



# Start Early Policy Agenda

Fiscal Year 2021 – Fiscal Year 2023



## Introduction

### OUR MISSION

Start Early advances quality early learning for families with children, before birth through their earliest years, to help close the opportunity gap.

### OUR VISION

Every child has equitable opportunity to reach their full potential to thrive in school and in life.

## What Shapes Our Policy Agenda

The work of Start Early is grounded in the fact that the first five years of a child's life are the most important for healthy development and long-term well-being, and that far too many children and families lack access to quality early learning — particularly those living in communities that have been under-resourced by decades of historical and institutional racism. We are committed to advancing racial equity in our direct service, advocacy and policy and research. Advancing equity in access, use and outcomes for young children and their families is inextricably tied to advancing equity for people of color, Black, Latinx and Indigenous individuals, communities that have been under-resourced, priority populations and those at the intersections of these groups.

Our policy agenda advances our core beliefs that:

- Early learning begins prenatally and includes the full continuum of high-quality services across all modalities that meet the unique needs of children and their families through the first five years of life.
- High-quality early learning services are those that are culturally, linguistically and ability-responsive and result in improved child and family outcomes.
- Early learning services and supports should be provided as early as possible to those children and families who would benefit the most.
- Investments in early learning at the federal, state and community levels must ensure strong early learning systems with the capacity to deliver high-quality services.

Our policy agenda is informed by our decades of work directly with children and families in prenatal-to-age 5 services, our experiences providing training and support to the early childhood workforce across the country, and our ongoing consultation to system leaders at the federal, state and local levels to drive policy change. To be effective, early childhood policies must mutually reinforce the day-to-day workings of early learning and care programs and the research and evaluation efforts that help identify high-impact practices/opportunities and disparities.

Our approach is grounded in research to gauge impact and ongoing improvement. We work broadly across child and family-serving systems to influence policy change and drive investments. We advance policy change through systems building; legislative, administrative and grassroots advocacy; and consultation and thought leadership.

Our Fiscal Year 2021 - Fiscal Year 2023 policy agenda outlines opportunities at the federal, state and community levels across seven issue areas organized across three themes.

## 1. Next-Generation Program Quality

- Instructional Leadership and Organizational Conditions
- Home Visiting and Doula Services
- Home-based Child Care

## 2. Building Connected, Comprehensive and Equitable Systems

- Priority Populations
- System Infrastructure
- Research-Practice Partnerships

## 3. Elevating Family Voice and the Role of Families

### A Note About Our Racial Equity Journey

Structural and institutional racism has meant that the contributions, strengths and needs of people of color and Black, Latinx and Indigenous individuals — particularly women, who make up most of the early childhood workforce — have historically been undervalued, under-resourced and not viewed as the sources of innovation that they truly are. The result is that many of the practitioners, children and families whom we serve experience inequitable access and outcomes in early learning and care and are overrepresented in many priority populations.

Start Early is working towards centering equity — particularly racial equity — in all of our work, including in our approach to early childhood policy. As individuals who interact with policy and systems of government, as well as stakeholders who shape and influence these structures, Start Early's policy teams feel it is critical for us to recognize the ways those formal systems (institutional racism) — in tandem with our country's history and culture (structural racism) — are capable of perpetuating inequities. We view the process of setting forward an equity-centered policy agenda as a learning journey and aim to interrogate our biases, weak spots and mistakes along the way and aspire toward more authentic change. We aim to reflect on our approach deeply as we improve and revise our agenda and welcome all feedback and resources that you recommend we use to shape our policy priorities. Please email us at [Advocacy@StartEarly.org](mailto:Advocacy@StartEarly.org).

## Next-Generation Program Quality

The research is clear: quality matters when it comes to early learning and care experiences. High-quality early learning services are those that are culturally, linguistically and ability-responsive and result in improved child and family outcomes. Start Early believes that federal, state and community standards and funding streams should be leveraged to incentivize professional development for the early childhood workforce, ensure wages and benefits are adequate and equitable, provide specialized coaching for the field, and fund research that will provide new insights into our understanding of quality and how to achieve it.

### INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP AND ORGANIZATIONAL CONDITIONS

For early learning and care programs to flourish, federal, state and local systems must create environments that enable providers and professionals to make good use of evidence-based practices that enhance the quality of early childhood interventions, care and education for all children and their families and attend to the well-being of staff. Start Early believes that leaders, caregivers and teachers must be supported by systems and resources that strengthen program-level organizational conditions, including strong education pathways, adequate, equitable pay and compensation commensurate with qualifications, continuing professional development requirements, in-service offerings, professional development provider competencies and qualifications, and resources for improvements to organizational conditions, including partnering with families.

