black and Brown programs—decide not to go through a rated license assessment . . . Then it directly impacts their income because it’s directly related to their subsidy dollars.”

—Devonya Govan-Hunt, Executive Director, National Black Child Development Institute—Charlotte Affiliate, Charlotte, NC



12 Yull, D., Wilson, M., Murray, C., & Parham, L. (2018). Reversing the dehumanization of families of color in schools: Community-based research in a race-conscious parent engagement program. *School Community Journal*, 28(1), 319–347. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1184919.pdf>

13 Bruno, E. P., & Iruka, I. U. (2022). Reexamining the Carolina Abecedarian Project using an antiracist perspective: Implications for early care and education research. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 58, 165–176. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2021.09.001>

14 Butrymowicz, S., & Mader, J. (2016, March 6). The race problem in Mississippi daycares. The Hechinger Report. <https://hechingerreport.org/the-race-problem-in-mississippi-daycares/>

What can be done . . .

“From a data perspective we will have achieved racial equity when there are no statistically significant differences by race. As we know, we’re far from there.”

—Esther Gross, Senior Research Analyst, Child Trends

In learning from these past failures—and heeding the voices of ECE leaders who have urged the field to adopt more equity-conscious approaches to research and data—now is the time to raise the bar. If the ECE field can **create a relationship with research and data that is grounded in truth and centers the interests of young children and families**, then research and data can be some of our most powerful tools to drive action toward equity. This includes looking ahead to ensure more accountability for those empowered with the messaging and application of emerging data—as well as looking back to reconcile ways in which research and data have been misused and have created additional hardship for marginalized communities. As a start, the field can commit to some foundational “best practices” to be held as a minimum standard for the use of research and data. To that end, the Early Childhood Data Alliance proposes three critical strategies for using data to understand and combat racial disparities.¹⁵

Break data apart by race and ethnicity

The only way to understand the breadth and depth of racial injustice in ECE, and to measure our progress toward overcoming it, is by disaggregating outcome data by race and ethnicity. Disaggregation of outcomes data is a start, but it does not come close to telling a complete story.

Identify underlying causes

Perpetual disparities in outcomes among young children are not natural; nor are they the result of differences in racial identity or ethnicity. To give a truthful, data-based account of racial disparities in ECE outcomes is to give voice to the complex and interlocking ways that structural racism contributes to those outcomes, as well as the bias that often masks what is most important to learn from the data.

Propose informed solutions

Research and data come up empty if they fail to call the ECE field to action. Proposing and pursuing informed solutions does not require that we know all there is to know about a topic. It requires courageous leaders to apply a critical lens to the data and prioritize action with accountability.



15 Alliance for Early Success. (2021, February 17). Allies get guidance on using data and racial equity in early childhood policy advocacy. <https://earlysucces.org/data-and-racial-equity-in-early-childhood-policy>

The Growmobile: Leveraging the statewide integrated data system to guide community-based action in Willmar, MN

In the farming community of Willmar, school officials used Minnesota's Early Childhood Longitudinal Data System (ECLDS) data to identify gaps in preschool access for Latine and Somali children. The Willmar School District partnered with the United Way to expand a home visit program that pairs educators with Latino and Somali children whose families face geographic and other barriers to accessing preschool. During these visits, educators teach the children and help connect their families to needed services. This initiative offers the field an example of the following:

The benefits of statewide integrated data systems to support community efforts

In recent years, states have increasingly used integrated data systems, including ECLDS, to enable programs to access and share information with one another, coordinate services, and identify gaps in the system. Such systems have linked community-level data on children's health, access to social services, preschool enrollment, and more and have created more clarity surrounding the state's strengths, gaps, and priorities. When data systems such as Minnesota's are governed and maintained effectively, community leaders can use them as a tool to identify, quantify, and build support to address the challenges that are most important to them. For the Willmar School District and its partners at the United Way, streamlined access to this data concerning their community gave them a vital head start in their decision about how to channel resources and meet a need.

