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Child Care and Early Education Equity: A State Action Agenda

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CLASP
Policy solutions that work for low-income people

High-quality child care and early education is critical to child development and family economic stability, particularly for households with low incomes.¹ State policymakers, including legislators, governors, and state agency leaders, play an important role in designing and implementing early childhood policies. Moreover, their decisions can affect whether children in low-income households and children of different racial, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds have equitable access to quality early childhood programs. This brief provides an overview of state programs offering child care, early education, and developmental supports for young children; critical information about the demographic makeup of young children today; and suggestions for how state leaders can equitably advance high-quality early education programs in the context of growing diversity among the young child population.

Child Care and Early Education Programs in States

An equitable child care and early education system supports all children's health and development, including the socio-emotional development that's related to their cultural, racial, and linguistic identity. In addition, the system should provide affordable access and high-quality choices to all parents and offer caregivers high-quality jobs with a baseline living wage and a pathway to higher wages based on knowledge, skills, and competencies. Achieving a more equitable system requires that state leaders pay 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.

Each state's child care and early education system is unique but typically includes these programs:

Child care assistance

States operate child care assistance programs for low-income families under the federal Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG). States can also choose to use funds from the federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program by spending the funds directly on child care or transferring funds to CCDBG. In addition to helping eligible families pay for care, CCDBG improves the quality of child care for all children. States use federal funds to help families afford child care and invest in early childhood infrastructure and quality. States set most programmatic policies under broad federal parameters including provisions about who is eligible for assistance, how families access care (with a voucher or through a contracted slot), and what requirements providers must meet to receive payments through the subsidy system.

Child care licensing and quality

States also control the licensing and monitoring of child care programs and providers. States set such licensing policies as ratios, group sizes, and provider education levels and then monitor or assess how well programs and providers are doing at meeting the licensing requirements. Many of the states' licensing policies are directly tied to quality.

CCDBG also provides quality improvement funds. As of October 2019 (federal FY 2020), each state is required to use 9 percent of its CCDBG dollars for quality improvement activities. State leaders should ensure agencies work in alignment and collaborate on implementing these activities, particularly if child care licensing and CCDBG are administered by different agencies. States use quality improvement funds on activities including training and professional development of the workforce; developing and implementing tiered quality improvement systems; and improving the supply and quality of infant and toddler care programs. In addition to the quality improvement funds, 3 percent of CCDBG funds must be reserved specifically for increasing the supply and quality of care for infants and toddlers.

Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP)

This federal program, which is administrated by states, reimburses participating centers and family child care providers for healthy meals and snacks for low-income children and ongoing training in nutrition and food preparation safety. This training and the program's monitoring can increase the overall quality of care in all child care settings, including family, friend, and neighbor settings.

Head Start

This premier federal program offers high-quality early childhood education to preschool-aged children living in poverty and their families. Its companion program, Early Head Start, serves pregnant women, infants, and toddlers, although limited funding means that far fewer children are able to enroll. 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 are local public or private nonprofit organizations; nonprofit or for-profit community-based organizations; and school districts. In addition, some states provide supplemental funding to Head Start grantees to support quality initiatives, partnerships with child care programs, or other system-building activities. All states have a federally funded Head Start Collaboration Office to facilitate partnerships between Head Start grantees and other state offices and entities, including child care programs.

State pre-kindergarten programs

Pre-kindergarten programs, which vary by state and community, provide early education experiences to 4-year-olds and occasionally 3-year-olds. They may operate in public or private schools, private child care centers, or Head Start programs. In most states, pre-kindergarten is not universally available, and services are targeted to geographic areas or groups, including low-income children, dual language learners, children with disabilities, and other vulnerable groups.

Home visiting

These programs connect families with trained professionals—often nurses, social workers, or parent educators—who teach parents skills to promote their children’s development. The federal Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) program is the largest source of federal funding to states for administering evidence-based and promising home visiting models to children and families. When MIECHV was created in 2010, states could design state-level, coordinated home visiting systems for the first time. Home visiting programs are voluntary, and most programs target specific populations (for example, first-time mothers or families with low incomes).

Preschool development grants

These federal investments are designed to improve states' early childhood systems by building on existing federal, state, and local early care and learning investments. The systems-oriented grants support programs for children ages birth through five. Many states have now successfully competed for one of the preschool development grants.