Six programwide organizational conditions have proven necessary to create and sustain staff well-being and commitment, to practice excellence and for ongoing improvement that ensures young children and their families reap the promised benefits of high-quality programming. Improving equitable access, use and outcomes for children and their families will require coherent, orchestrated action to strengthen the following six essential program supports:

- Effective instructional leaders
- Collaborative teachers and staff
- Involved and engaged families
- Supportive environments
- Ambitious practice and instruction
- Parent and family voice

To support a more comprehensive definition of quality and continuous improvement, Start Early believes that federal, state and local policies should align to the key principles inherent in *The Essential 0-5 Survey*. This includes a focus on effective instructional leadership as the key driver, and teacher, caregiver and staff collaboration as the vehicle for staff well-being, sustained professional learning and retention all undergirded by trust among leaders, teachers, staff and families.

## Federal Priorities

- Ensure Head Start, Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) and Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) standards for program directors and education coordinators require demonstrated skills in administrative and instructional leadership, including early childhood content knowledge. Leverage these standards to incentivize early childhood professionals to build cultural competency.
- Ensure Head Start, CCDBG and IDEA standards address early childhood leader, teacher, caregiver and professional development specialist competencies and qualifications, and resources are targeted to support job-embedded professional development, which together create the organizational conditions for high-quality instruction and continuous improvement.
- Increase staff compensation to ensure wages and benefits are adequate, equitable and commensurate with qualifications.
- Invest in specialized early childhood support personnel, including instructional coaches, mental health consultants, family and community partnerships staff and special education practitioners, which all early childhood education programs should be able to access.
- Ensure standards, regulations, data, implementation efforts and funding support instructional leaders, individual and group coaching, embedded professional development strategies and family partnerships that build strong organizational practices in programs poised for improvement.
- Fund research and innovations that strengthen our knowledge, measurement systems and understanding of how policies and systems can support strong organizational conditions in early childhood education settings.

## State-Level Priorities

- Increase investments in leader, caregiver, teacher and staff compensation and benefits as the foundation for equity and quality, including supports to attract and retain high-performing early educators, such as paid planning time, substitutes to cover release time for peer learning group participation, and actionable data to facilitate collaborative decision-making and ongoing cycles of improvement.
- Base tiered reimbursement rates in state Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) on the true cost of implementing equitable quality standards effectively, including higher payment to programs with strong family engagement services.
- Redesign principal preparation and early childhood directors' credential competencies and higher education curricula to prepare effective instructional and administrative leaders, which includes incentivizing the development of cultural competency.
- Establish multiple pathways to obtain professional credentials, including through job-embedded professional learning, and policies to recruit and support leaders, caregivers and teachers of color and multilingual professionals to obtain credentials designed to strengthen the supportive environments and organizational conditions of early childhood education programs.

## State-Level Priorities, continued

- Redesign QRIS standards, payment mechanisms and professional development systems to empower site-based instructional leadership and routine job-embedded professional development.

## Community-Level Priorities

- Incentivize elementary principals and early learning program leaders to develop competency in early childhood development and culturally competent instructional and family engagement practices with children, families and staff.
- Institute salary parity when early childhood educators, including infant-toddler teachers, have the same or similar education requirements and job responsibilities as K-12 teachers, regardless of setting.
- Collect and communicate data — including to administrators and program staff — on the strengths of organizational conditions in early childhood education programs to target investments in professional development and ongoing continuous improvement.
- Enact district and/or community-wide program standards governing early childhood education programs organized around the elements and practices of *The Essential 0-5 Survey*, offer training and technical assistance and evaluate and communicate progress on the essential conditions that positively affect child outcomes.
- Establish school district policies to ensure principals and program directors are responsible for structuring and facilitating the essential supports of effective instructional leadership, teacher collaboration and school-family communication and supports for early childhood education programs to achieve better performance and alignment with K-12.

## HOME VISITING AND DOULA SERVICES

Our belief that quality parent-child relationships and interactions create the foundational skills that children need to succeed in school and life also demands that we advance policies that address maternal health, particularly the outcomes of Black mothers. Addressing the needs of birthing parents is critical to their health and the health and success of their children.

