



**HEISING-SIMONS**  
FOUNDATION



**The Education Trust**



**The Bridgespan Group**

# Building Back for Equity

Guidance to Inform 2021 Early Childhood Grantmaking

A joint project of the Heising-Simons Foundation, The Education Trust, and The Bridgespan Group

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## Letters from the Collaborators



Dear colleagues:

One of philanthropy's greatest assets is the bird's eye perch and field knowledge it is fortunate to hold, enabling a view into a bigger picture and a possible better future. With that better future as a destination, and anticipating the opportunities and challenges ahead, philanthropy can hold equity at the core and use its present resources to fuel the risk capital for the social sector. That is philanthropy at its best.

But, of course, this year has been like no other, with opportunities and challenges that could not have been foreseen. And in that context, the early childhood sector began to falter. We will need fresh vantage points to guide us into the future.

It was with this in mind that we set out to learn what we need to do differently as we consider our grantmaking and the highest and best use of precious risk capital moving forward. To do this, the Heising-Simons Foundation's Education program collaborated with The Bridgespan Group and The Education Trust to help our field plan for early childhood education grantmaking for 2021. Most importantly, we wanted to hear from those most impacted in these unprecedented times—the parents, early educators, and practitioners, and other voices from marginalized communities not often centered in philanthropic decision making.

You will hear from them in reading this memo. And what they are saying is what they have been saying for quite a long time. There is no magic elixir, no novel innovation born of hard times. Instead, funders need to change how we operate and the types of investments we fund, something that we as a foundation have started to do but will continue to take to heart as we evolve. The innovation is that perhaps in these most difficult of times, philanthropy will actually begin to follow this advice. Ironically, in a period of such vast uncertainty, it is these enduring values that may lead the way forward.

*Barbara Chow*  
*Director, Education program, Heising-Simons Foundation*



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## The Education Trust

Dear colleagues:

The COVID-19 pandemic has further widened the divide between those families who can access high-quality early learning programs for their children and those who cannot, particularly Black, Latino, Indigenous, and low-income families. This is a critical concern, as we know that high-quality early childhood education is vital to jump-starting the economy; supporting family well-being; and fostering children's social, emotional, and academic development. At the same time, the current moment and America's reckoning on racial injustice are elevating awareness of the ways in which so many of our nation's systems—including early childhood education—are not serving all people equally well. While it's been promising to see many declarations that Black Lives Matter over the past few months, too often those public statements are not paired with the bold and necessary next steps to orient our systems toward equity.

One bold step that must be taken now is to center equity in early childhood education so that every single one of our babies receives the strong start that they need and deserve in order to thrive. Toward that end, The Education Trust is pleased to join The Bridgespan Group and the Heising-Simons Foundation to highlight perspectives from parents, providers, and leaders in the early learning space. These perspectives, we hope, will inform philanthropic strategies that prioritize and advance equity in early childhood education grounded in the experiences of low-income communities and communities of color.

We have the opportunity to guide early childhood education into an equitable future. And we know that there is great bipartisan support for high-quality early childhood education. We must act on this opportunity, as well as this support, to ensure that all our children receive the rich experiences that set them up to succeed in school and in life. Philanthropy has the power to help lead the charge toward equity for our youngest learners. Let's all get to work.

*John B. King Jr.*

*President & CEO, The Education Trust*

*10th U.S. Secretary of Education, Obama Administration*



Dear colleagues:

This memo gave us the privilege to deeply listen to parents, child care providers, and organizers, with a particular focus on people of color, to better understand the impact of inequitable systems exacerbated by a historic pandemic. These voices complement other calls to action as we work to stabilize while also considering what it might look like to build back these systems for equity.

These conversations surfaced a set of ideas different from our ingoing hypotheses shaped by funders, experts, and other typical partners. We believe these insights anchored in grassroots organizing, policy advocacy, and the missing connections between them hold the promise of real change as we aim beyond incremental improvement. That said, these ideas are not new and have been voiced for many years. Building on conversations in the field, leaning into these ideas will require shifts in *how* grantmaking is done and, for some funders, new learning mindsets and different approaches. Now is the moment to act in big new ways to lay the groundwork for more equitable systems so we do not return to the status quo.

We are grateful for the collaboration and thought partnership with the Heising-Simons Foundation and The Education Trust on this work, and we are eager to continue this conversation with many of you.

*Lija Farnham, Partner; Maggie Davies, Partner; and Rebecca Brondfield, Manager  
The Bridgespan Group*

## Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated longstanding systemic and structural inequities in early childhood, particularly for Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and low-income families and providers. Through the remainder of 2020, we anticipate that the pandemic will continue to disproportionately impact these communities. This will likely include uneven experiences with virtual learning and services, fewer child care options, and an emotional toll from isolation, a deepening recession, and high unemployment.

In July and August, we spoke with parents of young children, child care providers, and community and field leaders, with a particular focus on people of color, to understand what funders might do in 2021 to build back early childhood systems for equity. We listened to voices not always heard by philanthropy speak about the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on, and the longstanding systemic barriers faced by, these communities. This process illuminated, frankly, what many in the field have been naming for some time: there is not enough investment in the long-haul, deep work of organizing, advocating for, and centering the lives of those experiencing the challenges of current systems.

