



# Equity Starts Early

## Addressing Racial Inequities in Child Care and Early Education Policy



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## Introduction

Child care and early education policies are shaped by a history of systemic and structural racism. As a result, there are major racial disparities in children's access to quality child care that meets their cultural and linguistic needs and enables their parents to work. Early care and education workers are overwhelmingly in low-quality jobs with inadequate compensation. And workers of color are often relegated to the lowest-paid positions.

According to research, high-quality child care and early education is critical to children's development and family economic stability, particularly for low-income children and parents.<sup>1</sup> It is critical that children of all racial, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds have equitable access to quality early childhood programs. Further, such programs should employ a diverse workforce with equitable access to high-quality jobs that include compensation reflecting the importance and difficulty of their work as well as the field's increasing qualifications.

Addressing racial inequities in the early childhood system will require increased investments at the state and federal levels and smart policy decisions about expectations for, and delivery of, child care and early education.

## Young Children of Color in the United States

Children of color are more likely to experience the consequences of poverty, including negative effects on their educational experience and reduced success in adulthood<sup>2</sup> Moreover, their parents—who often struggle economically—are statistically least likely to be able to afford quality child care and early education programs.

### *A Racially and Ethnically Diverse Group*

As a group, young children in the United States are racially and ethnically diverse. In 2015, 50 percent of young children were non-Hispanic white; 14 percent were non-Hispanic African American or Black; and 26 percent were Hispanic regardless of race.<sup>3</sup> Children born in recent years have been "majority minority," as racial and ethnic minorities now make up half of all children birth through five. The tipping point to a "majority minority" population for children under age 18 is estimated to happen by 2020.<sup>4</sup>

One in four children under age six has at least one foreign-born parent. The vast majority (96 percent) of these young children of immigrants are U.S. citizens.<sup>5</sup> Approximately one in four young children in the United States is a dual language learner. According to Census data from 2000, 27 percent of children under age 6 came from homes where at least one parent spoke a language other than English.

### *Systemic Disparities for Children of Color*

Young children who are ethnic or racial minorities experience higher poverty rates than their white counterparts. Historical and institutionalized racism, which manifests in systemic and structural barriers to equitable access to opportunity, lead to pronounced disparities in socio-economic experiences for a large share of America's children. In 2015, 4.2 million young children under age 5 (21 percent) lived in poverty. Nearly half of young children lived in low-income families below 200 percent of federal poverty. Young children in low-income families are disproportionately children of

color. About 39 percent of Black young children and 30 percent of Hispanic young children lived in poverty, while 13 percent of white non-Hispanic young children lived in poverty.<sup>6</sup> Higher numbers of young children live in low-income households (under 200 percent of the federal poverty level): 62.4 percent of Black children, 56 percent of Hispanic children, and 28 percent of white children.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Prevalence of Low-Wage Work***

The majority of young children of color who live in low-income households have working parents. Among children under the age of five who are poor, 78 percent of Asian non-Hispanic children, 69 percent of Black non-Hispanic children, and 73 percent of Hispanic/Latino children under age 5 live in households with at least one employed parent.<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, employment is no guarantee of a livable wage.

People of color are more likely to be in low-wage jobs—often having erratic and unpredictable hours—and are unlikely to have employment benefits like paid time off.<sup>9</sup> Nearly half of women who work in industries with a median wage of less than \$10.50 per hour, such as the retail and restaurant industries, are women of color. Moreover, these workers are often paid less than their white counterparts. In retail, Black and Latino full-time workers are paid 25 percent less than white full-time workers.<sup>10</sup> In the restaurant industry, workers of color are almost twice as likely as their white co-workers to live in poverty.<sup>11</sup>

Employment challenges, including involuntary part-time and unfair scheduling practices—such as unpredictable hours—disproportionately affect workers of color. Black and Latino workers are more likely to be employed in low-wage jobs and have unstable schedules.<sup>12</sup> Low-wage hourly workers often experience inflexible and/or unpredictable scheduling practices; between 20 and 30 percent are required to work overtime with little or no notice. About half of all low-wage hourly workers have nonstandard or nontraditional schedules that fall outside of Monday-Friday daytime hours.<sup>13</sup> This interferes with parents' ability to use formal child care and early education programs that typically operate during traditional work hours.<sup>14</sup>

## **Racial Equity in the Context of Early Childhood Policy**

An equitable child care and education system supports all children's health and development, including socio-emotional development related to a child's cultural, racial, and linguistic identity. In addition, it provides affordable access and high-quality choices to all parents and employs its caregivers in high-quality jobs with a baseline living wage and a pathway to higher wages based on knowledge, skills, and competencies.

Achieving the goal of a more equitable system requires attention to racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity, given the demographics of young children and the early childhood workforce and the large racial inequities in opportunities and outcomes for these populations.

