Establishing Early Care & Education as a Public Good

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by Brandy Jones Lawrence & Emily Sharrock

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Following the pandemic, we have an unprecedented opportunity to redesign early care and education (ECE) with a new north star—ECE as a public good that supports the well-being of all children, families, and society as a whole. Our existing public system is designed as a set of social service programs that are usually means-tested and only available to a portion of eligible families. This haphazard patchwork of resources leaves the rest to find care in a severely broken private-pay marketplace that few families can afford. The programs that do exist are insufficiently, inequitably, and unpredictably funded, leading to a wide variance in quality and accessibility. Instead, our nation needs a system that is open and inviting to all: one that is based on a shared commitment to culturally sustaining, high-quality ECE and with the primary purpose of supporting child development and the diverse experiences and priorities of all American families.

To do this, we must center and elevate the unequivocal fact that society benefits and democracy is upheld when all children have access to meaningful early learning experiences.

To achieve this commitment, we must take every opportunity to make progress. Each policy and program decision made at the federal, state, and local levels has the potential to offer short-term steps forward, but identifying these opportunities requires a new outlook. While decades of underinvestment have resulted in an ECE system that operates within the confines of scarcity, now is the time to act on both long-imagined and new possibilities for our field. In order to undo the legacies of institutionalized racism and economic disparities, we must examine the impact of our assumptions on existing practice while we also devise new approaches.

So, the questions are:

*How do we build such a system? What does it look like? How do we get there?*
Bank Street’s *Learning Starts At Birth* initiative engaged a set of early childhood policy and thought leaders with a shared commitment to this vision in a discussion series. Our goal was to consider both what it would take and what would be possible for all children and families if we fundamentally shifted the paradigm for investment in ECE. From the outset, we made a strong commitment to equity, creating recommendations informed by our country’s history of institutionalized racism, and the evolution of work, gender roles, and family dynamics.

Through this collaboration, we designed the following guiding principles for policy design and implementation to support this paradigm and mindset shift. If applied consistently, we hope these guiding principles can aid the field in the tactical policy and advocacy actions needed to move us towards investing in ECE as a public good.

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**What is A Public Good?**

For the purposes of this paper we draw from the concepts of pure and quasi-public goods to define a public good as goods and services that:

- Benefit society overall, sometimes by providing a benefit that is utilized by all and sometimes providing a benefit only used by some.

- Are made available to all who can utilize it.

- Often, but not always, are supplied by government institutions, usually through taxation. For the purposes of this document we assert that ECE should be governed and paid for largely by the public sector through a mixed-delivery system.
Guiding Principles to Effectively Design Early Care and Education as a Public Good

1. Update and Expand the Value Proposition
2. Invest In and Plan for the Long-Term
3. Design for Anti-Racism
4. Commit to Quality
5. Partner with Educators, Families and Communities Throughout Policy Design and Implementation
1. Update and Expand the Value Proposition

Develop and strategically communicate policy and program strategies that offer a broader value proposition for ECE and connect to local needs. Invite a broader group of supporters and stakeholders into the work while policy leaders and advocates work toward shifts in policy.

ECE has far-reaching benefits for society. The pandemic has begun to make these benefits more evident to an expanding group of stakeholders, including businesses. Every dollar invested in quality early childhood programs yields a $4-$9 return on investment in individual and community outcomes.¹ We need to devise policies, programs, and, ultimately, a movement that communicates the benefits of ECE to all individuals and society at large. We also need to confront the ways in which broader access to ECE can push against assumptions about work, gender-assigned responsibilities, and dominant White culture. These beliefs have neither kept pace with our understanding of brain science, nor do they represent the way we live, parent, and work in today’s economy. The fact is that most American families need access to flexible and affordable, if not free, ECE. These tensions have led to a misconception that there is a narrower constituency that benefits from quality ECE than there actually is.

2. Invest In and Plan for the Long Term

Devise a long-term vision for a robust ECE system in your community and apply new resources toward policies or programs that move towards that vision.