Those we spoke with highlighted three types of investments funders can make to build back for equity:

1. **Build community power and capacity locally and nationally** by supporting communities to design solutions and investing in community organizing.
2. **Advance state and federal policy advocacy** with more holistic, integrated agendas by supporting advocacy campaigns and building capacity for longer-term advocacy and lobbying efforts.
3. **Build infrastructure and capacity to connect efforts and create feedback loops** by connecting organizing efforts, encouraging connections between grassroots and community organizations, and advancing data systems and communication channels.

Our conversations also highlighted grantmaking principles aligned with broader shifts we are beginning to see across philanthropy around the power dynamic between granters and grantees:

1. **Listen deeply to proximate stakeholders with an inclusive approach.**
2. **Cede power and engage others in decision making.**
3. **Fund organizations led by those most proximate to the issues and communities.**
4. **Adjust grantmaking practices to be more flexible.**

While near-term relief efforts continue to be necessary, funders can make investments in a long-term recovery and build back more equitable early childhood systems for children, families, and providers.

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated inequities and made more apparent the cracks in the fragmented and inequitably designed systems that support our youngest children. At the same time, there is heightened awareness of the importance of early care and education given their ties to economic reopening and recovery. Even while this attention has increased calls for universal child care and benefits such as healthcare and paid family leave, not putting equity at the center of recovery risks rebuilding systems that serve only a select few.

While the nation is still in the midst of response and relief efforts, many philanthropic funders are considering ways that 2021 grantmaking could support the development of more equitable and effective early childhood systems. In late July and August, we spoke with parents of young children, child care providers, and community and field leaders to understand how 2021 grantmaking could help develop systems that better address their needs.

Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and low-income families and providers already faced significant inequities in existing early childhood and education systems before the pandemic and are among the most marginalized voices in conversations about the future. For that reason, we largely focus on perspectives from these communities. This approach is grounded in the principles of [targeted universalism](#)—namely the understanding that designing for the most marginalized can benefit everyone. By putting the perspectives, experiences, and ideas of those closest to the problem—those who are proximate to the issue—at the heart of discussions on how to address it, we hold the hope of real, population-level change.

This memo intends to inform conversations, decisions, and actions that funders might take in 2021 from the perspective of what families, providers, and community and field leaders have named as being most critical. It is intended to be neither a comprehensive list of needed investments nor an exact blueprint of the tactics funders might take. Instead, we elevate types of investments funders can make, example organizations doing that kind of work, and grantmaking principles to consider. This memo draws from reports, blog posts, webinars, and panels as well as targeted interviews with over a dozen parents, providers, and community and field leaders who are predominantly people of color (please see the Appendix for a list of interviews and other examples highlighted in this work).

Even in the face of uncertainty about the future (including the November election), urgency and intention are important. Attention and energy around these issues are likely to dissipate over time, and systems will revert to the status quo without intervention. Most importantly, while the pandemic has shed light on the needs of this field for a broader audience, those most proximate to the issues have voiced the needs and ideas named here for many years, indicating their enduring relevance and importance. It is time to listen and take action.

## Expected Context for the Remainder of 2020

Given the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the remainder of 2020 will likely continue to bring significant hardships for families with young children (birth through age eight) and the providers and educators who support them. This is particularly true in communities of color and low-income communities, which have faced [higher rates of sickness from COVID-19, unemployment, loss of income, and implications ranging from food insecurity to housing insecurity](#). In our conversations, three major trends were named as likely to continue through the remainder of the year: uneven experiences with virtual learning and

services, significant impacts on the supply and demand of child care, and an overarching emotional toll on families, providers, and young children. That said, providers, educators, and families have also shown remarkable resilience. With an appropriate focus on equity and on leveraging that resilience and innovation, we can reverse these widening gaps and build back better, stronger systems.

### **Uneven experiences with virtual learning and services will widen opportunity gaps**

Given current reopening strategies, some form of remote learning and offerings are likely to continue for some time. While this puts pressure on all families with school-age children, people of color and low-income families face particular challenges, including [significant gaps in internet access](#) that predate the pandemic. Jennifer Rackliff, executive director of the [National Indian Child Care Association](#), described putting together physical at-home learning kits for tribal families but facing barriers in providing additional instructions for parents. “If you don’t have internet to access content and learning guides, they are not really that useful for some families.” [April data](#) from [The Education Trust-West](#) also indicated that 50 percent of low-income families and 42 percent of families of color lacked sufficient devices at home to access distance learning. In addition, schools and providers often lack resources needed to support marginalized families and do not have systems in place to communicate effectively with families whose primary language is not English. Those families then face challenges navigating remote offerings, including understanding instructions for remote learning and safety guidelines. Similar challenges exist in supporting students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and their families.

Providers and educators serving these children will also feel the impact of virtual services and contend with risks involved in returning to work. These risks are particularly high for low-income Black and Latinx women, who have disproportionately been impacted by the health and economic impacts of COVID-19 because of [higher incidence of preexisting conditions that put individuals at risk of the disease and inequitable access to healthcare](#). Reopening is also putting financial strain on these institutions. The [National Head Start Association](#) projected that [Head Start would need an additional \\$1.7 billion to cover operating costs](#) through the end of the calendar year due to COVID-19. At the same time, state and local budgets are likely to shrink, putting pressure on a key revenue source for already underfunded early childhood providers and school systems.

### **Fewer child care options and higher demand limit access in marginalized communities**

We are likely to see continued permanent closures of child care businesses, particularly center-based care, contributing to a growing shortage of child care options especially for families with infants and toddlers. The [National Association for the Education of Young Children \(NAEYC\)](#) estimated that [nearly 40 percent of providers \(and half of those who are minority-owned businesses\) will close permanently without public assistance](#), which has been insufficient to date to offset plummeting enrollment. The [Center for Law and Social Policy \(CLASP\)](#) estimated a [monthly gap of at least \\$9.6 billion](#) just to preserve the national child care system.

