



# 6 Ways To Ensure Preschool Contributes to an Equitable Early Childhood System

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# Contents

## **1 Introduction and summary**

## **3 Background**

## **5 Recommendations**

- 5 Equitably invest in educators serving children
- 8 Leverage the Head Start infrastructure
- 8 Tie support to infant and toddler investments
- 10 Focus on equitable access and quality
- 11 Prioritize the child care workforce and provide equitable compensation
- 12 Ensure all programs are accountable to families and value family voice

## **13 Conclusion**

## **14 About the author**

## **14 Acknowledgements**

## **15 Endnotes**

# Introduction and summary

On a typical day in Georgia, a 4-year-old enters a child care center, greets her teacher, writes her name on the sign-in board, and chooses to build a tower out of blocks alongside a few friends.<sup>1</sup> The teacher observes the child's actions and brings a nonfiction book over, encouraging the students to find a building that is similar to their own structure. This scene unfolds across the country in countless child care centers, homes, and preschools. In Georgia, more than 60 percent of 4-year-olds, including a high proportion of Black 4-year-olds, attend the free early education program in the year before kindergarten.<sup>2</sup> But Georgia is an anomaly; nationally, just 34 percent of 4-year-olds and 6 percent of 3-year-olds can access public preschool.<sup>3</sup>

As candidates, President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris proposed a comprehensive early childhood agenda, including child care, preschool, supports for families beginning at their child's birth, and improved compensation and working conditions for early educators and caregivers.<sup>4</sup> Congressional champions from both parties are committed to expanding investment in solutions that support the nation's youngest children and their parents' participation in the workforce.<sup>5</sup> As the Biden-Harris administration constructs a domestic agenda, there is an opportunity to create a world-class voluntary universal preschool program for children and families that addresses racial and other inequities.

Currently, early childhood programs reflect the stratification of American society by race and class and contribute to the compounding impacts of systemic racism among communities of color, particularly Black, Latino, and Indigenous families. A rigorous focus on examining and addressing structural racism must be at the core of a modern American preschool plan. Young children flourish when supported in rich environments with peers and educators—from resolving how four children can share three magnifying glasses, to documenting what they observe about a hermit crab shell. Preschool, a high-quality early education experience for 3- and 4-year-old children in the year or two before kindergarten, can be a critical lever for promoting children's school success and equitably investing in this coun-

try's future. However, access to preschool is often determined by a family's ability to pay or its residence in one of the handful of cities and states that offer widely available public preschool. Only 1 in 6 eligible children are receiving child care assistance, and without it, families face steep costs to access care and education.<sup>6</sup>

To address these inequities, preschool must be part of a continuum of support for children from birth to kindergarten, including child care and Head Start. Babies, infants, and preschoolers cared for outside their home most commonly access care in child care centers—a system that was already fragile pre-pandemic and that is now facing an existential crisis. This interconnected, underfunded support system for young children and working families can be strengthened by intentionally structuring supports for children from birth through age 5. However, if preschool is proposed or implemented primarily within schools—rather than in the various care settings that make up the early childhood system today—then these efforts will undermine essential infant and toddler care and damage the very providers, educators, and system that families of young children rely on.

This report outlines six key components for a preschool program that will also support a strong, equitable birth to age 5 system, including:

1. Design a system for preschool to be delivered in multiple settings, including family child care.
2. Support Head Start to continue to expand to serve more preschoolers and their families across the country.
3. Invest in infants and toddlers; excluding them from increased funding would undermine the overall early childhood system.
4. Ensure equitable access and quality, including by directing state and local governments to plan to serve targeted geographic areas and groups of students.
5. Prioritize providing equitable compensation to early childhood educators, regardless of settings.
6. Ensure that all programs provide a platform that values family voice and shares power with families.

By approaching preschool as a critical part of the broader system of early care and education, the administration can expand opportunities for young children across the country.

# Background

High-quality preschool is a critical lever for affecting 3- and 4-year-olds' short- and long-term outcomes, but it is best designed and delivered alongside a supportive system for babies, toddlers, and preschoolers—and their families and educators.

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## Learning from birth

Babies are born learning, experiencing an explosion of neurons best supported through trusting relationships with caregivers.<sup>7</sup> This rapid cognitive growth continues through the preschool years, when children tackle complex social and problem-solving scenarios.<sup>8</sup>

Yet families of children under age 5 have uneven access to the care and education that can be transformative to children, working parents, and the economy. With more than two-thirds of young children under age 6 having all available parents in the workforce, families need reliable, affordable, high-quality care and education.<sup>9</sup> Many settings currently serve families: Head Start, Early Head Start, preschool, and child care in centers and homes. No matter the name, nearly all programs have similar purposes: high-quality early learning experiences for children as well as care to support parental workforce participation.