Embrace a risk-taking mindset. Leaders fell into a pattern of incremental change after years of political polarization and gridlock at the federal level. The pandemic revealed the fragility of the ECE systems in most communities, exposing that they have been pieced together over time without the intentional planning and investment needed to create a stable, resilient system of care. Now is the time to build from that new awareness to plan for the long term as we build back our systems and invest in ways that allow us to be responsive to our evolving understanding of child well-being and our emergent needs, as well as shifts in our commonly held values and mores (i.e., regarding work, family ecosystems, gender assigned roles, and family economics).

3. Design for Anti-Racism

*Design programs and policies that build from the strengths and needs of all families, and that do not simply expand access to programs that perpetuate the inequities in our current systems, of a dominant White culture, and of our society at large.*

To achieve equitable access to ECE, as well as equitable outcomes, we must name the system design components that perpetuate inequities, ineffectiveness, fragmentation, and unintended consequences. At the same time, we can build from aspects of our system that have centered around anti-racism and equity. Universal access to ECE can contribute to dismantling racism if the design of those programs is culturally responsive and informed by the experiences of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities. Designing an anti-racist ECE system requires a shared commitment to a concept of quality that includes equitable experiences of quality among the children and families it serves, allowing space for the definition of “quality” to be expansive enough to include a continuum of preferences, priorities, and values that represent the cultural diversity and needs of all learners.

4. Commit to Quality

*Honor the complexity of the work at hand. Building and designing for an inclusive, high-quality ECE system at scale requires the courage to hold several interrelated priorities at once while refusing to succumb to expediency or a scarcity mindset.*

Policymakers must prioritize both equitable access and quality. Scaling programs that do not value both will continue to undermine the needs of children and families and feed into narratives about poor quality that perpetuate disinvestment in child care. ECE should be valued and funded to reflect its benefit to the health and well being of our nation’s children, the prosperity of families, and the requisite relationship to economic vitality. Policymakers must resist the temptation and political expediency to spread resources too thin, leaving out critical investments that drive quality including compensation, benefits and adequate professional learning for the workforce. We must continue to expect and demand system infrastructure enhancements and investment levels that reflect the indispensable value of a robust ECE system, refusing to sacrifice quality or scale.
5. Partner with Educators, Families and Communities Throughout Policy Design & Implementation

*Partner with, don’t just “listen” to, those who experience the impact of policies and programs in the design phase, from conception through implementation.*

Build structures for meaningful partnerships with educators and families to develop more responsive approaches to policy making. In addition to creating better policy solutions and stronger outcomes for children and families, this approach can create a more resilient system in the face of crisis. Create leadership platforms, protocols, and inclusion loops that are accessible. Consider paid positions and new governance structures that include more democratic principles of participation. As these models are developed, consider borrowing approaches and best practices from existing programs like Head Start Policy Councils and other sectors that do this well, including urban planning and climate change efforts. As we move from having representation to designing systems for authentic engagement and increased ownership, we can better anticipate unintended consequences and design more creative approaches that respond to the immediate and long-term needs of children, families, and communities.
Applying Principles to Our Current Work