Provider Chris Nelson from [Let’s Grow Kids](#) in Vermont explained that, in addition to losing revenue from children no longer attending, “We can’t raise the cost for parents to compensate for what we’re spending because they might not be working full time, they might have reduced hours, they might be unemployed or looking for work... they don’t have the money. We were already taking about 30 percent of their income anyway for child care, so to raise it would not benefit the children or their families.” As a result, [July surveys](#) of California child care providers conducted by the [Center for the Study of Child Care Employment \(CSCCE\)](#) showed 34 percent of home-based family child care providers have taken on personal credit card debt to cover program expenses and 49 percent have been unable to pay themselves at some point. These crises are exacerbating systemic challenges that providers were

already facing before the pandemic, including receiving poverty wages with [racial wage gaps](#) and without benefits such as paid sick leave, health insurance, or a substitute pool.

This limited supply of child care options will disproportionately impact people of color and low-income families, [particularly women](#) who are often the ones taking on child care responsibilities at home. These families may also be more likely to need child care as essential workers, but many did not even qualify for child care subsidies through relief funding (e.g., households with mixed immigration or citizenship status) that quickly ran out. Even before the pandemic, these families experienced limited access to high-quality early childhood care and education options. [The Education Trust](#) found that [only 1 percent of Latinx children and 4 percent of Black children were enrolled in high-quality state preschool programs](#) across 26 states. Tamara Hudson, a parent in California looking for child care, described, “I’ve been on a waiting list for two years, and I’m still waiting. And I know it’s more difficult right now because of the pandemic.”

### **Emotional toll from isolation, a deepening recession, and high unemployment**

Families and providers will continue to experience the mental health impacts from economic hardships and stress of continued isolation. April Leong, a parent in the San Francisco Bay Area, noted, “I’m scared for a lot of people who are already dealing with depression and anxiety, or single parents [who] are just on their own. It’s a lot to carry on your shoulders.” As of late August, the [University of Oregon’s Center for Translational Neuroscience](#) found that families are experiencing increased hardships since federal CARES Act unemployment stipends ended. Parent surveys indicated that [over 40 percent of households were worried about paying for basic needs that month and nearly two-thirds of specific subgroups of caregivers \(Black and Latinx households, single-parent households, and lower-income households\) were worried about basic shelter and food for their families](#). This extra strain is exacerbating the stress that many families were already facing, particularly those in poverty and those experiencing systemic racism. Erika Méndez, senior education policy analyst at the [Latino Policy Forum](#), spoke to the compounded stress many Latinx households are facing due to isolation and fears around documentation status—particularly those who live in dense urban areas and multigenerational homes, making sheltering in place safely and comfortably difficult. Many of these families were receiving critical information, emotional support, and resources to support their families from community organizations, including early childhood providers. Méndez said of those now going without those supports, “those are the children I worry about the most—they might fall through the cracks.” Providers we spoke with also noted the emotional toll of being separated from “their kids,” and carrying the financial and health risks of continuing to stay open.

[Research on the impact of adverse childhood experiences](#) and chronic stress indicate that the aforementioned issues could have devastating long-term effects for young children, who are also facing the strain of isolation and loss of routine. April polls of parents in [California](#) and [New York](#) conducted by [The Education Trust](#) indicated that about 70 percent of parents surveyed worried the pandemic would negatively impact their children’s social, emotional, and cognitive development. Such strain may also be exacerbating the effects of existing systemic inequities for these children (for example, [learning pods and other enrichment opportunities that affluent families can more readily access](#) could further widen opportunity gaps for low-income households and communities of color).

Ultimately, both families and providers face significant racial, gender, and economic inequities around early care and education that have been exacerbated by the pandemic. Mary Ignatius, statewide organizer of [Parent Voices](#), noted that, “For the longest time, because of the underfunded system, we’ve pitted the needs of parents against providers in terms of rates, quality, and access, when at the

heart of that argument are low-income women of color who need access to care, or who are the providers themselves. When both their needs are met, children benefit.”