The power of disaggregation of data

While quantitative data, particularly as it relates to "the gaps," cannot tell a complete story about communities, it can give leaders a strong start. When there are outcome disparities by race and other sociocultural factors, there is the opportunity to investigate further, seek out root causes, and work together to address these. On learning more about the relationship between the disparities showing up in the data and the lived experiences of Latine and Somali families, leaders in Willmar were able to create a targeted approach that has made a difference.

The need to connect research and data to action

The existence of data without a commitment to action is useless. Too often, research, acknowledging its own limitations, raises new questions that warrant additional research. While the role of ongoing learning and refinement through research is important, it is a poor proxy for action to create change in communities. Recognizing this, leaders in Willmar used the data available to get to work for children and families and built in opportunities to assess and refine the initiative along the way.

How does it support communities of color?

Leveraging research and data to create a more equitable early childhood system is a multifaceted and multidirectional effort. In addition to creating opportunity to participate meaningfully in research and data analysis, simply creating streamlined access to data is a way for state leadership and other empowered institutions to support communities. By putting high-quality, disaggregated data in the hands of local leaders—along with adequate resources and an appropriate balance of guidance and autonomy—systems leaders create the conditions for communities to act in their own best interest and in ways that honor the cultural nuances and realities of the children and families in their care.

[TO LEARN MORE](#)



THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION

Annie E. Casey Foundation (2018),
"Minnesota Integrates State Data to Improve Early Childhood Programming"

[VISIT WEBSITE](#)

Reflection corner

The following are a few questions to think about as you consider your use of and contribution to research and data. You may use the questions to reflect on how research and data have shaped your approach to your work, or even use them as part of a leadership team exercise to assess

organizational practices with a critical eye toward their foundations in ECE. Either way, these questions are intended to generate critical thinking and conversation to continuously improve our work.

What are the salient bodies of research that guide/inform your work as an ECE leader? As you consider these, where do you see the impacts of White supremacy and structural racism on the design, process, messaging, and/or application of this research?

How might a more truthful account of the ECE system and its impact on Black, Indigenous, Latine, and other communities of color change the conversation or lead to alternative actions for you and/or your organization?

How might a more truthful account of the ECE system and its impact on Black, Indigenous, Latine, and other communities of color change the conversation or lead to alternative actions for you and/or your organization?

Reflect on your own leadership role within the ECE system. What influence do you have (interpersonal, organizational, institutional) in the relationship between ECE research and communities of color?



Resources

For additional information and perspectives on equitable use of research and data in ECE, check out these resources from other leaders in the field.



Alliance for Early Success, Allies Get Guidance on Using Data and Racial Equity in Early Childhood Policy Advocacy (2021).

The presentation was part of the Alliance for Early Success's *National Issues>State Action* series. This page includes links to the recorded presentation and slides in which Carlise King (executive director of the Early Childhood Data Collaborative), Esther Gross (senior research analyst at Child Trends), and other leaders discuss foundational equity principles for how the ECE field thinks about, uses, and communicates data.

[LEARN MORE](#)

Child Trends, Equitable Research Communication Guidelines (2020).

Esther Gross offers key considerations for communicating research findings pertaining to children and communities of color.

[LEARN MORE](#)

Child Care Technical Assistance Network, *Equity in Early Childhood Data Webinar* (2020).

This page contains links to the recorded webinar, slides, and related resources. The webinar focuses on building state capacity to consider equity in data collection to improve equitable access and outcomes through data collection and analysis. Iheoma Iruka, founding director of the Equity Research Action Coalition at the UNC Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, shares best practices for analyzing data through an equity lens. The webinar is geared toward those within state, territory, and Tribal agencies who are working in data collection and analysis.

[LEARN MORE](#)

National Black Child Development Institute, *Being Black Is Not a Risk Factor* (2013).

The national organization and its state affiliates created this collection of resources to challenge prevailing deficit narratives surrounding Black children and families, and to present data affirming the strengths, assets, and resilience of Black communities.

[LEARN MORE](#)

ecta Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center (ECTA), *Early Childhood Data Sources* (2020).