This brief takes a deep dive into racial equity in child care and early education, along with the historic and current systemic underpinnings that shape policies and programs. It looks most closely at the major funding streams for child care and early education:

- The Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) is the major federal funding stream for child care assistance to low-income families. It also funds efforts to improve the quality of child care for all children. Funds flow to states, which use them to help families afford

child care and to invest in early childhood infrastructure and quality. States set the majority of programmatic policies under broad federal parameters.

- Head Start is the premiere federal program offering high-quality early childhood education to preschool-aged children in poverty (and fewer infants and toddlers through the Early Head Start program) and their families. In addition to early education, children and families in all Head Start programs have access to a range of services, such as parenting resources; social services; and health screenings, referrals, and follow-up support. Its program design and quality standards offer model practices for supporting racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse communities and families as well as a diverse workforce. Federal Head Start funds go directly to local Head Start providers that include local public or private nonprofit organizations; nonprofit or for-profit community-based organizations; and school districts.
- State pre-kindergarten programs are investments of state dollars to provide early education experiences to 4-year-olds as well as 3-year-olds in some cases. The design of pre-kindergarten programs varies by state and community. They may operate in public or private schools, private child care centers, or Head Start programs.

This report will analyze the history, policy, and practice of child care and early education programs and explain how they impact children, families, and workers of color. We will also provide recommendations for making early childhood programs more racially equitable.

### ***The Historic Role of Race and Ethnicity in Shaping Child Care and Early Education Policy***

Federal investments in child care and early education have occurred in fits and starts, often in response to larger public goals like preparing children for school, moving low-income parents into employment, and assimilating immigrant and low-income children of color into mainstream culture. However, these efforts have never been sufficiently funded to meet policy goals, provide benefits equitably, or specifically address racial gaps in access to high-quality early education.

The child care and early education discussion has historically been racialized. That includes the families accessing care and the workers providing it. The roots of racializing child care, along with other domestic work, predate the emergence of child care and early education as paid work. Black women have historically borne the burden of domestic work and child care—first as slaves, then as an undervalued labor force.<sup>15</sup>

The following—while not a complete history of U.S. child care and early education policy—offers examples of key federal policies, the social and political context in which they emerged, and how they may have created, perpetuated, or in some cases begun to address racial inequities:

- In the 19th century, day nurseries operated by settlement houses (residential social service organizations) and other charities cared for poor, often immigrant, children while their mothers worked or sought employment. The goals of these programs went beyond parental employment, seeking to assimilate children of immigrants into American culture.<sup>16</sup>
- During the Great Depression, government-funded child care programs were created to provide jobs for caregivers.<sup>17</sup> However, aspects of the New Deal were designed specifically

to prevent Black workers from obtaining the economic and social benefits. The Fair Labor Standards Act, enacted in 1938, specifically excluded agricultural and domestic workers, as a proxy for exclusion of workers of color. Because paid child care was typically provided in the home, caregivers were not extended the protections provided to other workers through law. Those exclusions denied domestic workers and farmworkers the right to organize.<sup>18</sup>

- The 1940 federal Lanham Act created child care programs to allow women to participate in the workforce while men were fighting overseas in World War II. It served approximately 130,000 children in 47 states. The Act funded programs that served both white and African American children, increasing employment for women of both races.<sup>19</sup> The Lanham Act programs were quickly scaled back and eventually eliminated when the men returned from war, except in California, where a broad grassroots effort preserved some programs and funding.<sup>20</sup> In 1947, California narrowed eligibility by adding means testing and limiting access to the lowest-income families. According to some analysis, this detrimental change was driven by white working women, who wished to distance themselves from Black low-income women and the perceived stigma of welfare benefits.<sup>21</sup>
- In 1965, the federal Head Start program was created to address the educational and developmental gap between children in poverty and their peers. From its inception as part of the Civil Rights Movement, Head Start has included a focus on poor children, including Black children in southern states. The federal-to-local funding structure was intended to bypass states that would not otherwise invest equitably in communities of color.<sup>22</sup> This also provided the means for local communities and parents of color to lead and shape local Head Start programs. In many cases, Head Start was the first time poor children of color had access to formalized early learning.<sup>23</sup> It evolved into a two-generation model that also provided poor mothers with job opportunities.
- In 1988, Congress passed an entitlement to child care through a provision in the Family Support Act (FSA) for parents receiving cash assistance under Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC).<sup>24</sup> While broadly supported, the FSA was enacted during the Reagan Administration on the heels of highly racialized campaign rhetoric about welfare reform.<sup>25</sup> Over decades, social welfare policy discussions have included covert and overt implications that women of color and their families are undeservingly taking resources from working white people. Bypassing the FSA, Congress acknowledged the need for families to have child care in order to meet work and training requirements included in the law.<sup>26</sup>
- In 1989 and 1990, grassroots advocates and child care providers won the bipartisan Act for Better Child Care, which created the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) to address the broader issue of child care affordability and access for working families, including those not receiving cash assistance. CCDBG remains the single largest federal child care investment to date. In 1996, CCDBG was reauthorized as part of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), which converted the former AFDC program to Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), a block grant to states. This eliminated the entitlement to child care for those receiving cash assistance. The national conversation around PRWORA included the same racialized stereotypes prevalent in the 1980s. It largely left out the voices of welfare recipients themselves, about

half of whom were women of color and their children.<sup>27</sup> CCDBG was reauthorized again in 2014 and is still the major source of funding to help working parents pay for child care and early education, with children of color representing the majority of recipients.<sup>28</sup>

