



Civil Rights Principles can Advance the Equity, Accessibility, and Quality of Early Care and Education for Children of Color

Why We Did This Project:

Cognitive growth begins at birth; early care and learning are the foundation upon which children develop sophisticated connections, emotional intelligence, and academic interests.¹ Early Care and Education (ECE) is the formal education and care of children from birth until the start of primary school (\approx ages 0 through 8)—ECE is an integral step in childhood development. Research has shown that access to high-quality ECE readily improves overall academic performance, graduation rates, and long-term socioeconomic outcomes.² High-quality ECE is a constitutional right for all children and families. Research reveals inequities across the country regarding access and quality of ECE for Black, Hispanic, Indigenous, Asian, and other children of color.

Despite research-based recommendations geared to advancing the ECE landscape in the United States, public education departments across the country are unable to provide equal opportunities for care and learning to children of color.³ Current literature identifies prominent gaps in the access, inclusivity, and quality of ECE. A myriad of factors result in the inequitable landscape of ECE for children of color; insufficient funding for ECE subsidies, lack of cultural diversity and inclusivity in ECE systems, a devalued workforce of ECE professionals, and structurally racist and discriminatory practices within ECE programs.⁴ This project aims to advance *The Civil Rights Principles for Early Care and Education*, by learning about opportunities and barriers to elevate ECE to a civil rights issue via conversations with national civil rights leaders. The principles, developed in 2022 by the Leadership Conference Education Fund in collaboration with the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, offer a comprehensive framework to develop and implement policies that establish equity and accessibility to high-quality ECE for children of color.⁵ [The Civil Rights Principles for Early Care and Education](#)

Key Findings and Recommendations

- Advocate for ECE as a civil rights principle for all children
- Address economic barriers and inequities in access to ECE
- Prioritize comprehensive policy reform expanding accessibility to ECE
- Promote language inclusion and cultural responsiveness in ECE
- Develop national standards for community involvement in ECE decision-making

Current Landscape

A brief preliminary review of existing federal policies that address early care and education produced few national guidelines or standards for high-quality ECE. The United States has never had a unified system of ECE policies and programs to support young children and families. This project examines the gaps in the two most prominent federal policies that directly contribute to ECE quality and accessibility: The Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007, and The Child Care Development Block Grant (CCDBG) Act of 2014. This policy brief will explore how policymakers and advocacy groups can use The Civil Right Principles for Early Care and Education as a framework for comprehensive policy development that addresses the presiding barriers and opportunities in ECE for children of color.



Head Start and Early Head Start

The Head Start Act is the federal policy most directly correlated to ECE quality and standards. First passed in 1975, the Head Start program was reauthorized and amended by Congress in 2007.⁶ The Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007 aimed to expand childhood eligibility by incorporating migrant and American Indian Head Start divisions and removing barriers to enrollment for homeless and disabled children.⁷ All children under the age of 5 and living below the federal poverty level are eligible for HeadStart. The 2007 act also increases qualification standards for the ECE workforce, by requiring and providing specialized training for ECE workers. Head Start policies were developed through heavy collaboration with community partners and parents, and in most cases demonstrate long-term positive outcomes for health, academic growth, economic stability, and parent involvement.⁸

Child Care and Development Block Grant

The CCDBG Act (1990) offered states the opportunity and funding to develop unique high-quality childcare programs to suit the needs of resident children and families. It has since been revised and changed in 2014 and 2024, both revisions intended to expand the equity, quality, and funding for ECE workers and programs.⁹ The current CCDBG discretionary fund is \$8.7 billion.¹⁰ The federal income cap for CCDBG eligibility is a total household income below 85% of their state median income.¹¹ However, due to the classification of the CCDBG funding as a ‘Block Grant’, states are granted the discretion to determine their own eligibility limits for the subsidy.