The current American early learning landscape is rooted in inequities found at the intersection of income, race, ability, and geography.<sup>10</sup> The child care market in the United States is largely private pay, and families bear the burden of trying to afford care. Families with young children are spending large amounts of their income on child care—with some spending more than 30 percent of their pay.<sup>11</sup> This reinforces disparities at the individual level, where quality is based on how much a family can pay, and at the community level, as evidenced by widespread child care deserts, which are communities without access to child care.<sup>12</sup> Pandemic trends suggest that Hispanic and Black families are most likely to be affected by worsening child care deserts.<sup>13</sup> This disparity affects how families can access any child care, but especially licensed and high-quality care.

Providing care for infants and toddlers is much more expensive than care for preschoolers—a fact worsened by the coronavirus pandemic.<sup>14</sup> The pandemic has eroded the existing care system, closing child care centers and homes, sometimes permanently.<sup>15</sup> The lack of child care has interrupted peer and educator interaction and erased decades of gains in women’s workforce participation.<sup>16</sup>

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## Universal preschool

A high-quality preschool experience includes access to a full day and school year; a curriculum that comprehensively addresses all facets of children’s development; developmentally appropriate learning standards and assessments; and ongoing professional development for educators. The benefits of a high-quality public preschool program for participating 3- and 4-year-old children are well-documented both in the immediate term and over time, with impacts on student achievement and economic benefits.<sup>17</sup> Whether delivered with a community-based Head Start program or a public school district, high-quality public preschool programs demonstrate short- and long-term outcomes, as shown by research on Tulsa, Oklahoma’s programs.<sup>18</sup> In Washington, D.C., expanded full-day preschool for 3- and 4-year-old children resulted in maternal workforce participation increasing 10 percentage points.<sup>19</sup> Historic inaction also has a cost—creating both a lag for working families now and a drag on children’s future earnings, especially compared with other countries’ investments in young children.<sup>20</sup> Expanding preschool will spur strong outcomes for children and expand parental work participation, acutely needed to support the pandemic recovery.

Policymakers must help build a modern American preschool model that understands the interconnected web of learning from birth and addresses the current inequities for families in affordability, access, and quality across the country.<sup>21</sup> Early childhood educators, a workforce disproportionately made up of Black women and other women of color, face low wages and poor working conditions.<sup>22</sup> Families of color are more likely to live in child care deserts, compounding lack of access to affordable, high-quality care.<sup>23</sup> Preschoolers of color also face deep inequities, including harsh discipline and higher expulsion rates.<sup>24</sup> This report offers recommendations for ensuring that preschool accelerates positive outcomes.

# Recommendations

The opportunity to invest in comprehensive care and education is tremendous: Early childhood experiences are formative, but the current landscape, including child care, Head Start, and preschool, does not fulfill the promise of high-quality early education. The Biden-Harris administration should seize the opportunity to design funding and initiatives to serve babies and toddlers and preschoolers in tandem, rather than viewing preschool as separate. Policymakers should also consider how a broad, strong implementation plan for preschool can help dismantle inequitable systems, including the disproportionate impact on Black and Latino families and educators.

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## Equitably invest in educators serving children

### Homes, centers, and schools

Early childhood educators serve preschooler 3- and 4-year-old children across the country in child care centers, Head Start programs, pre-K or preschool classrooms within school districts, and family child care, which is child care within someone's home. When expanding the access, quality, and impact of care, the administration should explicitly design funding mechanisms to maintain and strengthen these settings where preschoolers' care and education are already happening. This approach has several advantages, including building on the existing infrastructure of dedicated educators, meeting working families' needs, and allowing families maximum choice to match their preferences with their home language and culture.

In family and center child care, infants and toddlers are the most expensive to care for given the low adult-to-child ratio.<sup>25</sup> Preschoolers, who can be served in larger group sizes, are crucial to making infant and toddler care stay afloat in both centers and home-based child care. Given preschool's objectives, implementing a distinct program without strengthening the entire birth to age 5 system is counterproductive. Such an approach erodes the perilous economic structure for child care centers that serve children in this age group, harming both babies

and toddlers and the early childhood educators already serving these students.<sup>26</sup> Implementing exclusively a school- and district-focused preschool also reinforces the false idea that learning happens in one place—school—rather than the correct understanding of children’s development happening within the environments, including educators and peers, around them from birth. Communities and families may choose many different settings for their young children, and funding can follow these choices.