- Beginning in the 1980s—and increasingly in recent decades—states and some localities expanded their investments in preschool education. State-funded pre-kindergarten programs were often launched as part of K-12 education reform and (in some cases) to address racial and income-based academic achievement gaps. These programs vary in design, eligibility requirements, geographic reach, and level of funding. Although the federal government has periodically made small investments in pre-kindergarten, there is no comprehensive federal program.

## Differential Access to Child Care and Early Education

Funding for public early childhood programs has failed to meet need, limiting participation in federal and state early childhood programs and leaving millions of children and families unable to access affordable, high-quality child care and early education that meets their wants and needs. Improved access to the major early childhood programs—Head Start, Early Head Start, CCDBG child care subsidies, and state-funded pre-kindergarten—can increase families' choices and expand the number of children of all racial and ethnic backgrounds who benefit from high-quality child care and early education experiences. Stagnant federal funding and antiquated funding formulas for both child care and Head Start may also prevent states with growing or diversifying child populations from targeting new resources to underserved communities.

Overall, most young children across race and ethnicity participate in some sort of non-parental child care and early education, and most families choose non-relative care over relatives. However, those decisions are influenced by affordability, access to assistance, and availability of culturally and linguistically appropriate options. Families' preferences, choices, and ultimate use of child care and early education are also driven by other variables, including geography and work schedules.

Families of all racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds have a variety of experiences in accessing child care and early education, but there are some trends across racial and ethnic groups. The majority (76 percent) of all preschool-age children—including 69 percent of Black children, 55 percent of Latino children, 54 percent of Asian/Pacific Islander children, and 62 percent of white non-Hispanic children—regularly attend some type of non-parental care setting.<sup>29</sup> These settings may include children's homes, child care centers, home-based child care by licensed or license-exempt providers, or care by a relative.

Among those who use regular weekly non-parental care arrangements for their children, families of all backgrounds are more likely to use non-relative care outside the home than relative care. Hispanic and Asian children are less likely than other groups to have a regular non-parental care arrangement. Hispanic children in non-parental care are most likely to be in relative care (52 percent). For children in non-parental care, use of center-based care is highest among Asian and Pacific Islander (66 percent) and Black non-Hispanic families (61 percent), followed by white non-Hispanic families (57 percent) and Hispanic families (49 percent). Immigrant families are less likely overall to use non-parental child care. However, when they do use non-parental child care, immigrant families are also more likely to choose relative care for infants and toddlers and center-based care for preschool-age children.<sup>30</sup>

As income increases, all families are more likely to use non-parental care outside the home.<sup>31</sup> Affordability, rather than preference, appears to be a major factor in the lower use of non-relative

care among Hispanic families, who may be less likely to access public sources of child care assistance.<sup>32</sup> Despite lower use of formal care settings, Hispanic families have similar perceptions of formal care settings to African American families, and their perception of informal care by relatives is less favorable than their white non-Hispanic counterparts.<sup>33</sup> Program availability may also be a factor in child care decisions. Without added investments, reaching new communities—such as Latino immigrants—would require shifting funds away from other communities.

### **Head Start Participation**

While fewer than half (43 percent) of all eligible preschool-age children have access to Head Start, 54 percent of eligible Black children are served. Thirty-eight percent of eligible Latino children are served in Head Start preschool, with additional Latino children in the Migrant and Seasonal Head Start program.<sup>34</sup>

Head Start, in part due to its roots in the Civil Rights Movement, is a vital early childhood program for Black families and communities. Head Start has rigorous quality standards, many of which promote a more equitable mode of early education across diverse populations. For example:

- Head Start grantees conduct regular community needs assessments, which include documenting the cultural and linguistic needs of the geographic area they are serving, to ensure adequate reach in diverse communities.
- Head Start has targeted programs that serve American Indian/Alaskan Native communities as well as children of migrant and seasonal farmworkers who would otherwise be severely underserved.
- Head Start has developed cultural and linguistic program standards that serve as models for the early childhood field, including best practices in serving dual language learners. According to 2008 Head Start data, 29 percent of Head Start preschoolers come from a home where a language other than English is spoken.<sup>35</sup>