How We Did This Project:

We conducted an initial landscape review of the current federal policies concerning ECE guidelines and funding. Following this review, we utilized *The Civil Rights Principles for Early Care and Education* to identify gaps in ECE policies resulting in large-scale inequities for children of color. Researchers then interviewed some of the most prominent civil rights organizations in the United States that represent historically marginalized populations: the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials (NALEO Educational Fund), Unidos US, Asian Americans Advancing Justice (AAJC), the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights (LCCHR), and the Leadership Conference Education Fund (hope we will be able to add ACAI and MALDEF!). These interviews enabled our team to examine specific barriers to and opportunities for high-quality ECE that national civil rights organizations recognized as preeminent within their communities.



Only 54% of Black Children in poverty are enrolled in Head Start.¹²



Only 4% of Black Children are enrolled in high-quality ECE programs.¹²



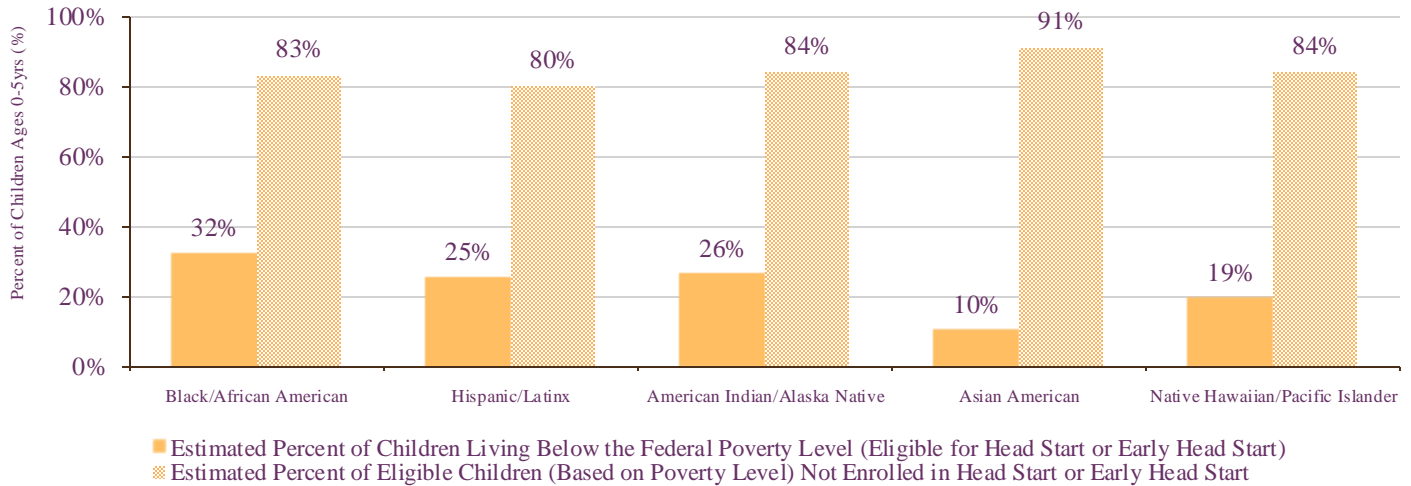
Only 10% of children eligible for the CCDBG ultimately receive them.¹⁶



Nearly 80% of eligible Black children do not receive CCDBG Subsidies.¹⁷



Estimated Percent of All Children Living Below the Federal Poverty Level¹⁴ (Eligible For Head Start or Early Head Start) & Estimated Percent of Eligible Children Not Enrolled in Head Start or Early Head Start by Race/Ethnicity in 2021-2022¹³



Where Are The Gaps?

The purposes of Head Start, and the Child Care and Development Block Grant Act (CCDBG) are to elevate the equity, accessibility, and quality of ECE for all children and families. However, current reporting reveals extensive disparities in the distribution of funding and ECE outcomes. The following statistics account for Head Start and Early Head Start enrollment. Only 54% of eligible Black children were served by Head Start,¹² leaving a large proportion of Black children and families underserved. Only 29% of Head Start recipients are Black children,¹³ while 32% of all Black children under the age of 5 are living in poverty.¹⁴ On the other hand, 23% of children enrolled in Head Start programs are White,¹³ while only 14% of White children under the age of 5 are living in poverty.¹⁴ Of the total population of Black children enrolled in state ECE programs across the United States only 4% were enrolled in programs that meet 9 out of 10 of the benchmarks for high-quality pre-kindergarten education.¹²

