

Racial Equity at the Forefront: Priorities for Early Childhood Education in Pennsylvania

A Call to Action by the Early Childhood Provider Council Racial Equity Subcommittee

Introduction

The Early Childhood Provider Council's Racial Equity Subcommittee, supported by Children First, is dedicated to addressing systemic inequities in Pennsylvania's early childhood education (ECE) system. Children of color face significant barriers to accessing high-quality care, and Black and Hispanic educators are disproportionately represented in low-wage roles. The Subcommittee has identified three priority areas—funding, equity practices, and leadership/business reform—that require immediate action to ensure equitable opportunities for children, families, and educators.



Priority 1: Increase Child Care Funding and Improve Educator Compensation

Challenges:

- ECE educators earn some of the lowest wages in the U.S. workforce, with many living below the poverty line. Black educators earn \$0.78 less per hour than their white counterparts, and early educators with bachelor's degrees earn 22% less than K-12 teachers.
- Low compensation exacerbates staffing shortages, high turnover rates, and classroom closures, impacting the quality of care and education children receive.

Data Highlights:

- In Pennsylvania, the average early educator earns \$12.43/hour or \$25,844/year, far below the cost of living in all 67 counties.
- Over 44% of early educators rely on payday loans or financial assistance to cover basic expenses.

Recommendations

1. **Increase state funding for programs like Child Care Works, Pre-K Counts, and Head Start to reflect the true cost of quality care.**
2. **Establish a Fair and Equitable Salary Standard (FESS) to align ECE pay with K-12 educators, accounting for qualifications and experience.**
3. **Provide essential benefits, including subsidized health care and pensions, to stabilize the workforce.**



Priority 2: Fund Equity Practices and Mental Health Support

Challenges:

- Providers lack resources to implement equity-focused practices, such as translating materials and hiring culturally competent staff.
- Mental health challenges among children are rising, but services remain underfunded, particularly for low-income and minority families.

Data Highlights:

- Black preschoolers are 3.6 times more likely to face suspension than their white peers, and children with disabilities are 14.5 times more likely to be suspended or expelled.
- Culturally and linguistically appropriate mental health professionals are critically needed but scarce.

Recommendations

1. **Provide targeted funding to support equity practices, such as hiring bilingual staff and implementing trauma-informed care.**
2. **Establish higher reimbursement rates for children with special needs to ensure adequate support.**
3. **Expand mental health services in ECE, modeled after programs like Pennsylvania's Rapid Response Team Pilot, and ensure parity with K-12 mental health funding.**
4. **Improve transparency and accountability in resource allocation to address inequities.**

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Priority 3: Enhance Equity in Leadership and Business Practices

Challenges:

- Black and Brown leaders are underrepresented in ECE, limiting diverse perspectives in decision-making and program design.
- Inequitable workplace policies disproportionately burden low-income families, forcing parents into inflexible jobs that disrupt family routines and limit access to quality care.

Data Highlights:

- Diverse leadership is essential for equitable decision-making and helps children develop positive perceptions of diversity.
- Employers provide minimal financial support for child care, leaving public policies to fill the gap.

Recommendations

1. **Promote diverse leadership by creating equitable hiring practices and accessible professional development opportunities.**
2. **Reform workplace policies to support family stability, such as flexible schedules for parents and consistent child care subsidies.**
3. **Foster stronger partnerships between ECE providers and employers to address child care needs.**

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Call To Action

The Racial Equity Subcommittee calls on legislators and stakeholders to:

1. Increase funding for ECE programs and align educator pay with K-12 standards.
2. Invest in mental health services and equity-focused practices to support children and families.
3. Promote diverse leadership and reform business practices to ensure equitable access and opportunities.

By addressing these priorities, Pennsylvania can create a more just and inclusive early childhood education system that uplifts every child, supports families, and values educators.

About The Report

In the policy brief, we delve into each of these priority areas, highlighting the issues that demand urgent action. The recommendations are meant to address these challenges, ensuring equitable access and opportunities for all children and families in early learning programs. By prioritizing these issues and taking tangible steps toward achieving racial equity, we can build a more inclusive and just education system.



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