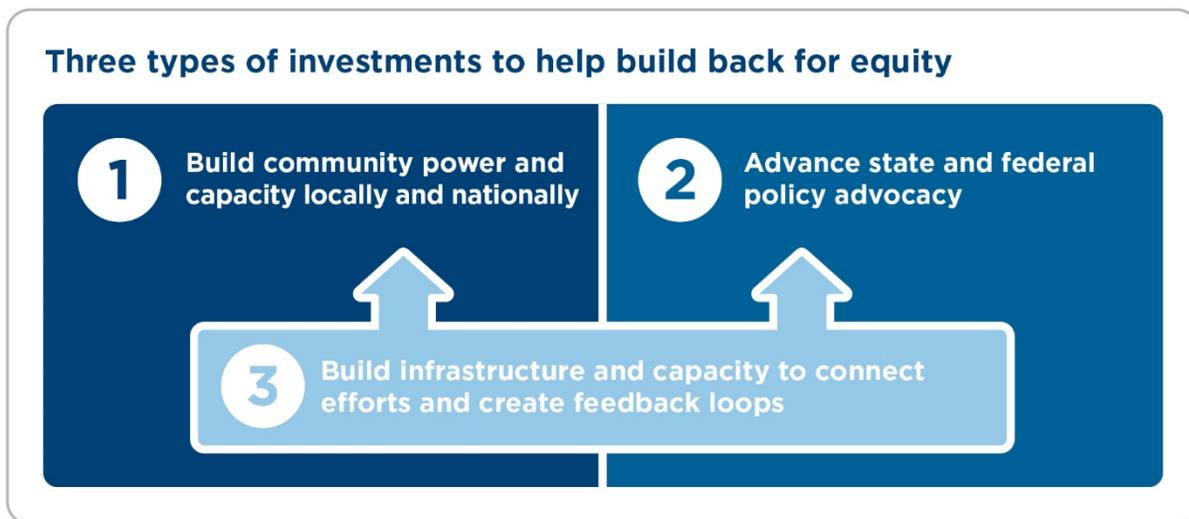
## What Funders Can Support

The pandemic is exacerbating issues that Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and low-income households were already facing in navigating a fragmented, complex, and inequitable early childhood system. While no single description of an ideal system emerged from our conversations, interviewees noted that a more equitable system should include:

- **high-quality services that are centered on the experiences and needs of the most marginalized** to ensure they work for all—not just some—young children, their families, and providers;
- **holistic, multigenerational supports** that break down existing siloes (e.g., across early care and K-12 education, across child-focused and family-focused services);
- a **trained and sufficiently compensated workforce**, with affordable and accessible professional development opportunities and improved compensation and benefits;
- **trauma-informed approaches** and **mental health supports** for children, families, and providers;
- **systems and communication channels** to connect siloes and track data on what is needed and where resources are flowing, including aligned governance at the state and local level; and
- **sufficient funding and supply of resources** that are equitably allocated to address systemic barriers faced by families from low-income communities and communities of color.

In the near-term, significant public investment is needed to respond to the pandemic nationwide before we can even begin to build back for equity. Philanthropy can provide critical bridge resources and encourage public funding for these efforts. (A few of the many existing resources for guiding near-term efforts and policy agendas include the [Early Childhood Funders Collaborative’s summary of emergency relief funds](#), an [equity policy roadmap](#) from the [Children’s Equity Project](#) and [Bipartisan Policy Center](#), and a recently released [policy roadmap](#) from the [Alliance for Early Success](#)).

Funders can also keep an eye on the long-term horizon by beginning to lay the foundation for the future. To do this, parents, providers, and community and field leaders we interviewed spoke of the need to deeply invest and build power in communities. We also heard calls to invest in and strengthen state and federal policy advocacy that is so underdeveloped in early childhood. Most of all, we heard a clear need for these efforts to be connected and deeply rooted in the experiences of those most proximate to the issues. This will take infrastructure and capacity—time, people, information, and relationships—across these efforts that may not currently exist.



We expected interviewees to emphasize specific topics that funders could support related to the challenges families, providers, and community and field leaders are facing (e.g., child care quality rating systems, Child Care & Development Block Grant funding, community spaces for virtual learning). While we heard some programmatic examples, instead we heard most clearly calls for these three types of investments and shifts in how funders engage with communities and grantees. While these types of investments are not necessarily new ideas, they feel more urgent and clear when considering what it might take to develop systems that are more equitable.

### 1. Build community power and capacity locally and nationally

With families and providers facing unique circumstances that are changing rapidly, there is a clear need for community-driven, responsive solutions now and in the long run. Those who understand these needs—families, providers, and educators—are best equipped to diagnose problems and generate effective solutions. Melody Robinson, a home-based child care provider in Chicago, noted, “If we all come to the table together and share what we’re thinking, we’re going to come up with something really good. Who better to go to than the people it affects?”

To these ends, funders can **support organizations and communities to design solutions** and invest in **community organizing**. To target these efforts, funders can take a national view or consider taking a place-based approach in selecting a few communities (e.g., tribal communities) or geographies (e.g., select states or cities).

#### **Build capacity for communities to design solutions**

Investing in organizations that know the community well and can partner in agile ways can both support recovery efforts and build infrastructure needed for longer-term family support. For example, early childhood provider [Sheltering Arms](#) in Atlanta quickly pivoted to virtual family outreach and providing basic needs for families, either directly (e.g., sending diapers and wipes that they would have provided via the child care center) or in partnership with other community organizations to address other needs (e.g., helping families understand eligibility for child care subsidies, or identifying resources to help find a new job). Relatedly, the [Heising-Simons Foundation](#) funded [Abriendo Puertas](#) to translate CDC guidelines into Spanish for community members, among other resources they were providing. Intermediary organizations that have close ties to communities of color and low-income communities like the [National Indian Child Care Association](#) have also helped distribute real-time information and

resources to providers in tribal communities across the country. These organizations can leverage their relationships and understanding of the communities to design and share solutions, or even regrant funding to individual communities to do that work locally.

Part of this work requires early childhood providers, school districts, and community-based organizations to have the time and resources to engage families. During the pandemic, child care providers and school districts like Broward County, Florida, New York City, and Elgin, Illinois, have worked hard to track down and connect with families to assess needs, often partnering with community organizations to do so. Longer-term relationships and investments in this kind of family-centered engagement could help create a stronger, more equitable system. Early childhood providers could also benefit from this kind of support and technical assistance to keep their businesses running, both during the pandemic in accessing relief resources but also more generally. Tennille Smalls, the owner of [Gentle Hands Academy Daycare](#) in New Haven, Connecticut, is part of a group of local child care providers who share information and moral support, though she wishes there were more connections to local policymakers and leaders who could help her navigate financing as she opens a second location to support the community.