Decades of research document Head Start's positive effects on children and their parents. Head Start improves children's educational outcomes, increasing the chances that participants graduate from high school and complete postsecondary education and training. In addition, the program has positive effects on parenting practices, as well as children's social-emotional development and behavior, across education levels and racial and ethnic groups. Research shows particularly strong impacts among African American children.<sup>36</sup>

Early Head Start serves far fewer children, despite equally strong evidence documenting outcomes. Just 5 percent of poor children from birth to age 3 have access to Early Head Start.<sup>37</sup>

### **CCDBG Participation**

By helping low-income families afford stronger child care programs, CCDBG extends the benefits of quality child care and early education to vulnerable children.<sup>38</sup> Child care subsidies are linked to improved employment outcomes for parents.<sup>39</sup> And families receiving child care subsidies are more likely to have stable employment.<sup>40</sup>

Due to insufficient investments, CCDBG participation is low across the country. About 17 percent of eligible children actually receive assistance. Only 21 percent of eligible Black children, 11 percent of eligible Asian children, 8 percent of eligible Hispanic/Latino children, and 6 percent of eligible American Indian/Alaskan Native children are served through CCDBG.<sup>41</sup>

States play a major role in designing child care assistance programs and setting policies. In Mississippi, for example, Black families make up 55 percent of low-income households but comprise 88 percent of CCDBG recipients.<sup>42</sup> In 2015, the Mississippi Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights found that the state's CCDBG policy decisions restricted low-income Black families from accessing quality, affordable child care (for more, see text box on Mississippi Child Care and Civil Rights).<sup>43</sup>

Unlike Head Start, there is not a common set of quality standards for all CCDBG-funded child care. States determine eligible providers and what standards they must meet. Providers may include licensed centers and family child care homes as well as those exempt from licensing.

States also determine specific eligibility criteria for assistance within federal parameters. Those state determinations can further restrict access to CCDBG. For example, the very low rates of participation among eligible Latino children may be explained by funding patterns as well as the impact of state programmatic decisions. State eligibility practices can make participation difficult for workers with highly variable hours of employment, including Latino families, who are overrepresented in this category.<sup>44</sup>

### ***Pre-Kindergarten Participation***

Nationally, an estimated 5 percent of 3-year-olds and 32 percent of 4-year-olds are in state-funded pre-kindergarten.<sup>45</sup> Data on participation by race and ethnicity are not available nationally or comprehensively across states. In most states, pre-kindergarten is not universally available, and services are targeted to particular geographic areas or groups of children, which may include low-income children, dual language learners, children with disabilities, and other vulnerable groups.

## **Barriers to Equitable Participation in Early Childhood Programs**

All low-income families face significant barriers to child care and early education, but those barriers are particularly daunting for families of color, LEP families, and immigrant families—all of whom face systemic barriers to successfully navigating public systems. The most common barriers are affordability, access, supply, and quality of care. In each of these areas, racial, ethnic, and linguistic minority families may face more complex and acute obstacles. These include cultural and linguistic barriers and those that result from persistent, deeply rooted racial bias.

### ***Affordability***

The most universal barrier to child care is cost. There are too few free or affordable early childhood programs for all children. For most working families, child care is a significant portion of their household budget. On average, families living in poverty spend almost a third of their household



income on child care, compared to 18 percent for low-income families who are just above the poverty level and 7 percent for families whose income exceeds 200 percent of poverty.

In 2015, the average annual cost of center-based care for a 4-year-old ranged from \$3,997 in Mississippi to \$12,781 in Massachusetts. To place affordability in context, a full-time minimum wage employee earns only \$15,080 annually. For many families, the enormous cost of child care limits their choices and their access to quality care.

### **Access**

Publicly funded early childhood programs can help alleviate affordability as a barrier to accessing quality child care and early education services. Since all early childhood programs are desperately under-resourced, important policies determining who can participate in the programs (and under what conditions) are often made in the context of limited resources. These decisions can disproportionately limit access to children and families of color.

### **Eligibility Criteria and Administrative Rules and Processes**

Complex eligibility rules, application processes, and other administrative obstacles may limit families from participating in early childhood programs. Complex application and enrollment procedures can be difficult to navigate, particularly for child care assistance under CCDBG, which has income eligibility and work activity requirements that vary by state and often require extensive documentation.

States determine: which activities qualify as work, education, or training under CCDBG; whether to require a minimum number of hours of a work activity as a condition of eligibility; whether and how to collect and verify information on work activity, job schedules, and/or job hours; and what role job hours and job schedules play in determining child care authorization (i.e., when and for how long a child can attend care). These requirements for getting child care assistance may be particularly daunting for families with language barriers.

Adults of color are disproportionately unemployed, underemployed, and engaged in the low-wage labor force. Consequently, Black and Latino parents are particularly impacted by barriers to child

### **Child Care as a Civil Rights Issue<sup>47</sup>**

In 2015 the Mississippi Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights found that the state's administration of CCDBG restricted low-income Blacks from accessing quality, affordable child care.