States and cities are already utilizing intentionally mixed delivery models for high-quality education for preschoolers. New York City provides a recent example, having grown its public programs on a short timeline to serve more than 62,000 3- and 4-year-olds, universally guaranteeing a slot for each child born in 2016 through partnering with a variety of settings across child care and school providers.<sup>27</sup>

A recent analysis of Pennsylvania’s Pre-K Counts program, which uses a mixed delivery model in nursery schools, Head Start, school districts, and child care centers, found positive language and math outcomes for students who participated in the program. The impact study did not look at student outcomes by setting, but an accompanying implementation study showed that while providers that reported implementation challenges were more likely to be community-based, overall, providers had a positive impression of program participation.<sup>28</sup>

The federal government, in partnership with states, territories, and tribes, is well-positioned to support preschool investments in different settings.<sup>29</sup> The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services distributes the Child Care Development Block Grant—the primary funding mechanism for American child care—to all states, tribes, and territories.<sup>30</sup> States and tribes then disburse the funds to programs that serve eligible children and families and that are responsible for ensuring quality implementation.<sup>31</sup> Head Start and Early Head Start are also federally funded by the Administration for Children and Families and distributed to local grantees who lead the programming across the country, with federal oversight.

In supporting a mixed delivery design, the administration’s preschool program should include a phased-in approach for quality standards as well as technical support and funding for existing providers to have the opportunity to meet these standards. To provide equitable access to preschool implementation, providers will need differentiated support. For instance, some providers might need help with technical forms to subcontract with the state, while others might need upfront funding for additional curricula, educational supplies such as paint or

books, or for educators to access ongoing education or further credentials. Many state systems require a certain level of accreditation or rating on a state rating scale, such as a quality rating and improvement system, and programs should be able to access upfront and sustained funding and technical support to meet such quality requirements.

### Family child care providers

As part of a mixed delivery system, family child care—child care provided in the early educator’s home—should be a cornerstone of the preschool program. Family care providers are vital partners for working families, often serving multiple ages and sometimes during nontraditional hours.<sup>32</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted how parents seek care from trusted sources, including family care providers who live nearby and serve fewer children.<sup>33</sup>

One of the critical challenges of implementing preschool on a national scale is reaching children across the country, including in child care deserts; family home providers are an essential part of this ecosystem.<sup>34</sup> In many cases, family child care educators live and work in the same communities as the children they serve, which may help families choose providers who share their cultural and linguistic background. Scaling preschool also creates a massive need for additional teachers and educators, so investing in hardworking family child care educators as part of the system is a strategic decision. Incorporating family child care also respects the dedication of longtime educators and honors families’ choices.

Some states, including Arkansas, already include family care directly in the state preschool program.<sup>35</sup> To successfully propel family child care centers to participate, states must explicitly build support designed for family child care; it is not sufficient to simply include such providers on an eligible list. Conveners with a track record of success with family care providers must be intermediaries—such as Judy Centers in Maryland, Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships, or child care resource and referral agencies.<sup>36</sup> These networks or hubs can facilitate family child care participation by handling administrative duties associated with receiving federal and state funds and ensuring that the implementation process works for family child care providers. For example, these providers may not be able to join meetings during regular business hours when caring for children, so there might be a need to offer meeting times on weekends or evenings.

The preschool program should also encourage states to set up shared services that help family child care providers interface with state requirements such as insurance, liability, and other regulations that can otherwise be burdensome to a single proprietor. By connecting existing early childhood providers with strategic supports, the federal government can strengthen, rather than undermine, the early childhood system currently serving families in communities across the country.

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## Leverage the Head Start infrastructure

Likewise, the Biden-Harris administration preschool design can build on the success of Head Start, a program running for more than 60 years that serves preschoolers from low-income families with comprehensive services and family accountability. As a federal program administered locally, Head Start should be scaled as a stand-alone investment to reach more eligible students and families across the country. Early Head Start, which serves pregnant people, babies, and toddlers through a mix of home-based services and classroom experiences, should be expanded as a key resource for communities. Also, individual Head Start grantees should be explicitly encouraged to apply for preschool expansions. Head Start has classrooms in rural and remote counties, including a strong presence across tribal communities.<sup>37</sup> Head Start and Early Head Start also include strategic wrap-around services to meet families' needs beyond the classroom, such as nutrition benefits, support finding medical and dental care, and family economic supports.