### **Support community organizing**

Stronger community organizing of families and providers at the local, state, and national level is needed to build back for equity. Knowing best what they need, families and providers can be the most effective advocates and can build public will, especially with access to advocacy resources and training. As an example, a [2016 ballot measure in Ohio to expand quality preschool offerings was shaped by, and succeeded, thanks to a coalition of community-based organizations and leaders](#). Community leaders are also in the strongest position to know if a given policy proposal actually works to provide a tangible benefit (or not). Rachel Schumacher, early childhood policy consultant and program manager of the [Raising Child Care Fund](#), explained: “We need people who can hold policymakers’ feet to the fire—people who coordinate with the advocates and provide people power behind what they might be asking for. They have demands, not a list of priorities, and that’s a really big difference.”

Most community organizing operations have few paid staff members, so philanthropic investments can go a long way. Wendoly Marte, director of economic justice at [Community Change](#), noted, “If we’re able to provide additional resources so that local organizing efforts can also pay attention to the federal work, that could be a big piece of whether we’re going to win something or not at the federal level.” Funding additional staff capacity could enable groups to tackle more issues, track what is happening at different levels (e.g., state or national issues that will impact a local community), and build partnerships with intermediaries and grassroots organizations. Community-based organizations may not have the staff or resourcing to get involved in policy and advocacy efforts, so funders could also help build their capacity to organize.

Along these lines, funders can invest in networks to support organizing efforts across the country, such as the [United Parent Leaders Action Network](#), [9to5](#), or [MomsRising](#), which uses an online platform to organize families remotely. Funders can also support regional- or state-focused organizing efforts, including [Parent Voices](#), [Mothering Justice](#), [Make it Work Nevada](#), and [Organizers in the Land of Enchantment: OLÉ](#), to name a few. On the provider side, the [National Domestic Workers Alliance](#) could serve as a national example for organizing and giving voice to providers, and [Let’s Grow Kids](#) has been working to connect and organize child care providers in Vermont. For funders interested in peer learning opportunities, the [Neighborhood Funders Group](#) is a group of national and local funders who connect to build power in local communities across a range of issues.

As funders and more people get involved in organizing, it's important for them to avoid [movement capture](#)—the tendency for focus to drift away from the most marginalized as those with greater resources and power get involved. Melissa Boteach, the vice president for income security and child care/early learning at the [National Women's Law Center](#), explained, "As more people get activated, I want to make sure we're not pushing down the experiences of the people who've been the most marginalized all along and they continue to stay front and center. Because some people who are better off might say, 'oh, a tax credit would help,' when what we really need is systems change."

## 2. Advance state and federal policy advocacy

The early childhood sector was already significantly underfunded before the pandemic, so significantly more public funding will be needed to embrace bold changes to early childhood systems (e.g., appropriate compensation for child care providers, subsidies for those who are least able to pay for high-quality child care services, or data to track families across systems to ensure they have wraparound supports). This needs to include efforts to inform policy, maintain attention, and then support implementation of policies at the federal, state, and local levels while also holding policymakers accountable. It also will require investments in narrative change and research to galvanize support and understanding. To this end, funders can **invest in advocacy campaigns** as well as **build overall capacity for long-term advocacy and lobbying efforts**.

[Child care](#) is currently one of the most pressing policy issues with [bipartisan support](#) because of the systemic challenges that existed before the pandemic and the attention it is now receiving as a linchpin for economic recovery. While most people with whom we spoke mentioned the centrality of child care as an issue given its relationship with racial, economic, and gender justice, we also heard the desire for a holistic approach rather than tackling individual issues with siloed strategies. To this end, **policy, advocacy, narrative change, and movement building efforts should be intersectional in topic**, centered on the needs of families and providers.

### **Support advocacy campaigns to increase public funding and change narratives**

Wendoly Marte, director of economic justice at [Community Change](#), noted, "We need to make sure that we're investing in infrastructure building because we have to get ready for a big fight in 2021 and beyond at the federal level. States are going to start to feel the strain of the revenue losses and of the shortfalls." For these reasons, investing in near-term campaigns and the capacity of national organizations to build from the energy existing today will be critical.

Funders can support a range of efforts in this area. Organizations like the [National Black Child Development Institute](#) and [ZERO TO THREE's Think Babies](#) campaign focus on early childhood and early learning with a commitment to community engagement to inform that work. Given the intersection of child care with so many other issue areas, early childhood funders might also consider other organizations that may not traditionally be thought of as early childhood organizations. Some established national organizations include [UnidosUS](#), [Community Change](#), [National Women's Law Center](#), [National Urban League](#), [National Domestic Workers Alliance](#), [CLASP](#), [MomsRising](#), and [Family Values@Work](#). Funders can support relevant campaigns or invest specifically for organizations to take on or further integrate early childhood issues (e.g., fund new roles to focus on these topic areas). In general, advocacy organizations can also benefit from flexible funds to quickly respond and work with communities as policy and advocacy needs come up.