Not only is there a lack of equity in the distribution of Head Start services, but evidence suggests that Head Start programs are less effective at providing long-term benefits to children who are specifically targeted by the program and display the greatest risk for long-term negative outcomes.¹⁵ Nearly a decade after the passing of The Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007, a study compared children who were deemed eligible and enrolled in Head Start programs to children who had been denied eligibility and enrolled in other ECE programs. This study found that Head Start programs were ineffective at providing academic and behavioral benefits to children from the group specifically deemed eligible by the program’s guidelines in comparison to the children in alternative ECE.¹⁵

The CCDBG displays drastic inequities in the allocation of funding and access to subsidies. Those who are eligible for CCDBG and Head Start are disproportionately children of color.³ Only 10% of all children eligible for CCDBG subsidies receive them.¹⁶ In 2019 approximately 80% of Black children eligible for CCDBG funding did not receive subsidies.¹⁷ State income limits are the standards by which CCDBG eligibility is determined.¹⁶ According to federal income eligibility limits nearly 30% of all children would be eligible for CCDBG subsidies, on the other hand, states setting income limits lower than the federal limit results in only 20% of children being potentially eligible for subsidies. If all states maintained the federal income limit of 85% of the state median income, children’s eligibility for CCDBG subsidies would increase by nearly 50%.¹⁶



Barriers and Opportunities

This project found a multitude of barriers which ultimately reduce the equity, accessibility, to high-quality ECE for children and families of color. Listening to input and strategies from national civil rights organizations we identified the most pertinent barriers and opportunities to increase the equity and accessibility of high-quality ECE programs for historically marginalized communities. The framework of *The Civil Rights Principles for Early Care and Education* was used to develop the key policy and advocacy recommendations put forth in this policy research brief.

Barrier: Language Inclusion and Cultural Responsiveness in ECE Programs

The lack of comprehensive language inclusion and culturally responsive ECE programs creates a barrier for diverse families and children to effectively access and benefit from ECE programs. 63% the ECE workforce identify as non-Hispanic White, and nearly 91% speak only English.¹⁸ Diverse languages and bilingual learners account for a substantial proportion of marginalized communities.¹⁹ Families of bilingual children face a significant barrier to access when in search of limited bilingual ECE programs. However, bilingual education and culturally responsive curriculum have been found to positively affect the academic outcomes of children enrolled in ECE.¹⁹ This barrier is compounded by a lack of trained bilingual educators and culturally relevant materials. These gaps in ECE hinder the academic and social-emotional development of children from these communities.

Barrier: Economic Disparities & the Accessibility of ECE Programs

Economic disparities such as high cost of living, inadequate healthcare, and the underfunding of ECE programs, are barriers that disproportionately affect marginalized communities.²⁰ Black families are the least likely to have a Head Start program center within their neighborhoods, and only 25% of all Head Start eligible children have a center that is immediately accessible to them.¹² Socioeconomic status (SES) is one of the deciding factors for neighborhood choices, families with low SES can only afford to live in low SES neighborhoods.²¹ Black and Hispanic children experience more than double the rate of poverty than non-Hispanic white children in the United States.¹⁴ Children of color consistently slip through the cracks in federal ECE policies due to these compounding disparities. Marginalized communities should be assisted with transportation and accommodation to overcoming these barriers to accessing high-quality ECE. Policymakers should be aware of publicly reported and disaggregated data to determine where Head Start centers need to be located.

Key Barriers

- Lack of language inclusion and cultural responsiveness in ECE
- Economic disparities limiting the accessibility of Head Start

Recommendations

- Direct funding towards ECE workforce training increasing the skills and responsiveness regarding underrepresented languages and cultures.
- Implement national standards for culturally inclusive curriculum.
- Implement channels of assistance for communities with low level of access to high-quality ECE in their neighborhoods.



Opportunity: Comprehensive Policy Reform

This project reveals numerous gaps in the landscape of ECE policy at a national level.