To ensure an equitable approach for babies, toddlers, and preschoolers, as well as for families of migrant and seasonal farmworkers and within tribal communities, there should be dedicated resources for Early Head Start and Head Start.<sup>38</sup> These programs are accountable to families through parent policy councils, and through such partnerships over time, they have a history of culturally competent care.<sup>39</sup> Head Start is an essential anchor to creating powerful choices for American families, including by continuing to provide access to a comprehensive family approach.

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## Tie support to infant and toddler investments

Implementation of preschool—even with mixed delivery—can have unintended consequences for babies and toddlers. For example, two recent studies of New York state's preschool program found that it hurt infant and toddler care supply, especially in rural areas.<sup>40</sup> Funding preschool without a comparable investment

in infants and toddlers can compound the pressures on infant and toddler care, which is already comparatively scarce and expensive for families seeking licensed centers and homes.<sup>41</sup>

As the administration builds an early childhood system, no preschool program should be implemented without an integrated plan for funding for babies and toddlers. Babies' earliest experiences affect their emerging language, social, physical, and emotional development.<sup>42</sup> Babies need constant watching and consistent caregiving during a critical period of development when their families are least prepared to shoulder expensive care.<sup>43</sup> Funding preschool alone would create an arbitrary two-tiered system for young children and permanently hurt the economics of child care—reducing access to high-quality care for babies, toddlers, and preschoolers.

Communities and states have attempted to remedy this by tying matching funds for programs serving babies and toddlers to other funding. For example, Illinois sets aside infant and toddler funding linked to the preschool funding.<sup>44</sup> The recently passed Preschool for All program in Multnomah County, Oregon, includes a plan to set aside funds to protect infant and toddler slots from the incentive to only serve preschoolers.<sup>45</sup> Such efforts are laudable but not sufficient to fully sustain infant and toddler programs. The role of the federal government is critical in prioritizing funding and intentionally instructing states to roll out such dedicated funding so that child care educators are not incentivized to only serve preschoolers.

### **Oregon Baby Promise**

Baby Promise in Oregon aims to build the state's supply of quality infant and toddler child care, echoing Oregon Preschool Promise, the state preschool program.<sup>46</sup> Baby Promise provides a reliable, predictable revenue source—like the preschool program and state K-12 funding—through state contracts with early childhood providers. Using Child Care Development Block Grant funds, these contracts establish child care slots specifically for infant and toddler child care at no cost to families living at up to 185 percent of the federal poverty level, which, for a family of four, is less than \$49,025 per year. Such a model preserves slots for babies and toddlers—and provides a more sustainable structure for families and providers.

The administration can create a united American early childhood approach by innovatively combining investment in care for babies, toddlers, and preschoolers. The Child Care for Working Families Act provides a comprehensive blueprint for both child care and preschool.<sup>47</sup>

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## Focus on equitable access and quality

A Biden-Harris preschool proposal should focus on equitable outcomes, considering geography and access by race, income, disability status, and dual-language learners—including in planning, compensation, and family voice.

### Equitable planning and outcomes

Incorporating the Preschool Equity Review from Title II of the Child Care for Working Families Act into the administration's early childhood care plans can help states achieve equitable outcomes.<sup>48</sup> First, it directs states to review the current preschool population, including children with disabilities, low-income children, children from major ethnic and racial groups, and dual-language learners. Next, the Preschool Equity Review includes analysis on geographic distribution, quality, and resource inequities. Some states have launched targeted work through their Preschool Development Grants, large federal grants to help states build strong systems for birth to age 5 care. By using strong data to target subgroups, such as children in foster care and certain geographic areas, states can create more equitable programs based on local needs.

An American preschool plan must also confront the rampant harsh discipline and expulsion practices that disproportionately affect children of color, especially Black children.<sup>49</sup> The Children's Equity Project, a research, policy, and practice initiative focused on dismantling systemic racism in learning settings, lays out several fundamental principles that the federal government should incorporate in all programs receiving federal funding, including: prohibiting corporal punishments and seclusion; limiting restraint allowances; and ensuring more frequent monitoring and reporting.<sup>50</sup> Michigan has identified ways to proactively support the emotional well-being of children, families, and early educators that also limit exclusionary practices, including coaching on mental and behavioral health support and supporting community connections for educators and families.<sup>51</sup> Affected children need federal leadership to create widespread change in how young children are supported, including through anti-racist training, mental and behavioral health support, and accountability for disproportionate discipline rates.