### **Build capacity for longer-term advocacy and lobbying efforts**

Lobbying efforts focused on early childhood have been limited and advocates few, so funders can invest in capacity building with an eye toward centering the experiences of people of color and low-income communities. One way to do this is to support local and state coalitions to build relationships and needed infrastructure across stakeholder groups, including families and providers. The [Georgia Early Education Alliance for Ready Students](#) brings together business, civic, and government leaders (including child care providers) to advance state-level policy work, and [Raising New York](#) is a statewide coalition of parent, early childhood, education, civil rights, business, and health organizations that advocates at the state level. Another way to build capacity is to provide technical assistance to those who want support advocating on early childhood issues. Examples for this work include efforts by the [Alliance for Early Success](#) and an emerging effort to increase lobbying capacity through an [Impact Fellows Action Fund](#).

### **3. Build infrastructure and capacity to connect efforts and create feedback loops**

While those we interviewed stressed the importance of policy advocacy efforts and community-driven efforts being closely connected, these ties do not happen organically. There is a gap in the time, people, information, and relationships needed to connect these efforts and generally limited funding to do so. Funders can support ways to connect and **share learning across organizing efforts and between grassroots and grasstops organizations**, as well as **build and improve the information and communication channels** needed to support a more equitable system.

#### **Connect community organizing efforts to amplify power and voice**

Community organizing groups can learn a great deal from one another, share resources, and find power in numbers when taking on larger issues across groups. [Community Change](#) and the [Raising Child Care Fund](#) bring together many of these organizations to support these connections and streamline resource and information sharing. Communication platforms can also foster learning across communities, particularly for early care and education providers, especially those in home-based and smaller settings who are often isolated. One virtual way to connect providers is the [Early Childhood Connector](#), which early childhood professionals have been using during the pandemic to share information ranging from ideas for engaging families to understanding reopening policies and safety guidelines as they come out. Funders can invest in these platforms to help strengthen connections and include more groups and efforts in the conversation.

#### **Encourage grasstops organizations to forge community connections**

Some grasstops organizations do not have natural ties to what is happening on the ground, and funders can help support more connections between the two. Cemeré James, interim CEO and president at the [National Black Child Development Institute](#), noted, “We need philanthropy to support the connection between the community and power.” ZERO TO THREE’s [Strolling Thunder](#) program recruits families with young children across the country to connect with legislators in DC. Families tell their stories to influence policy and also receive training and support to stay active in their communities. This kind of program takes time and resources but enables ZERO TO THREE to stay connected to what is happening on the ground and influence policy in a way that is centered in families’ experiences. Funders can support this kind of work or convenings that explicitly connect grassroots and grasstops organizations, such as a meeting the [Heising-Simons Foundation](#) supported in 2019 with the [National Women’s Law Center](#) and organizer and Berkeley professor Saru Jayaraman to connect grasstops and grassroots groups around the power of organizing. Funders can also invest in building and supporting long-term relationships among groups. For example, organizations such as the [National Black Child Development Institute](#) and [UnidosUS](#) rely on affiliate networks, partnerships with local and national organizations, and

community engagement work through interviews and surveys to inform national and state policy recommendations when advocating for Black and Latinx children and families.

### **Advance data systems and communication channels**

The early childhood space is severely limited by a lack of data. Miriam Calderon, the early learning system director at the [Oregon Department of Education's Early Learning Division](#), noted that lagging data due to manual entry coupled with insufficient data on both supply and demand made it challenging to equitably allocate scarce resources at the start of the pandemic. Limited data makes it challenging to understand demographics, supply and demand for services, workforce needs, and funding flows that are important for advocacy and policy efforts. For example, current systems do not adequately collect and report data on race and ethnicity, home language, family income level, disability status, or information on whether families are experiencing homelessness—and similar gaps exist for data on providers. Data systems that effectively follow children, families, and providers over time and across institutions would be invaluable to guide families and organizations working to serve them, enable learning across communities and states, and provide critical statistics and feedback loops to guide policy and implementation. Funders can support and advocate for long-term financial sustainability and improvement of states' [existing systems](#). Intermediary organizations are often valuable hubs that can support this infrastructure for collecting and providing access to data for families and providers. For example, [Help Me Grow](#) affiliates help families access resources related to healthy development, and [Child Care Resource and Referral agencies](#) help families locate quality child care options in their area.

Together, these three types of investments can support the rebuilding of more equitable and cohesive early childhood and early education systems. Funders can play an important role in advancing existing efforts and connecting dots, taking into account some best practices in *how* they are funded as well.

## **How Funders Can Support These Efforts**

While the pandemic has encouraged significant investment and an openness to experimentation and flexibility not previously seen in philanthropy, we have not yet seen significant movement in grantmaking approaches. As noted in a [new report](#) from the [Center for Disaster Philanthropy and Candid](#), funders gave approximately \$11.9 billion in pandemic response during the first half of 2020, but only 3 percent of that was explicitly flexible, unrestricted funding. In addition, among institutional giving to specified recipients, 5 percent of total dollars and 12 percent of awards explicitly identified communities of color or organizations serving people of color as intended beneficiaries.

In our conversations with families, providers, and community and field leaders, we asked for advice and “watch outs” for funders in supporting relief and rebuilding efforts. We heard clear themes to **center the most proximate leaders and organizations** and **give them the flexibility to drive the work**. These themes align with a broader set of shifts we are observing in philanthropy that may be in the early stages of taking root. Below, we have brought in examples from other fields to illustrate what this might look like.