Young Children in the United States

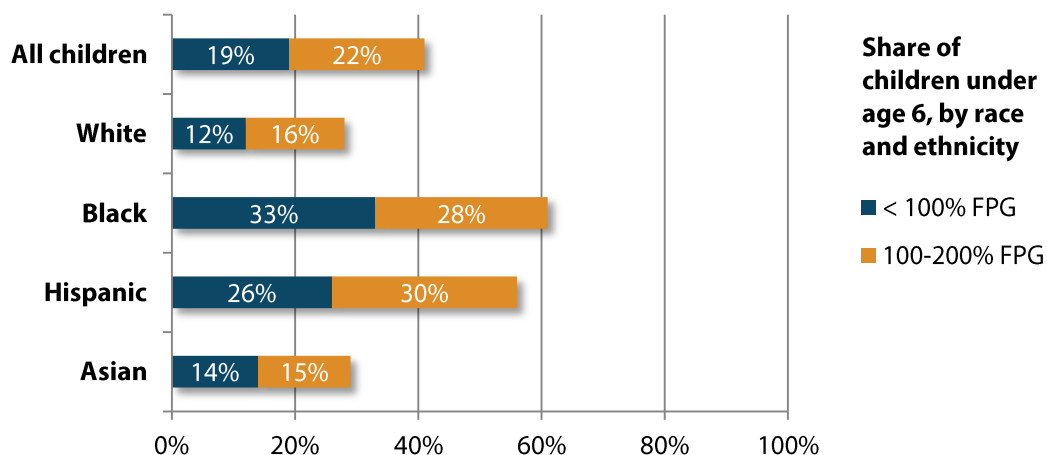
In 2017, 19 percent of children under age 6 lived in poor families. Nearly half (41 percent) of young children lived in low-income families, which have incomes below 200 percent of the federal poverty level. When children experience instability and hardship—particularly during the earliest years of life—it has long-term consequences for their wellbeing. Children living in poverty have a higher risk of poor health and developmental delays in childhood. When they grow up, they are likely to have lower wages and educational attainment than their economically secure peers.² Research demonstrates that the longer children live in poverty, the worse their adult outcomes.³

As a group, young children in the United States are racially and ethnically diverse. In 2017, 49 percent of children under age 6 were non-Hispanic white; 14 percent were non-Hispanic African American or Black; and 26 percent were Hispanic regardless of race.⁴ Children born in recent years have been “majority minority,” as racial and ethnic minorities now make up more than 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 2020.⁵ One in four children under age six has at least one foreign-born parent. The clear majority (96 percent) of these young children of immigrants are U.S. citizens.⁶

Because young children of color are more likely than their white counterparts to live in families with low incomes, they are more likely to experience the consequences of poverty, including negative effects on their education and reduced success in adulthood.⁷ Moreover, their parents—who often struggle economically—are least likely to be able to afford quality child care and early education programs.

Historical and institutionalized racism, which has created systemic and structural barriers to equitable access to opportunity, leads to pronounced disparities in socioeconomic experiences for a large share of America’s children. Young children in low-income families are disproportionately children of color. About 33 percent of Black young children and 26 percent of Hispanic young children lived in poverty in 2017, while 12 percent of white non-Hispanic young children lived in poverty.⁸ Even higher numbers of young children live in low-income households: 61 percent of Black children, 56 percent of Hispanic children, and 28 percent of white children.⁹

Figure 1. Children Ages 0-6 in Poor and Low-income Families, 2017



Source: CLASP analysis of 2017 Census Current Population Survey data.

Despite high rates of employment, parents of color are more likely to earn low wages in jobs with unstable schedules and few employer-sponsored benefits (such as paid time off, retirement benefits, or health insurance).¹⁰ The instability and stress of low-wage work can undermine parents' ability to care for their young children during a critical period of development. It can also trap families in a pattern of economic instability that can echo throughout their lives. Moreover, the stressors of poverty are compounded by the challenges of getting affordable health insurance and preventive health care services, quality child care, and interventions for developmental delays and mental health issues.¹¹

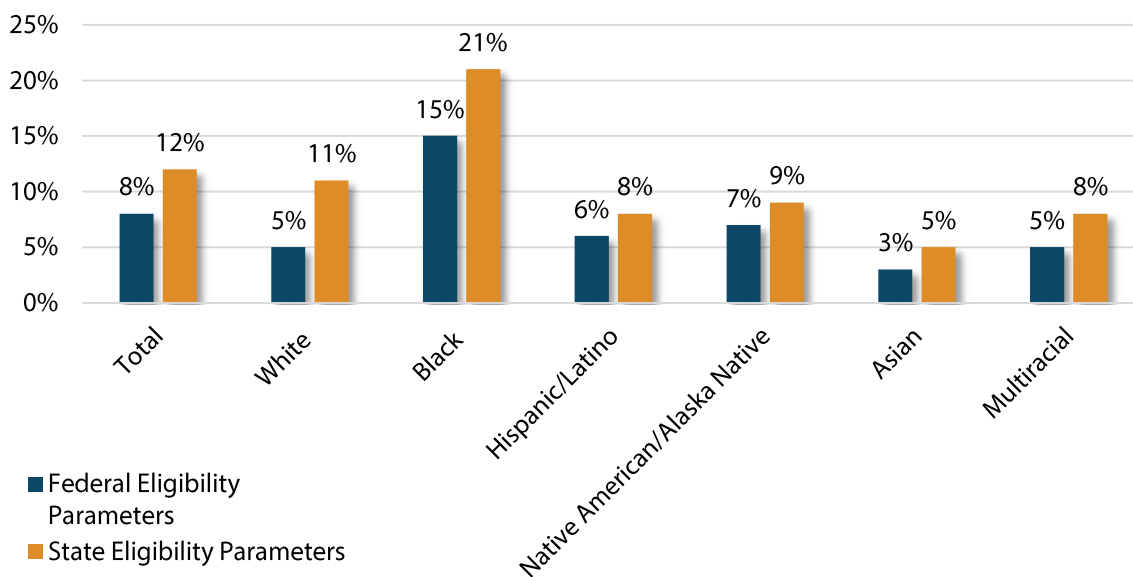
Limited Access to Child Care and Early Education

Severely underfunded federal and state early childhood programs leave millions of children and families without access to 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.