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## Prioritize the child care workforce and provide equitable compensation

Educators support growing neural connections in children with each book read and build social and emotional strength with each Band-Aid applied. Families trust this expertise, but compensation for early educators, unfortunately, does not match the value of their labor and skills. Early educators often make poverty-level wages and often do not have access to health insurance benefits, much less other job compensation such as retirement funds.<sup>52</sup> While educational and credential requirements for child care and preschool educators have risen across the country, early educator wages remain stagnant.<sup>53</sup> Salaries of educators who care for 3- and 4-year-old children vary arbitrarily, despite the fact that children, regardless of settings, benefit from the same educator expertise and warmth.

Early childhood educators' race and ethnicity more closely match children's race and ethnicity than K-12 educators—a strength that helps the field serve children and families with culturally responsive care, especially as the population of the United States grows more diverse each year. The early childhood workforce disproportionately comprises Black women and other women of color. However, compensation is stratified by race within the early learning field such that women of color tend to be concentrated in infant and toddler classrooms and home-based settings that pay the lowest wages in an already undervalued field.<sup>54</sup> Increasing wages across the board and explicitly including family child care educators and infant toddler educators is critical to advancing gender and racial equity.

A federal preschool program can maintain the diversity of the early childhood field and dramatically increase wages by enabling states to disburse funds to preschool providers based on the actual cost of providing high-quality care and education.<sup>55</sup> Participating programs would be required to pay wages following a standardized compensation ladder applicable across child care settings so that early educators in homes and centers earn the same as those in schools.<sup>56</sup> Implementing this salary approach can also unite a currently disparate system across federal early childhood programs. Educators of infants and toddlers must be included here; a fair compensation structure should seek to close the gap between preschool and infant and toddler teachers wages.

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## Ensure all programs are accountable to families and value family voice

Building back a more robust system from the pandemic-ravaged early childhood system will require reimagining parents' and families' roles. Head Start's history and current practices are rooted in elevating family power and decision-making. Designing a federal preschool program will mean creating intentional family support and ensuring accountability to families' voices and needs.

The federal program should incentivize states and local communities to create programs that support working families' schedules—recognizing that full-day preschool programs typically end in midafternoon, before the workday ends. A strong federal approach would encourage a full day and year of high-quality experiences, including funding for before- and after-school programs, backup, or summer care. Many working families also need care during nontraditional hours, such as evenings or weekends, or need flexible schedules due to unpredictable shifts.<sup>57</sup>

Implementing a two-way accountability structure for families will also be crucial to ensuring that parents have real power in informing the policies and practices affecting their children. Sen. Elizabeth Warren's (D-MA) child care proposal during the 2020 presidential election called for local communities to have administrative control to serve local needs best.<sup>58</sup> Through using their federal Preschool Development Birth through Five grants, many states have built out robust plans for maximizing family choice and providing smooth transitions across early childhood programs.<sup>59</sup>

A key principle of any federal preschool program should be ensuring that families have meaningful choices for affordable and quality care that match their child's needs, including those of dual-language learners, and that children of all disability and ability levels have services and supports. At the program level, Head Start has long been a leader with purposeful power to listen to families' voices. Each Early Head Start and Head Start program includes a parent policy council, which has real power to be a part of all meaningful decisions, from hiring to curriculum. Programs, centers, and homes can create similar structures, including representative teams that partner closely with leadership.

# Conclusion

The Biden-Harris administration, the 117th Congress, and the American people have a tremendous opportunity in 2021 to build a robust early childhood care and education system for children and families. States and communities across the country have created innovative models with local funds and building on popular federal programs. A new preschool plan can create more equitable opportunities for children, families, and educators through purposeful strategies that acknowledge and address the current intersection of oppressive policies and practices. Comprehensive child care and preschool investments will help children continue to grow as curious learners, positively affecting their long-term outcomes.<sup>60</sup> Given the complex, interrelated nature of children's development, families' needs, and the economics of the early childhood field, infant and toddler investments must be included in order to positively affect preschoolers' outcomes.

The pandemic has led many parents to exit the workforce to care for young children, with Black and Hispanic mothers more likely to be forced to leave the labor market.<sup>61</sup> Child care providers are facing financial strains from serving fewer children or from closures, and children continue to face challenges, from food insecurity to lost socialization opportunities.<sup>62</sup> A recovery will require meeting children's full needs for care and education and stabilizing and further investing in all care settings, especially child care centers and homes. Expanding investment in infant and toddler and preschool programs in tandem will best serve families' needs, allowing parents to participate in the workforce, and help spur a recovering economy.

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