### **1. Listen deeply to proximate stakeholders with an inclusive approach**

Everyone we spoke with, particularly parents, providers, and advocates who do not always have a chance to speak directly with funders or those in power, was deeply grateful for the opportunity to share their perspectives. For funders, listening is likely to include both opening up processes and doing active outreach. This might include building in time (and budgets) to gather input from communities before taking action (e.g., through surveys, focus groups, or partner organizations), or supporting

grantees to take this approach. The [James Irvine Foundation](#) sought input from hundreds of Californians to inform a new strategy that included doing away with program areas to focus on one institutional goal and allocating 15 percent of initiative budgets for direct-service and intermediary players to determine investments that address barriers in their work. The [California Endowment](#) leverages a [President's Youth Council](#) made up of mostly young people of color to inform advocacy campaigns. Listening could also involve attending community events (e.g., town halls), identifying key local leaders with whom to cultivate relationships, and regularly inviting community members to participate in conferences and other events. Particularly in working with policy and advocacy grantees, funders can also ask about and encourage stakeholder engagement to help generate policy solutions. Mary Ignatius, statewide organizer of [Parent Voices](#), noted, “[Early childhood education] funders have been part of perpetuating the status quo and funding think tanks and advocacy groups to affect systems change who rarely, if ever, speak directly with parents who are closest to the problems of the system and therefore closest to the solutions. Their experiences must drive systems change.”

When engaging the community, being inclusive means considering who is engaged, making it easy to participate, and avoiding extractive approaches. To operationalize targeted universalism, funders can first engage those who are most proximate and often last heard—generally parents and providers in early childhood. Funders can compensate participants, share back insights they’ve heard, forge new connections, and engage in meaningful ways. To make it easier to participate, funders can also ensure translation is available to encourage broad participation and make meetings, conferences, and other opportunities open to the community.

## **2. Cede power and engage others in decision making**

Out of respect for others’ expertise and experience, funders can allow grantees, families, and providers to guide the development of a solution or approach rather than offering funds to those who will implement a funder’s chosen solution. This could take different forms. For example, funders can ask grantees where ideas come from and how communities have been engaged in developing a proposal, or conduct focus groups with families and providers ahead of making decisions. Or, funders could invite families and providers to take part in decision-making bodies for grants or even consider hiring them to lead work in this area. The [Chorus Foundation](#) offers an example of inclusive decision making, as it regularly engages its grantees to identify needs in the community and inform decisions. The [foundation convened Alaska Native grantees, community leaders, and allies to determine how to allocate the foundation’s resources](#) and used their guidance to set up new intermediary organizations in their community. [Mosaic](#), an environmental collaborative, constructed its governance assembly to include a super-majority of NGOs and grassroots representatives who help make grant decisions.

## **3. Fund organizations led by those most proximate to the issues and communities**

Many people we interviewed encouraged funders to take a hard look at giving patterns to date and consider shifting toward grantees who are closer to the issues or have relevant lived experience. Because of the many ways in which systemic racism affects the lived experiences of families and providers of color, people of color often offer strategies that are informed by the racialized experiences of communities of color and the issues these communities face. MacKenzie Scott demonstrated the practice of investing in those with lived experience with [the giving she recently announced](#). In her first round of giving, 91 percent of the racial equity organizations are run by leaders of color, 100 percent of the LGBTQ+ equity organizations are run by LGBTQ+ leaders, and 83 percent of the gender equity organizations are run by women. The [W.K. Kellogg Foundation](#) is another example, making significant place-based investments and seeking out grantees with a diverse board and senior staff who reflect the racial and ethnic demographics of the children, families, and communities they serve. As a first step,

funders can take a more proactive approach in broadening their networks and seeking opportunities to invest in organizations led by those who are most proximate to the communities.

#### 4. Adjust grantmaking practices to be more flexible

Families, providers, and organizations all named a desire for funders to **demonstrate more trust** in their instincts and approaches to the work. This translates into authentic relationship building, being transparent with grant requirements and diligence, and streamlining processes (e.g., simplifying application and reporting requirements). As an extension of building trust, providing **multiyear, general operating support** gives grantees more space to adapt as needed to meet the needs of their communities or movements they support. This also reduces the burden of fundraising for the organization, particularly with funding partnerships that already exist. Again, [MacKenzie Scott](#) has demonstrated what it looks like to take this approach with a deep equity lens in her recently announced giving. She provided significant unrestricted grants to organizations led by people who had experienced the inequities they are working to address. No application was required, lowering the burden on the recipients, and she trusted recipients to spend the money however they saw fit.

Another tactical shift that came up in our conversations was **changing outcome and metrics requirements**, particularly during such a dynamic time. Melissa Boteach of [National Women’s Law Center](#) warned that, “Funding that is too restrictive or too focused on metrics can very quickly cut off organic conversation and be steeped in what the people who are already in the room—as opposed to people that need to be in the room—think should happen.” One way to do this is to allow grantees to define their own metrics. The [Raising Child Care Fund](#) outlined goals and then asked grantees to define their own metrics and outcomes for grants that felt aligned with their work and those goals. In some cases, this might mean that outcomes could cross into different content areas given the intersectionality of early childhood issues with other topics (e.g., outcomes might be benefits such as paid sick leave for family members as opposed to developmental outcomes for their young children).

These grantmaking themes align with conversations around trust-based philanthropy and participatory grantmaking that many are observing in the social sector beyond early childhood. There are a number of helpful resources for funders on these topics, including [principles and clear actions](#) that funders can take from the [Trust-Based Philanthropy Project](#), Cynthia Gibson’s report, *Participatory Grantmaking: Has Its Time Come?* and the Grantcraft report, *Deciding Together: Shifting Power and Resources Through Participatory Grantmaking*. [Bridgespan](#)’s recent work in partnership with [Echoing Green](#) on [disparities in funding for leaders of color](#) and memo in partnership with [ABFE](#) on [guiding a giving response to anti-Black injustice](#) also provide additional data, examples, and ideas about supporting leaders of color and racial justice efforts. (Please see additional organizations in the Appendix.)