Head Start reaches less than half (48 percent) of eligible preschool-age children (children ages three and four), and Early Head Start reaches just 7 percent of eligible pregnant women, infants, and toddlers (children under age three).¹² An even smaller share of eligible children in families with low-incomes—about 15 percent—has access to child care assistance.¹³

CLASP has found racial and ethnic disparities in access to federally funded child care and early education programs. Nationally, only 12 percent of all children eligible under current state income eligibility thresholds received a child care subsidy in 2016. CCDBG serves only 21 percent of eligible Black children, 11 percent of white, non-Hispanic children, 5 percent of eligible Asian children, 8 percent of eligible Hispanic/Latino children, and 9 percent of eligible American Indian/Alaskan Native children.¹⁴ These access rates vary significantly from state to state.

Figure 2. Percent of Eligible Children Served in CCDBG, 2016



Source: CLASP analysis of 2016 ACS 1-year data, 2012–2016 ACS 5-year data, and Administration for Children and Families Office of Child Care 2016 Administrative Data.

State Leaders Can Make a Difference

State leaders have many options for improving early childhood policies and programs to ensure equal access for all families.

First, state leaders should evaluate their policies and consult with diverse experts, including those with expertise in state child care and early education policies and those with lived experience.

- **Consult with a diverse group of stakeholders to evaluate how current policies support or hinder all children, especially children living in families earning low wages.** State leaders can create a more inclusive environment by consulting with and listening to early care and education stakeholders and organizations that serve and represent racially and ethnically diverse families, along with immigrant families—including civil rights and immigrant rights communities that often operate independently from early childhood programs. Families are the real experts on how policies and practices affect them and, oftentimes, have helpful ideas about the solutions. Leaders can significantly improve policies by meaningfully engaging with and bringing the voices of people of color to the policy conversation in a manner where they feel comfortable and their time and experience is valued.
- **Use the state’s convening role to consider and address inequities and equity issues.** State advisory boards and early childhood cabinets can play a role in tackling early childhood-related equity issues. State leaders should ensure these advisory boards and cabinets include a diverse group of experts who are well positioned to assess and address racial equity issues in child care and early education programs.

Second, state policymakers should support child care and early education providers by offering trainings and professional development, making investments to increase providers’ compensation to a livable wage, and maintaining a diverse and knowledgeable workforce that meets the needs of the diverse populations they serve.

- **Ensure all child care and early education workers and providers receive ongoing training in cultural competence, implicit bias, and effective strategies for teaching children with diverse linguistic and cultural needs.** States should design research-based trainings in partnership with community-based organizations or representatives of diverse communities. States can also train home visitors who interact with diverse families and play an important role connecting families to other needed services.
- **Increase the availability of quality jobs by more heavily investing in compensation for early childhood providers.** This includes increasing CCDBG provider payment rates, developing early childhood career ladders tied to compensation, and creating pathways for entry- and mid-level workers into jobs that support them and their families.

Third, state policymakers should review and revise policies and expand programs to reach underserved populations and provide culturally competent services.

- **Review and revise state CCDBG policies to better reach underserved populations with high-quality care.** States play a large role in determining the quality of child care and who gets subsidies. Policymakers can ensure they make equitable choices that address the diverse needs of children and their families by recognizing how their decision-making is informed by their own lived experience and personal biases.
- **Review and revise quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS) and quality standards to address racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity.** States can revise their quality indicators to incorporate anti-bias training, 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.¹⁵
- **Expand on the array of Head Start services offered.** Despite the fact that all Head Start funds and most Early Head Start funds bypass the state and go straight to local level, states can still invest, build, and expand the program with state funds. Options for states include extending the day/year of existing Head Start services; expanding the capacity of Head Start programs to increase the number of children and pregnant women served; providing resources and assistance to child care providers to help them deliver services meeting Head Start standards; and supporting partnerships between Head Start, center-based, and family child care providers to improve the quality of child care.
- **Ensure pre-K programs are offered in multiple types of settings**—including public and private schools, community-based child care programs, and Head Start—and encourage participation by community-based providers that meet children’s and families’ cultural, linguistic, programmatic, and scheduling needs. This strategy should include investing in quality improvement strategies so all providers can meet high-quality standards.

Finally, state policymakers should significantly invest 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 offering jobs that fairly compensate their staffs.

State policymakers, including legislators, governors, and state agency leaders play an important role in ensuring that children and families can access high-quality child care and early education programs that best meet their needs. Because states and the country as a whole are growing in diversity, policymakers must pay attention to how policies differentially impact children of many races and ethnicities. Children will have a better shot at future success when they and their families are served by policies that have been evaluated and modified to be culturally and linguistically relevant.

Endnotes

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