This page provides links to national and state-by-state data on policies, performance, and initiatives related to early childhood care and education.

[LEARN MORE](#)

CLASP The Center for Law and Social Policy

The Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP), *Shaping Equitable Early Childhood Policy: Incorporating Inclusive Community Engagement Frameworks into Expanded Data Strategies* (2020).

This report highlights the importance of equitable community engagement strategies in research and data initiatives and resulting policy change. Recommendations are primarily identified for state leaders and related to the design and usage of state-integrated data systems.

[LEARN MORE](#)

Actionable Intelligence for Social Policy (AISP), *A Toolkit for Centering Racial Equity throughout Data Integration* (2020).

This toolkit is designed for early childhood leaders seeking to shift awareness and practice by centering racial equity and community voice within the context of data integration and use. The resource offers guidance surrounding ethical data use with a racial equity lens and toward a culture of sharing and building power across agencies and community members.

[LEARN MORE](#)

Educare Flint, *Data Utilization & Research* (2020).

This page, containing links to video and research documents, highlights the importance of, and key strategies for, child-centered, action-oriented data collection, analysis, and utilization that engages families to ensure each child has the support they need to thrive in their ECE programs.

[LEARN MORE](#)

Center for the Economics of Human Development, University of Chicago, *Next Generation Data Sets for Measuring Child Development* (2018).

This resource offers a four-session video series highlighting advancements in ECE data collection and their potential to add more granularity and nuance to the exploration of sociocultural factors impacting child development.

[LEARN MORE](#)

Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Evidence for Action Program, *Storytelling for Social Change: A Message Brief* (2022).

In this message brief, Liana Winett and Jeff Niederdeppe propose a set of considerations for data-informed policy narratives, especially for use in ECE advocacy efforts. Their findings explore the effectiveness of different types of narratives (data messaging) in support of early child care policy across multiple policy contexts, public information environments, communication goals, and messaging strategies.

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Join us in the work of transformation

The opportunity to hear the experiences and perspectives of the families, providers, and local early childhood communities most impacted by the early childhood system is a gift and an invitation. As the chapters of this playbook point out, there is a great deal of work to do to give all children the start in life they deserve—and making real change for equity at scale will require leadership and commitment at all levels. But above all, what this playbook demonstrates is the willingness of early childhood stakeholders to give a truthful account of what it will take to make change, as well as the growing readiness of systems leaders to hear, amplify, and be transformed by truth.

As those of us who are empowered and entrusted with the design and implementation of the early childhood system, the choices we make in all of our respective spheres of influence matter greatly. National and state systems leaders, policymakers, funders, community leaders, and advocates—we are the ones who will usher in change to the degree that we are willing to listen, learn, make different choices, and work side by side with

communities. Indeed, transformation of the early childhood system is unlikely to come as a single decision or sweeping policy change. Instead, it will be the cumulative result of many choices of early childhood leaders to affirm the right of all young children to thrive and to take strategic action to challenge a system that was built for inequity.

Therefore, this playbook is for all of us. It offers guidance for those ready to take action by making those choices in their spheres of influence—concrete steps that can be taken at the national, state, and local levels toward meaningful change within the current structures that govern and define the early childhood system. It extends an invitation to join together in the work of transformation—of ourselves, of the choices we make, and of the early childhood spaces we influence every day.

The following is a synthesis of the opportunities for concrete, meaningful action that local early childhood communities have brought to light within the chapters of this playbook.



Setting Young Children on a Path to Success

Overcoming the historical, sociocultural, and political barriers that exclude Black, Indigenous, Latine, and other children of color

Together, we must . . .

- Work within the confines of our current system by reallocating existing funding to address access gaps
- Address the ways in which current policies and practices have created barriers to equitably building the supply of ECE settings in keeping with the growing demand
- Promote community-based collective impact initiatives that place ECE within a web of child and family supports
- Increase resources to foster learning environments that embrace linguistic diversity, expand professional development focused on DLL children, and improve family engagement practices and policies to be supportive of multilingualism
- Forge systemic pathways to ECE teacher preparation, practices, and evaluative measures that affirm children of color and DLL children

Where Early Childhood Education Meets Race and Culture

Forging pathways for culturally responsive education in ECE settings

Together, we must . . .