- **Inequity in the distribution of grants and subsidies for children of color**
- **Physical inaccessibility of high-quality ECE programs for children of color**
- **Lack of diverse culture and language inclusion in ECE programming**
- **Lack of a national unified policy system or standards for ECE**

Comprehensive policy reform holds the solution to the myriad issues that are present in the delivery and structure of ECE across the United States. *The Civil Rights Principles for Early Care and Education* provides a detailed framework of guiding principles that will allow policymakers to directly address the key issues that this brief has identified. The following policy recommendations are derived from *The Civil Rights Principles for Early Care and Education* and directly address these key issues.

1. Inclusion and non-discrimination policy is the first step to addressing the inaccessibility of ECE, all children must have access to and be included in ECE programming with no regard to any demographic status. This means that ECE programs must be required to have diversity and inclusion protocols for all races, ethnicities, genders, cultures, and languages. Furthermore, funding and resources should be allocated to establishing a highly-qualified ECE workforce. ECE workers should have access to the necessary trainings and certifications that increase their capacity to cater toward a diverse classroom.

2. ECE Programs should be physically and financially accessible to all children and families.

Communities with little to no physical access to ECE programs in their geographic location should be accommodated with appropriate resources and transportation. 100% of Children who are eligible for ECE funding and Head Start programs should receive subsidies and enrollment. The CCDBG should be allocated with the necessary funding to address all children and families below a federally designated income threshold.

3. ECE programs should be designed and implemented through consistent community engagement.

Diverse parent/community counsels representing all demographics within a community should be included in ECE decision-making processes. It is crucial for their voices to be heard and their distinct needs to be met to result in high-quality ECE outcomes for all children, especially those with diverse backgrounds. National civil rights and local community-based organizations can contribute meaningful ECE policy recommendations in local and state governments. Ensuring diverse representation in governing councils and departments is also vital for aligning educational practices with the unique needs of historically marginalized communities.

4. Policymakers should enact a unified federal policy system that establishes a set of standards for the equity, accessibility and quality of ECE programming available across the United States. Rather than states determining their own limitations for federal subsidies. State and local governments should be tasked with upholding a set of federal standards for civil rights principles within ECE. They should be responsible for providing detailed reporting on disaggregated data from within their ECE programming so that the public and federal policymakers can transparently see gaps in the equity and accessibility of high-quality ECE in every state.



How can policymakers, civil rights organizations, and other advocacy groups effectively increase support and funding for comprehensive federal ECE policy?

The recommendations presented in this brief require a large-scale overhaul of the current federal policy landscape of early care and education. To develop and implement such comprehensive policy changes would require a shift in the perception of ECE from a luxury for those who can readily access and afford it, to an inherent civil right for all children. Advocacy and educational efforts need to propose ECE as a civil liberty that should be afforded to all children, and *The Civil Rights Principles for Early Care and Education* is a prime example of this notion.

Interviews with national civil rights organizations representing various historically marginalized communities provided insightful recommendations that could further the equity, accessibility, and quality of ECE systems. The organizations specified that shifting the perspective of ECE to a principle of children civil rights can be a way to meaningfully progress toward eliminating the disparities present in the current ECE system. Equitable access to ECE grants all children the opportunity to succeed, regardless of their background. *The Civil Rights Principles for Early Care and Education* establish that access to high-quality ECE should be framed as a civil rights issue and be focused on equity, inclusion, and social justice. This perspective emphasizes the need for systemic changes that address the historical and ongoing marginalization of children of color in the context of economic, linguistic, and cultural barriers.

About the Author:



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Equity Research Action Coalition (ERAC):

The ERAC is a conglomerate of researchers funded by a grant from the Foundation for Child Development. The purpose of the ERAC is to co-construct with practitioners and policymakers actionable research to support the optimal development of Black children prenatally through childhood across the African diaspora using a cultural wealth framework. The coalition focuses on developing a science-based action framework to eradicate the impact of racism and poverty and all its consequences on the lives of Black children, families, and communities, and to ensure optimal health, well-being, school readiness and success, and overall excellence.²²





Endnotes

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