The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights is an independent, bipartisan agency charged with studying and advising the president and Congress on civil rights matters and issuing a federal civil rights enforcement report.

The Mississippi Advisory Committee investigated allegations of racial discrimination against both the families who sought help paying for child care and the child care providers who care for them. Among its findings, the report identified Mississippi policy decisions that restricted parents of color from accessing services; diverted and constrained available funding that could have otherwise provided additional services for low-income Black children; and excluded child care centers in low-income African-American communities from CCDBG-funded initiatives to improve quality.

care subsidies.

### Adequate Hours for Working Parents

State pre-kindergarten systems may be designed in ways that create barriers for families of color. One significant barrier is availability of the program during the hours when parents are working. Child care assistance is generally designed to provide care during work hours but may be flexible to meet needs during nontraditional hours if providers are available. However, Head Start preschool and pre-kindergarten programs are only available during traditional hours, often on a part-day or school-day schedule.

Employment conditions in the low-wage sector make it difficult for Black and Latino families with low-wage workers to participate in state child care assistance programs due to schedule fluctuations. They also struggle to access Head Start and pre-kindergarten programs because they may need child care during hours that are not offered. Partnerships with community-based child care programs can sometimes alleviate scheduling barriers. Many states fund pre-kindergarten services in multiple settings, including public and private schools, community-based child care programs, and Head Start. These mixed-delivery systems can serve communities in a more racially equitable way by intentionally including community-based providers who meet the cultural, linguistic, and programmatic and scheduling needs of children and families.

### Unique Barriers for Immigrant Families

CCDBG state policies sometimes affect access to care through verification procedures. This applies to mixed-immigration status families in which the child is a CCDBG-eligible U.S. citizen but their parents are *not* citizens. How states inform families about eligibility, and whether and how they ask about immigration status through the application and verification process, may prevent eligible children from getting care.<sup>47</sup> Immigrant families with limited English skills may encounter difficulties in learning about early childhood options, going through the application and verification process, and finding child care and early education programs that meet the child's and family's linguistic needs.

All low-income families share challenges like cost and administrative complexity. But for low-income immigrant families, these barriers can be compounded by linguistic, cultural, and immigration status issues.

Among public child care and early education programs, only CCDBG and TANF have eligibility restrictions for immigrants. All children, regardless of status, are entitled to Head Start and publicly funded pre-kindergarten education through school systems. That said, families with undocumented family members might not access child care and early education services due to confusion around eligibility rules. They may also be hesitant to interact with government programs and public officials because of concerns about immigration, the privacy of their information, or the risk of immigration enforcement.<sup>48</sup> Recent federal efforts to ramp up immigration enforcement measures have made families fearful of seeking public supports, regardless of their legal status and eligibility.<sup>49</sup>

## Supply

Families' participation in child care and early education may also be inhibited by the lack of high-quality options that are culturally or linguistically appropriate. Research on the populations impacted by "child care deserts"—areas with little or no access to quality child care—show that Latino and Asian children are most impacted by lack of supply, while African American children are least impacted (but still face other barriers to access.)<sup>50</sup>

Overall, the supply of services in an area is influenced by neighborhood wealth, maternal employment and education levels, and the presence of community-based organizations that advocate for state and federal funding.<sup>51</sup> The supply of high-quality options is often limited in poor and low-income neighborhoods.<sup>52</sup> It may also be less available in neighborhoods with high proportions of people who speak languages other than English. For example, one parent poll in California found that 40 percent of Latino parents reported no high-quality, affordable child care centers in their neighborhoods.<sup>53</sup> According to the National Survey of Early Care and Education by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, a majority of both center- and home-based providers serving large proportions of Latino families had denied a child due to lack of space.<sup>54</sup>

Low-income neighborhoods, as well as neighborhoods with high proportions of non-English speakers, may also have low availability of formal, licensed, culturally competent care, including bilingual providers who speak the languages of families in the community. Oftentimes, families in immigrant communities rely on informal, license-exempt care that meets their cultural and linguistic needs. Unfortunately, this important sector of child care often is not adequately supported through funding and technical assistance to meet safety and quality standards established in state and federal policy, limiting its ability to serve families receiving child care assistance.

## Quality

Research shows that maintaining strong and positive racial, ethnic, and cultural identities is beneficial to youth of color's development.<sup>55</sup> Similarly, research demonstrates the benefit of early childhood program practice that maintains continuity of cultural and linguistic characteristics and experiences between children's homes and their early childhood settings.<sup>56</sup>

Yet definitions of quality in early childhood settings often reflect the views of the dominant language and culture and may fail to elevate standards on diversity or alternative concepts of quality.