- Recruit, hire, and retain ECE teachers and leaders who reflect the diversity of children and families served
- Apply strategies to reduce bias and honor diversity as a central part of culturally responsive education practices and policies in ECE settings
- Learn about and expand the use of promising curricula and effective practices that are defined by and for racially, culturally, and linguistically minoritized communities
- Forge systemic pathways to ECE teacher preparation, practices, and evaluative measures that affirm children of color and DLL children



Authentic Partnership for Meaningful Change

Centering families and communities in program and systems design

Together, we must . . .

- Embed equity-informed family engagement professional learning, along with guidance and resources to support current and emerging best practices, within program monitoring and improvement systems
- Include equity-informed family engagement considerations as a foundation of current and future systems-building efforts—and leverage these initiatives to expand pathways to more meaningful partnership between families and systems leaders
- Seek opportunities to meaningfully include families in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of initiatives, and value their input enough to make substantive change

Honoring the “Workforce Behind the Workforce”

Pursuing recognition and equity for those who teach and care for young children

Together, we must . . .

- Recognize and message the impacts of ECE teacher characteristics and practices that create caring and supportive early learning contexts for children prior to kindergarten
- Ensure that all members of the ECE workforce are compensated and supported so that the ECE field is experienced as a viable, long-term profession
- Create clear pathways to leadership, policy, and advocacy spaces that are accessible to women of color, particularly those women who are currently practitioners in the field, working directly with children and families

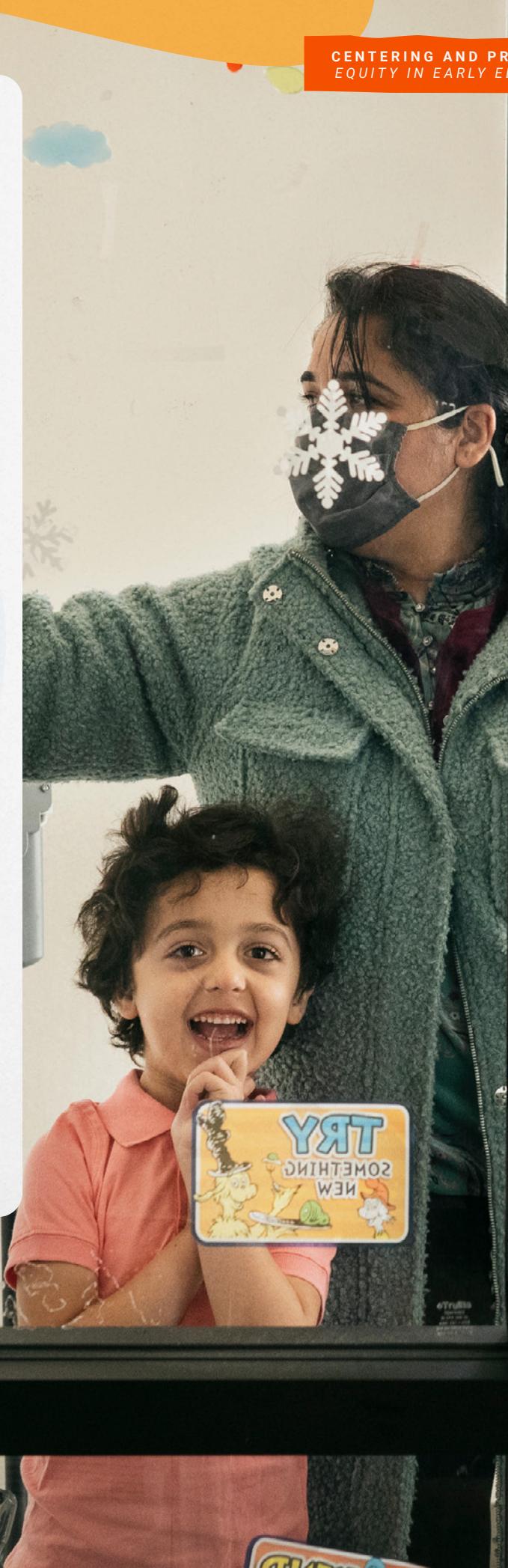


Telling a More Hopeful Story

Deconstructing early childhood research and data practices to tell the truth about the system and the potential of young children

Together, we must . . .