## Conclusion

As the pandemic continues, we will need relief efforts in early childhood to support children, families, and providers. People of color and low-income communities are now significantly worse off given the impact of the pandemic, recession, and limited additional relief efforts, and need our increased attention and partnership. Still, this is also a critical moment to lay foundational efforts to avoid simply reinforcing the inequitable and insufficient systems of the past and instead center the voices of those most proximate to the issues in developing the solutions. We hope this document can be a starting point for continued discussions among funders in partnership with families, providers, and community and field leaders to chart the path forward.

## Appendix

### Acknowledgments

We are grateful to the following parents, providers, and community and field leaders for sharing their insights and time during interviews for this work:

- [Community Change](#): Wendoly Marte, Director of Economic Justice
- [Gentle Hands Academy Daycare](#): Tennille Smalls, Owner and Child Care Provider
- [Latino Policy Forum](#): Rebecca Vonderlack-Navarro, Manager of Education Policy and Research, José Marco-Paredes, Senior Policy and Communications Analyst, and Erika Méndez, Senior Education Policy Analyst
- [Let's Grow Kids](#): Chris Nelson, Child Care Provider and Community & Program Support Specialist
- [National Black Child Development Institute \(NBCDI\)](#): Cemeré James, Interim President and CEO
- [National Indian Child Care Association \(NICCA\)](#): Jennifer Rackliff, Executive Director
- [National Women's Law Center \(NWLC\)](#): Fatima Goss Graves, President and CEO and Melissa Boteach, Vice President for Income Security and Child Care/Early Learning
- [Oregon Department of Education: Early Learning Division](#): Miriam Calderon, Early Learning System Director
- [Parent Voices](#): Mary Ignatius, Statewide Organizer
- Parents: Tamara Hudson, April Leung, and Ana Cisneros
- Parent's Helper Daycare: Melody Robinson, CEO and Founder
- [Sheltering Arms](#): Blythe Keeler Robinson, CEO and President
- [The Raising Child Care Fund](#): Rachel Schumacher, Early Childhood Policy Consultant and Program Manager
- [ZERO TO THREE](#): Myra Jones-Taylor, Chief Policy Officer

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### Organizations and resources surfaced through this work

In writing this memo, we had the pleasure of hearing about dozens of organizations that are not always the “usual suspects” in conversations among early childhood funders—many of them focused on and led by people of color. While certainly not comprehensive nor vetted, this list intends to capture those organizations to enable further learning and exploration.

#### National organizations:

[9to5](#)  
[Abriendo Puertas](#)  
[Alliance for Early Success](#)  
[Black Mamas Matter Alliance](#)  
[Build Initiative](#)  
[Business Roundtable](#)  
[Center for Law and Social Policy \(CLASP\)](#)  
[Center for the Study of Child Care Employment](#)  
[Children Thrive Action Network](#)

[Commonsense Childbirth](#)  
[Community Change](#)  
[Early Childhood Connector](#)  
[Ecology of School Readiness Lab at Boston University](#)  
[Erikson Institute](#)  
[Family Values @ Work](#)  
[Grassroots Movement for Child Care and Early Education](#)

Help Me Grow  
Home Grown  
Impact Fellows Action Fund (website forthcoming)  
MomsRising  
National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)  
National Association of Counties  
National Domestic Workers Alliance  
National Indian Child Care Association (NICCA)  
National Indian Child Welfare Association  
National Indian Health Board

National Urban League  
National Women's Law Center (NWLC)  
Native Americans in Philanthropy  
NORC at the University of Chicago  
PolicyLink  
SEIU Early Educator Training Center  
Stand for Children  
Trust for Learning  
UnidosUS  
United Parent Leaders Action Network (UPLAN)  
ZERO TO THREE

### **Regional or local regional organizations:**

Alabama Institute for Social Justice  
DC Action for Children  
Educare DC  
Educare Miami-Dade  
Family Forward Oregon  
Gads Hill Center  
Gentle Hands Academy Daycare  
Georgia Early Education Alliance for Ready Students (GEEARS)  
Harlem Children's Zone  
Latino Policy Forum

Let's Grow Kids  
Los Angeles Education Partnership (LAEP)  
Make it Work Nevada  
Mothering Justice  
Organizers in the Land of Enchantment: OLÉ  
Parent Voices  
Raising New York  
Sheltering Arms  
Training Grounds  
Tribal Child Care Association of California  
Vital Village

### **Resources for funders**

#### **Organizations:**

ABFE  
Early Childhood Funders Collaborative  
National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy  
Neighborhood Funders Group (NFG)

Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity (PRE)  
The Bridgespan Group  
The Education Trust  
The Raising Child Care Fund  
Trust-Based Philanthropy Project

#### **Reports and articles:**

*Deciding Together: Shifting Power and Resources Through Participatory Grantmaking*

*Field Building for Population-Level Change: How Funders and Practitioners Can Increase the Odds of Success*

*Guiding a Giving Response to Anti-Black Injustice*

*Participatory Grantmaking: Has Its Time Come?*

*Racial Equity and Philanthropy: Disparities in Funding for Leaders of Color Leave Impact on the Table*