

A Call to Action: Transforming Child Care with the Build Stronger Child Care Policy Roadmap

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Let's be clear. The vulnerabilities we are seeing in the child care sector are a direct result of the poor public policy and investment choices our country made for decades before COVID-19 appeared. Providers would not be closing their doors if durable funding streams ensured stable enrollment and fair compensation, and if they did not rely on private tuition from families. Child care is an essential part of a functioning economy because it allows parents to work and it lays the educational and developmental foundation for the next generation. It is a public good, just like public education and public transportation, because its value is bigger than those who directly participate in it.

The pandemic made the importance of child care clear and challenges us to rethink how we value it, how we provide it, and how we fund it. This is our chance to listen to the frustrations, and anger, and hopes, and dreams of the families and educators clamoring for change.

Now is the time to fight for a stronger early childhood system—when the economy depends on the child care sector to bolster the recovery. By thinking boldly and innovatively, we can transform child care in America. The Build Stronger Child Care Policy Roadmap is a path to the future—one that does not return us to the pre-pandemic status quo, but builds a stronger system, and by extension, our economy.

Our journey starts by making equity and quality the guardrails to reaching our destination of a better child care system. We assert that we achieve quality by embedding principles of equity - for children, families, providers, and educators - into policy and practice, and that quality and equity are mutually reinforcing, not competing values. We lift up the contributions and value of educators and caregivers working in all settings, a workforce composed disproportionately of women of color. This means ensuring that our definition of quality has room for the full range of early childhood educators and care providers, including family, friend and neighbor caregivers, while providing all of them with equitable access to the resources and supports that help them be successful and serve children and families effectively.

The Build Stronger Child Care Policy Roadmap is built on a foundation of equity and quality. This tool for state policy advocates and leaders has four distinctive lanes that are traveled simultaneously—all are equally “high-priority.”



A: Recognize Child Care as a Public Good: Increase Access and Affordability

Recognizing child care as a public good acknowledges its value to the economy. Parents, child care providers, employers, schools – we all benefit from a functioning child care system, so we must rethink how we value it and fund it. This will require a significant increase in sustainable public dollars, redefining who’s eligible for publicly-funded child care by decoupling it from workforce participation, and relentlessly using data on what families choose to drive who and how we support a mix of child care supply, including home-based programs. Data disaggregated by race, language, income, special needs, immigrant status, and other backgrounds will also allow us to track and respond to inequities in access.

Make child care accessible to all by reforming policies related to cost and eligibility

Build a supply of child care that reflects families’ preferences

Ensure equitable access among historically underserved populations

B: Advance the Early Care and Education Profession

Putting the principles of equity into policy and practice means having diverse, competent, well-prepared, and well-supported early care and education (ECE) professionals. For too long, early childhood educators, disproportionately Black and brown women, have worked for near poverty wages, without benefits, even as they are asked to continue to build their competencies and credentials. After tinkering around the edges on this issue for years, it is time to prioritize compensation, and give ECE professionals a more unified voice in the policymaking process—from who gets included, to how they are trained, and how much they are paid.

Secure public investment specifically for educators’ compensation and benefits

Build educators’ power through a unified voice

Establish policies tailored to support home-based providers’ practice

Invest in educators’ career and educational advancement, especially for educators of color and multilingual educators

C: Reform Child Care Financing

Child care is a broken market where funding does not correlate with cost, supply does not meet demand, and quality and equity lose out to competitive pressure to keep prices low. This is especially true for infant-toddler care and family child care educators. As a result, the system provides assistance to a sliver of the population and asks parents and providers to shoulder the majority of the cost. Instead, we need to build a system supported primarily with public dollars that offers every child—regardless of zip code or race—access to the kind of care that lays a strong foundation for future success. We know what it takes. We just need the will to stop what we've always done, build a better financing system that supports quality and stability, and raise the additional revenue needed to make it happen.

Base child care funding policies on the true cost of care

Adopt equitable, robust, stable, and durable revenue generating policies that significantly increase public investment in the system

Create more stable and less burdensome financing mechanisms

D: Build a Better Child Care Business Model

Building a stronger child care system means fundamentally improving the child care business model. Only the most well-resourced business have the practices and systems in place to operate successfully. With provider support networks, modern technology infrastructure, and the coaching and mentoring to take advantage of it all, child care providers can reduce resources spent on administrative and overhead functions and maximize resources that support the care they provide and the staff they employ. Building a better child care business model also means collecting more accurate data about revenue and enrollment to improve financial management, and lead to better policies and business decisions when emergencies strike.

Accelerate the development of provider support networks, such as a staffed family child care network or Shared Services Alliance

Modernize the technology infrastructure that programs use to generate the necessary data for efficient business operations and sound decision-making

Provide programs access to the business and administrative technical assistance needed to manage the back-office functions of a stable child care program

This policy roadmap strives to identify the common areas of work that all of us will need to do to build a stronger child care system that will not only help programs, educators, families, and our economy survive the next crisis, but equip them with the resources needed to thrive. That said, the path that each state takes will differ, especially given the uncertainties that will be with us for the foreseeable future - whether they stem from politics, economics, or public health.

No matter the terrain, one thing will remain constant. Our destination is creating an America in which high-quality child care—and the broader ECE system—is an essential public good.