- Advance community-based participatory research involving partnership between research institutions and communities to address community priorities for ECE through collaborative research
- Reduce bias and injustice in the ECE data collection and analysis processes
- Create a relationship with research and data that is grounded in truth and centers the interests of young children and families



Reflecting and action planning

Change starts with reflection. Want to take action, but don't know where to start? Use the tool below to reflect on how you can take steps toward meaningful change. This tool combines all the reflection provocations alongside the guidance

and considerations for action from the playbook chapters. We hope that you find this tool helpful as you take steps to advance equity in the early childhood system.

Setting Young Children on a Path to Success

Overcoming the historical, sociocultural, and political barriers that exclude Black, Indigenous, Latine, and other children of color

Together, we must . . .

- Work within the confines of our current system by reallocating existing funding to address access gaps
- Address the ways in which current policies and practices have created barriers to equitably building the supply of ECE settings in keeping with the growing demand
- Promote community-based collective impact initiatives that place ECE within a web of child and family supports

You might consider . . .

- What specific/local legacies of racism have contributed to access gaps in your state, city, or community? In what ways do you see history repeating itself or manifesting in current system realities?
- In what ways do the choices made about policies and structures—even “well-intentioned” ones—reinforce the status quo and prevent progress toward more equitable access to high-quality ECE?
- What alternative choices or commitments on the part of leaders in your state, city, or community would make a difference? What are the key policy levers for raising the standard of access?
- What perspectives and voices need a more prominent place in the access conversation? What additional insights, stories, influence, and expertise could effect more progress—both nationally and in your state, city, or community?
- Reflect on your own leadership role within the ECE system. What influence do you have (interpersonal, organizational, institutional) in the effort to support equity in access to ECE programming?

Where Early Childhood Education Meets Race and Culture

Forging pathways for culturally responsive education in ECE settings

Together, we must . . .

- Recruit, hire, and retain ECE teachers and leaders who reflect the diversity of children and families served
- Apply strategies to reduce bias and honor diversity as a central part of culturally responsive education practices and policies in ECE settings
- Learn about and expand the use of promising curricula and effective practices that are defined by and for racially, culturally, and linguistically minoritized communities
- Increase resources to foster learning environments that embrace linguistic diversity, expand professional development focused on DLL children, and improve family engagement practices and policies to be supportive of multilingualism
- Forge systemic pathways to ECE teacher preparation, practices, and evaluative measures that affirm children of color and DLL children
- In what ways have you witnessed, enacted, or affirmed biased practices and/or policymaking? What have been the potential impacts on the children and families in your “care,” and what alternative choices might you make in your role going forward?
- What alternative choices or commitments on the part of leaders in your state, city, or community would make a difference? What are the key policy levers for systematizing culturally responsive education as a standard for high-quality ECE?
- What perspectives and voices need a more prominent place in the conversation about culturally responsive education? What additional insights, stories, influence, and expertise could effect more progress—both nationally and in your state/city/community?

You might consider . . .

- In the program/system you are working within, what are the prevailing racial, cultural, and linguistic characteristics of children and families? Of those providing direct services to children and families? Of those who set policies and make decisions that impact children, families, and providers? What barriers and/or opportunities do these realities present?

- How do you and/or your organization define terms such as “cultural competency,” “cultural responsiveness,” “anti-racism,” “anti-bias,” and “anti-oppression”? What efforts have been made/could be made to unify definitions and commitments surrounding these terms?