Home visiting and doula services are embedded within a broader early childhood system of care and education to support children and their families in establishing healthy foundations and ongoing developmental success through strong parent-child relationships, sustainable support networks and access to community resources. Recognizing that learning begins at birth, and relational health and care begins before birth, the vision for home visiting is to foster seamless and uninterrupted access to high quality early childhood services and experiences from the prenatal period through early childhood.

For the home visiting field in general, we seek to center parent and caregiver voice across policy, practice and research tables to ensure that the service delivery system is accessible and responsive to changes in community and family desires and needs, with an eye towards equity.

The field must develop, promote and utilize innovative and responsive home visiting models and practices. We should always be learning and consciously iterating and improving. Start Early seeks opportunities to seed innovation, elevate and scale existing community-based innovations and build for sustainability and incorporation of innovative practices into the larger system. We also recognize the critical need for a home visiting workforce that is reflective of families in the diverse communities that home visiting programs serve. We support policy that strengthens career pathways into and trajectories through the field, in a way that builds on lived experiences and provides professional development opportunities and increased compensation for both doulas and home visitors.

### **Federal Priorities**

- Increase funding for the Maternal, Infant Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) program and provide for any COVID-19-related funding and flexibility needs.
- Provide the needed flexibilities and incentives for states to utilize other federal funding streams to expand access to evidence-based home visiting programs (such as Medicaid and the Family First Prevention Services Act).
- Advance the principle that evidence of family-expressed needs and desires be considered as part of an evidence base.
- Strengthen efforts by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and other federal agencies to enable and scale innovations that remove barriers preventing low-income women from accessing home visiting and doula services.
- Expand Medicaid coverage for up to one year postpartum, which includes coverage for doula and home visiting services and services that are not pregnancy-related, such as dental.
- Appropriate funding for states to establish maternal mortality review boards. These boards should be prepared to review and provide best practices for mitigating instances of maternal mortality and morbidity, including implicit bias, found in hospital settings.
- Work with federal agencies to issue timely approval of waivers that would allow states to expand services, such as Medicaid.
- Collect and use data at the federal level related to racial disparities in outcomes for birthing parents across the country.

### **State-Level Priorities**

- Focus on state systems building to ensure home visiting programs are incorporated as a part of a continuum of supports for families in both the early childhood and health sectors, as well as child welfare.
- Ensure that state funding streams are responsive to post-COVID program attrition, the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on community-based programs serving hardest-hit geographies and populations, and emergent innovations in client engagement.
- Strengthen systems-level efforts to better promote the benefits and availability of home visiting and local/regional efforts to coordinate enrollment across funders.

### State-Level Priorities, continued

- Align and improve data systems across programs and state agencies.
- Streamline funding and monitoring processes across home visiting funders at the state level to improve the ability of local home visiting agencies to access funding and create greater coherence in program quality.
- Identify solutions to common challenges faced by the home visiting workforce, including promoting a more diverse workforce, racial pay disparities and other state-specific solutions.
- Advance legislation that expands state Medicaid programs to include coverage for doula and evidence-based home visiting services for individuals who qualify for medical assistance.
- Advance legislation that extends state coverage for Medicaid for birthing parents to one year postpartum.
- Collect and use data at the state level related to racial disparities in outcomes for birthing parents across the country.

### Community-Level Priorities

- Increase awareness of benefits and availability of intensive home visiting services to increase enrollment of home visiting services by eligible families.
- Where available, connect birthing parents with support navigating Medicaid coverage of home visiting, doula and postpartum services.
- Collect and contribute local data to state and federal efforts to address racial disparities in outcomes for birthing parents.
- Support and incentivize coordinated intake at the community level.

## HOME-BASED CHILD CARE

Home-based child care is a critical component of our nation's child care infrastructure, particularly for infants and toddlers. Home-based child care (HBCC) includes licensed (regulated) family child care (FCC) and family, friend and neighbor (FFN) caregivers who offer small mixed-age group care and education services in nurturing home environments that reflect the culture of the families they serve. Start Early believes that early learning systems must support the unique needs of home-based child care providers to ensure an equitable, high-quality supply of early learning and to ensure family choice.

The number of licensed FCC homes and FFN caregivers has fallen dramatically over the last 10 years. Although the reasons for these declines vary by community conditions, factors that affect the supply of HBCC care include low or unpredictable income and lack of benefits; 50-60 hour work weeks; lack of time, business skills and/or technology to bring in enough revenue to cover housing and insurance costs; inability to meet increased regulations; and social isolation.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, families' reliance on HBCC increased dramatically while simultaneously exacerbating these stressors. Start Early believes that a strong supply of home-based child care is critical to support families who work untraditional hours, live in rural communities, have infants and toddlers, have children with disabilities or who speak a language other than English as their primary language. Action is urgently needed to ensure that HBCC is an accessible, high-quality option in our diverse early childhood education system to respond to parents' needs.