States use a variety of policy approaches to define quality, and those policies shape the practice of child care and early education programs. For example:

- Licensing standards vary widely across states and may include requirements on culturally, linguistically appropriate communication with families as well as health and administrative provisions that prevent discrimination.
- State early learning guidelines, which establish learning goals for children of different age groups, may include provisions on language use and acquisition, cultural and social themes that may be inclusive or exclusive, and exposure to culturally appropriate

materials.

- Quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS) establish levels of quality for early childhood settings, including specific standards providers must meet. Often, increased payment is tied to higher levels of quality. QRIS standards vary by state and may include indicators around cultural competency, family engagement, curriculum and learning materials, and other areas that can support or discourage equitable participation by families and children of diverse backgrounds.

### Head Start as a Model for Serving Dual Language Learners<sup>59, 60</sup>

Given Head Start's roots in the Civil Rights Movement, it is not surprising that it has taken the lead in policies and standards that make early education and comprehensive services available to poor children from diverse backgrounds. The most recent version of Head Start's Performance Standards requires that all programs pay particularly close attention to policies that support dual language learners and families from a variety of cultural backgrounds. Head Start's leadership in this area reflects the increase in U.S. children who are people of color, have immigrant parents, and live in homes where the primary language is not English.

Current Head Start policy and practice reflects a Planned Language Approach that supports children's home language while also supporting acquisition of English as a second language.

That approach is reflected in Head Start Performance Standards, including provisions that:

- Incorporate cultural background in determining developmentally appropriate practice for children;
- Require screening processes to be linguistically appropriate and sensitive to a child's cultural background;
- Require programs to include linguistic and cultural appropriateness in their approaches to supporting child development and education;
- Engage parents while also supporting and respecting children's home language, culture, and family composition;
- Ensure teachers demonstrate an understanding of children's culture and, whenever possible, speak the children's home language;
- Require that any classroom where the majority of children speak a given language includes a teacher who speaks that language; and
- Incorporate families' cultural and linguistic backgrounds into parent engagement activities, including communication in parents' primary language whenever possible.

Statistically, children of color live in neighborhoods that offer less opportunity to participate in high-quality early education. However, programs that are well designed can help connect children of color with high-quality child care and early education programs that meet their cultural and linguistic needs. In particular, programs like Head Start create settings that foster quality for diverse communities of children and families by targeting resources directly to low-income, diverse communities while also incorporating important cultural, linguistic, and quality provisions.<sup>59</sup>

Head Start offers standards for cultural competence that can be incorporated into state quality standards and early childhood programs. The program's Multicultural Principles for Early Childhood Leaders emphasize the importance of supporting children's cultural roots, sustaining a workforce that reflects children's diversity, and incorporating culture—without stereotypes or bias—into program services, family engagement, and systems.<sup>60</sup> Further, Head Start has applied these principles to an intentional effort to reduce historically disparate and negative outcomes by improving Black boys' experiences.<sup>61</sup>

According to 2016 Head Start data, 28 percent of Head Start preschoolers come from a home where English is not the primary language.<sup>62</sup> Many children benefit from speaking and learning in both their home language and in English. Indeed, learning and communicating in two languages offers cognitive, linguistic, and cultural benefits. However, children can experience problems when they are expected to transition to English before mastering their first language during early childhood.<sup>63</sup> In a 2009 statement on cultural and linguistic diversity, the National Association for the Education of Young Children specified that early childhood education settings and families must work together to support and preserve the child's home language.<sup>64</sup> Head Start's Multicultural Principles also incorporate linguistic appropriateness and support for the family's home language.

In addition to educational and developmental considerations, federal guidance mandates that early childhood programs consider linguistic differences in addressing young children's educational needs.

On June 2, 2016, the U.S. Departments of Health and Human Services (HHS) and Education (ED) released a joint statement to support early childhood programs, states, and tribal communities in promoting the development and education of young dual language learners (DLLs)—children who come from homes where a language other than English is spoken. The statement highlights the legal infrastructure that supports and requires early childhood programs to address the needs of DLLs, including provisions of the Head Start Act, the Child Care and Development Block Grant, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.<sup>65</sup>

### Preschool Suspension and Expulsion

Racial stereotyping and implicit bias can also negatively impact children's participation in early childhood programs, including literally removing them from the classroom. Research shows that children of color, particularly Black children, are disproportionately disciplined in educational settings and are more likely to be suspended and expelled from early education settings than their white counterparts, disrupting their access to early education and affecting their future developmental and educational success.<sup>66</sup>

The long-term impact of these trends is sometimes referred to as the “preschool-to-prison pipeline.”<sup>67</sup> Such trends must be addressed through a combination of anti-bias training, focused professional development efforts, and program policies and quality standards that prohibit suspension and expulsion as well as provide teacher coaching and other supports in the classroom.<sup>68</sup>

The U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights (OCR) collects and reports data from school districts on enrollment in pre-kindergarten programs by districts.<sup>69</sup> According to national OCR data, Black children comprise 18 percent of all public preschool students but 42 percent of public preschool students who have received an out-of-school suspension.<sup>70</sup>