To imagine what would be possible through the application of these principles and significant additional public investment, our group took on the task of examining the current ECE system to decide what systems or design elements should be left behind, expanded upon, or developed from scratch. The result of that inquiry is a sampling of options for transitional strategies, policy recommendations, and visions for the future that we hope spark the imagination of communities, funders, policymakers, and systems leaders to design systems differently. The following ideas are meant to be prompts, not policy endorsements, as we work in partnership to expand our thinking and imagine "what might be possible if we reimagine an ECE system as a public good?"
Imagine what would happen if all families enjoyed an early childhood benefit that allowed them to choose from a combination of comprehensive paid leave, early care and education, and wraparound support.
To meet the unique needs of families with young children, establish a national program that guarantees all families have access to a continuum of ECE services in the first five years of a child’s life. Families would access support from a continuum of benefits, including comprehensive paid family leave delivered through direct payments to families and a baseline early care benefit available to all American families until a child turns three, available during the hours needed (part or full time; including non-traditional hours) with a participating provider chosen by the family. Universal free, publicly funded pre-K for three- and four-year-olds would be guaranteed, just like K-12 education. Additionally, wraparound supports would be available for families in need of them, such as home visiting or mental health supports.
Imagine what would happen if a system of local control could coordinate and guarantee universal access to the right mix of early care and education and wraparound support for each community.
Establish locally governed ECE zones across the nation that are responsible for activating access to new early childhood benefits. Zones would be charged with reorienting their relationships with families to coordinate voluntary, universal access to child care using existing and new federal, state, and local dollars. This funded structure would streamline the administration of ECE under existing and/or newly created localized governing entities with a board that includes parents and educators to ensure representative system design and implementation while also ensuring adequate and responsive supply. The board would create linkages between a diverse continuum of public and private providers, including both centers and family child care homes, as well as providers of wraparound services. Additionally, this infrastructure would offer system-wide economies of scale—including purchasing and shared services, equitable access to robust professional development, new teacher training pathways, and other operational and quality assurance support. With planning and an intentional commitment to ensuring equity, ECE zones could also formally partner with adjacent K-12 school districts and/or other health and human service systems to enhance system alignment between ECE and K-12, especially with regard to transition, family engagement, and expanded services and supports.
Imagine what would happen if the early childhood education workforce were compensated and credentialed in recognition of the complex work they do.
Establish a system that invests in the ECE workforce as professionals, instead of treating them like babysitters. Offer tailored professional learning opportunities that are anchored in adult development principles, including job-embedded learning experiences that lead to transferable credentials and college degrees. Guarantee all early care educators a living wage and health benefits. Pair additional increases in compensation with additional professional development, moving towards the ultimate goal of pay parity for similarly credentialed K-12 educators. Develop systems to guarantee access to these opportunities through early educator residency or apprenticeship programs in partnership with institutions of higher education. This would meaningfully build the supply infrastructure while creating a system that honors the professional nature of the work and supports the provision of ECE as a public good.
Imagine what would happen if we had a different and truly inclusive relationship and set of expectations between systems, families and providers.
Establish authentic and inclusive power-sharing practices for informing policy, system design, and program implementation. Policies informed by the lived experiences and perspectives of all vested stakeholders lead to stronger outcomes that are more likely to deliver on the value proposition public goods promise. Mechanisms for authentic engagement used in other fields offer models we can adapt. These include negotiated rulemaking—where an agency convenes a committee of stakeholders with the goal of reaching a consensus outcome on the content of a proposed rule—or the establishment of citizens’ assemblies in which parents, educators and other community members participate in decision-making, beginning with in-depth analysis of a given issue and deliberation over different solutions. Approaches like these could support significant shifts in our system’s design and responsiveness, including an expansive understanding of quality based on the perspectives of families and educators.
Imagine what would happen if we had a national family policy that required all federal agencies to commit to every family’s well-being.
Establish a national family or early childhood policy that garners the full force of government and society to uphold a certain standard that intentionally considers and supports the well-being of families. A comprehensive policy approach would establish a set of standards to which all government entities that impact the lives of families would be held accountable. What if we developed a comprehensive policy strategy that ensures no family would fall below a certain threshold of well-being? What if the government utilized all its plans, functions, and resources for the purpose of fostering and promoting the stability and flourishing of all children and families in America? With a coordinated policy approach across agencies that support families at the highest level of government, American families would be able to thrive. Such an approach offers an opportunity to move away from a system that is made up of a disparate set of programs, often with competing values and priorities. With a new national approach that values the economic security and well-being of all American families, children would stand a far greater chance of experiencing a consistent, voluntarily accessed ECE system that is responsive to their needs and reinforces their potential for success.
Where do we go from here?

To realize the ideas outlined in this brief and others that meaningfully change the way we support families with young children, we must garner the public and political will necessary to invest at the scale required. We need to be honest about the implicit and explicit assumptions we hold about work, gender-assigned responsibilities, and an ideal of institutionalized Whiteness, all of which have become embedded in our way of governing despite our changing landscape, priorities, and socio-economic structure. And, we need to ask why we have been unwilling to invest in ECE as a public good when so many other nations do? Policy leaders, social justice activists, child and family advocates, and government administrators must develop new approaches to policy formation and program design and implementation that challenge assumptions that no longer reflect our reality. The field needs messages and policies that integrate both commitment to supporting healthy development for all children and illuminate the role ECE plays in driving our economy. Simply put, we need to think critically and act strategically to reveal and realize the universal public value of a robust ECE system.
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