- What biased and deficit-based perspectives or lack of information surrounding Black, Indigenous, Latine, and other children of color and DLL children have been perpetuated in your professional preparation and/or ongoing communications with colleagues? What power do you have to bring more affirming perspectives to light in your program/professional circles?

- In what ways have you witnessed, enacted, or affirmed biased practices and/or policymaking? What have been the potential impacts on the children and families in your “care,” and what alternative choices might you make in your role going forward?

- What alternative choices or commitments on the part of leaders in your state, city, or community would make a difference? What are the key policy levers for systematizing culturally responsive education as a standard for high-quality ECE?

- What perspectives and voices need a more prominent place in the conversation about culturally responsive education? What additional insights, stories, influence, and expertise could effect more progress—both nationally and in your state/city/community?

Authentic Partnership for Meaningful Change

Centering families and communities in program and systems design

Together, we must . . .

- Embed equity-informed family engagement professional learning, along with guidance and resources to support current and emerging best practices, within program monitoring and improvement systems
- Include equity-informed family engagement considerations as a foundation of current and future systems-building efforts—and leverage these initiatives to expand pathways to more meaningful partnership between families and systems leaders
- Seek opportunities to meaningfully include families in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of initiatives, and value their input enough to make substantive change

You might consider . . .

- Think about the characteristics of the families in the community or communities you serve. What makes it difficult for them to fully engage as partners in early learning? What have you learned by listening to families?
- Where could strategies for listening and learning from families be strengthened?
- What opportunities are there for families to participate in leadership of the ECE program(s) or system in which you or your organization has influence?
- What strategies might make the most sense to engage families as partners in program and/or systems design in your communities? What unique perspectives and expertise could families bring to the table?
- How could storytelling offer a meaningful channel for partnership with families, as well as valuable guidance for ECE leaders in your community?

Honoring the “Workforce Behind the Workforce”

Pursuing recognition and equity for those who teach and care for young children

Together, we must . . .

- Recognize and message the impacts of ECE teacher characteristics and practices that create caring and supportive early learning contexts for children prior to kindergarten
- Ensure that all members of the ECE workforce are compensated and supported so that the ECE field is experienced as a viable, long-term profession
- Create clear pathways to leadership, policy, and advocacy spaces that are accessible to women of color, particularly those women who are currently practitioners in the field, working directly with children and families

You might consider . . .

- How does your organization or policy environment define ECE providers? Who is included and who is not included in workforce development efforts in your professional context?
- What are the prevailing messages about the contribution and value of the ECE workforce?
- What needs of the workforce are best addressed by workforce development efforts in your community, state, or area(s) of focus? What needs are most overlooked?
- How do you see the historical and current context surrounding the false distinction between “educating” and “caring” show up in your community, state, or area(s) of focus? In what ways have you seen this impact ECE policies, especially surrounding the workforce?
- In what ways, and at what scale, can you or your organization promote the recognition and support of the full range of ECE arrangements that families prefer and choose?
- What do you notice about the racial, cultural, and linguistic identities of the leaders around you? What ideas do you have about how to create pathways for more ECE leaders of color to advance to influential roles?

Telling a More Hopeful Story

Deconstructing early childhood research and data practices to tell the truth about the system and the potential of young children

Together, we must . . .

- Advance community-based participatory research involving partnership between research institutions and communities to address community priorities for ECE through collaborative research
- Reduce bias and injustice in the ECE data collection and analysis processes
- Create a relationship with research and data that is grounded in truth and centers the interests of young children and families

You might consider . . .

- What are the salient bodies of research that guide/inform your work as an ECE leader? As you consider these, where do you see the impacts of White supremacy and structural racism on the design, process, messaging, and/or application of this research?
- How might a more truthful account of the ECE system and its impact on Black, Indigenous, Latine, and other communities of color change the conversation or lead to alternative actions for you and/or your organization?
- What are the questions relative to ECE in the community you serve that have not been fully explored by research? Why do you think this may be?
- Reflect on your own leadership role within the ECE system. What influence do you have (interpersonal, organizational, institutional) in the relationship between ECE research and communities of color?