## Systemic Inequities Facing the Early Childhood Workforce

### *A Devalued Workforce*

Because of the historic social and political impact of systemic racism, and an historic undervaluing of caregiving and domestic work, a large portion of the child care and early education workforce has traditionally been comprised of women of color. Moreover, a large portion of the field has worked in poorly paid jobs with substandard or no benefits. Forty percent of today’s early childhood workforce is made up of people of color, who tend to be concentrated in low-level positions with lower credential requirements and relatively low pay.<sup>71</sup>

The earnings of child care workers place them among the lowest-paying occupations.<sup>72</sup> In 2013, child care workers earned an average of \$10 per hour. Preschool teachers, including teachers in public and private settings, fared slightly better at \$15.11 per hour. In comparison, kindergarten teachers earned \$25.40 per hour.<sup>73</sup>

Early educators of color report that the cost of higher education is an obstacle to advancement in early childhood careers.<sup>74</sup> A recent study in Alameda County, California found that Latina and Asian/Pacific staff were more likely to hold lower-paid assistant teacher positions, while white non-Hispanic staff were more likely to be teachers.<sup>75</sup> Teachers of color, particularly African American women, also experience wage inequity compared to their white counterparts, receiving 84 cents on the dollar.<sup>76</sup> These disparities and racial inequities in the early childhood workforce must be addressed to counter disparities in the experiences of the children and families served.

State and federal policy changes are increasing expectations for child care providers and teachers. Yet the diversity of the early childhood workforce may decrease if workers don’t get the support they need to meet professional development and higher education requirements (and if compensation does not go up accordingly when they do). According to one study, increasing educational requirements and salaries for early childhood teachers leads to a higher percentage of white workers. For example, the study found that while 16.5 percent of child care teachers were Latino, only 6 percent of teachers in the early elementary grades (which required higher degrees) were Latino.<sup>77</sup>

Federal child care and Head Start policies, as well as state-specific quality requirements, are increasingly raising expectations for teacher education, training, and professional development. This may pose barriers for low-income staff, particularly those who are not English language

proficient. Federal Head Start data show that while teacher education levels have increased in recent years, restricted funding has limited the ability to reward higher education levels with higher salaries. As a result, a body of teachers, half of whom are people of color and one quarter of whom is Latino, are meeting higher quality standards, attending and completing degrees, and *still* earning low wages.<sup>78</sup>

### ***Children Benefit from a Diverse Workforce***

Every parent, child, and caregiver experiences their role through the lens of their identity, so it is important for the early childhood workforce to reflect the diversity of children and families. Children often benefit from teachers who share their ethnicity, which can lead to stronger relationships among children, better attachment between caregivers and children, and more attentive teacher-child relationships.<sup>79</sup>

Further, all children, regardless of race, benefit from diverse educators. Children start becoming aware of social categories of race and class during preschool. In order for children to form positive perceptions and reduce racial bias, they need early opportunities to interact with people from different backgrounds and to see their adult caregivers respected and valued.<sup>80</sup> That includes seeing people of color in leadership and management positions within early childhood settings, reversing the concentration of people of color in low-level positions.

## **Advancing Racial Equity in Child Care and Early Education**

Access to affordable, high-quality child care and early education is crucial for parents' economic mobility, family health and stability, and children's development and wellbeing. Given those benefits, policymakers have an obligation to address inequities in access to high-quality early childhood experiences. We need to change the trajectory of early childhood policy from one that historically has served the goals of the majority population by relying on low-wage workers to one that values and leverages the assets of a diverse workforce to provide high-quality care to an increasingly diverse population of children.

To address racial inequity, early childhood programs and policies must respond to families' economic needs as well as the unique needs and experiences of racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse populations. Federal child care and early education programs have historically targeted services according to income guidelines. But income eligibility alone is not sufficient for ensuring equitable access. Other factors influence who gets access to child care and early education and why. Some of these factors lead to inequity due to race, ethnicity, and language.

### ***Addressing Affordability and Access***

A root cause of families' limited access to affordable high-quality care is the historic lack of public investment in child care and early education that disproportionately negatively impacts children of color. Access to high-quality, affordable programs will remain out of reach for most families until there are major investments of new resources at the federal and state levels.

That said, investments alone will not ensure equity. Therefore, policies must be revamped or created with the diverse needs of children, providers, and communities of color in mind.

States can intentionally build the supply of high-quality child care and early education options that

meet the geographic, linguistic, and cultural needs of families of color, particularly in underserved communities.

### Recommendations

- Federal and state policymakers should invest significantly in child care and early education programs—including CCDBG, Head Start, and pre-kindergarten—to expand access to high-quality child care and early education and create a robust system of high-quality providers and jobs for a fairly compensated workforce.
- State and local policymakers and community leaders can improve equitable access by promoting collaborations among stakeholders to address disparities and equity. Traditional early care and education stakeholders can also build relationships and partner with organizations that serve and represent racial, ethnic, and immigrant workers and families.
- State and local policymakers and program administrators can address the needs of families who are Limited English Proficient (LEP) by reviewing procedures and materials to ensure they are linguistically appropriate, culturally sensitive, and accessible for families.
- State and local policymakers should ensure child care and early education providers and families know about federal policy on “sensitive locations,” including child care, Head Start, and schools, where federal Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) cannot conduct enforcement activities without a warrant.<sup>81</sup> Programs can also support families with procedures in the event that children or parents are subject to immigration enforcement.

### ***Building the Supply of High-Quality, Racially and Culturally Competent Programs***

In developing and changing program quality policies, states should reflect racial equity in both content and process, bringing a variety of stakeholders to the table to ensure an understanding of families’ needs. To meet increasing quality expectations, support children and families appropriately, and respect cultural and linguistic identities, early childhood providers must reflect the diversity of the young child population and be skilled in developmentally appropriate practice that meets the needs of all children.<sup>82</sup>

*We need to change the trajectory of early childhood policy from one that historically has served the goals of the majority population by relying on low-wage workers.*

### Recommendations

- State and local policymakers and administrators should build on the quality, cultural, and linguistic standards and practices embodied in Head Start. In particular, programs should adopt Head Start’s community engagement and needs assessment process. They should also incorporate Head Start’s cultural, linguistic, and other program quality standards to reflect the best thinking on serving diverse children and families and supporting a diverse workforce.
- State and local policymakers should ensure all child care and early education workers and providers receive ongoing training in cultural competence and effective strategies for teaching dual language learners. Trainings should be designed based on available research



and in partnership with community-based organizations or representatives of diverse communities.

- State and local policymakers should consider strategies to better reach underserved populations with high-quality care. CCDBG allows states to consider using contracted slots for child care services in particular communities to increase access for underserved populations. States can also strengthen the cultural competence of their pre-kindergarten programs by contracting with immigrant-serving organizations and other diverse community-based organizations.
- State and local policymakers should review and revise their quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS), as well as quality standards, to address racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity. By revising their indicators, states can support home language and best practices in dual language learning, engage extended families and parents from culturally and linguistically diverse communities, and support diverse and multilingual staff.<sup>83</sup>
- State policymakers can use a mixed delivery approach for pre-kindergarten services—including public and private schools, community-based child care programs, and Head Start—and facilitate participation by community-based providers that meet children’s and families’ cultural, linguistic, and programmatic and scheduling needs. This should include investing in quality improvement strategies to ensure all providers can meet high-quality standards.
- State policymakers should assess child care and early education policies for their impact on communities of color and immigrant communities. This can include analyzing patterns of state policy and funding choices within the child care subsidy program. For example, policymakers could identify state policies that restrict or expand access for diverse children and families.

### ***Quality Jobs for a Racially Diverse Workforce***

Supporting a diverse workforce means ensuring that jobs in early childhood programs are high quality. They should provide a livable wage and benefits as well as a supportive environment that gives people of color the opportunity to take leadership positions and grow and develop professionally.

### **Recommendations**

- Federal and state policymakers can increase the availability of quality jobs by more heavily investing in compensation for early childhood providers. This includes increased provider payment rates in CCDBG, developing early childhood career ladders tied to compensation, and other targeted initiatives to create pathways for entry- and mid-level workers into jobs that support them and their families.<sup>84</sup>
- State policymakers should support the education, training, and professional development of racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse child care workers through scholarships and stipends; professional development; and information, curricula, and other materials in multiple languages.
- State and local policymakers and administrators should ensure accessible, language-appropriate training and technical assistance opportunities for LEP child care workers and providers.

- State policymakers should address inequitable suspension and expulsion rates through policies that end expulsion, including professional development efforts and support for teachers.
- State and local policymakers and administrators should support informal and license-exempt caregivers in diverse low-income communities, particularly those of color. Through collaborations with community-based organizations, states can ensure caregivers' access to linguistically appropriate training, professional development, quality improvement efforts, and family support programs.

## Conclusion

Addressing racial inequities in the early childhood system will require a combination of increased federal and state investment and thoughtful policy decisions about expectations for, and delivery of, child care and early education. Advocates and stakeholders should maintain a steady push for dramatic increases in funding for CCDBG, Head Start and Early Head Start, and state pre-kindergarten programs. They must also focus on the policy decisions made by administrators, state legislators, and members of Congress.

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## About CLASP

The Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) advocates for public policies that reduce poverty, improve the lives of poor people, and create ladders to economic security for all, regardless of race, gender, or geography. CLASP targets large-scale opportunities to reform federal and state programs, funding, and service systems and then works on the ground for effective implementation. CLASP's research, analysis, and advocacy foster new ideas, position governments, and advocate to better serve low-income people.

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