## **Federal Priorities**

- Prioritize the use of Head Start, CCDBG and Preschool Development Grant B-5 funds to strengthen existing and establish new staffed family child care networks that connect HBCC providers to the supports they need to improve quality, enhance business practices, connect providers and the families they serve to community resources, and support more equitable, comprehensive practices that build on the cultural, linguistic and personal strengths both licensed FCC and FFN providers offer to the children and families they serve.
- Incentivize states to embed health, mental health and family engagement services within staffed HBCC networks.
- Use the national early childhood Training and Technical Assistance system to deliver technical assistance to states and communities to sustain and grow the supply of quality HBCC, including developing cost models and financing approaches to institutionalize models that work.
- Invest in research to determine the effectiveness of different types of networks for increasing supply, improving quality and enhancing child outcomes and to identify effective program and cost models that support FFN caregivers to maintain safe, stimulating home environments and earn livable wages.
- Require states to track family child care preference and demand trends to inform investments in an expanded mix of provider types that meet the evolving needs of families. Prioritize supply-building to address the persistent gaps experienced by children and families in under-resourced communities.
- Support rate-setting methodologies and flexible payment policies to ensure adequate business income for HBCC providers

## **State-Level Priorities**

- Use structured methods to engage diverse provider associations, parents, child care resource and referral (CCR&R) agencies and licensing and training agencies to identify operational, policy and systems solutions to the barriers that HBCC providers confront, including in QRIS.
- Fund new, staffed FCC networks, enhance existing networks and local provider associations and expand state-funded partnerships between HBCC, Head Start and pre-K programs to improve access to high-quality services, prioritizing under-served Native American, Black and Latinx children.

### State-Level Priorities, continued

- Co-create and invest in strategies that help FFN providers become licensed and participate in quality enhancement activities. Recruit and equip FCC providers to comply with licensing and registration requirements by offering intensive consultation and training, including using local networks to encourage FFN caregivers to become licensed, participate in the subsidy system and engage in QRIS.
- Advance funding, policies and implementation strategies to sustain and improve HBCC, including subsidy rates and payment mechanisms based on the true cost of quality care; recruitment, enrollment and continuity of care; quality improvement initiatives; business and technology supports; licensing, housing and zoning regulations; start-up costs; and to support HBCC in serving priority populations.
- Expand home visiting programs working with FFN caregivers to support healthy development, early literacy and family engagement for children in their care.
- Strengthen intermediary organizations and associations to ensure FFN caregivers know about and can access resources and supports, such as state CCDBG subsidies and the Child and Adult Care Food Program, and linkages to medical homes, child care health and mental health consultants, early intervention specialists, play and learn sessions, safety supplies and learning materials.

### Community-Level Priorities

- Implement strategies that help HBCC providers recruit and enroll children, such as ensuring that consumer outreach resources and CCR&R specialists highlight the value of HBCC, the types of services FCC and FFN providers offer and provider participation in quality initiatives.
- Convene networks to share learning, engage in research and advance policy reforms.
- Leverage the [Early Childhood Connector](#) as an online hub offering navigation services that make it easy for HBCC providers and networks to quickly connect to tailored resources and peers.
- Support community-driven approaches to support HBCC caregivers and the families they serve based on unique community goals and contexts, such as efforts to increase reach, deepen engagement and diversify support.

## Building Connected, Comprehensive and Equitable Systems

Start Early seeks to design, implement and sustain comprehensive early childhood systems that provide all children and their families with equitable access to an uninterrupted continuum of high-quality services from before birth through age 5. We define high-quality services as those that are culturally, linguistically and ability-responsive and that center parent and caregiver voice to ensure the service delivery system is accessible and responsive to community and family desires and needs. This means that the design, implementation and coordination of learning and care programs and initiatives across the nation results in families experiencing these services as:

- *Comprehensive:* An uninterrupted continuum of high-quality services is provided to all children before birth and through age 5
- *Equitable:* All children and their families have access to high-quality early learning and care services. Children enrolled in those services experience strong outcomes regardless of geographic, cultural, linguistic or economic circumstances.
- *Responsive:* Services must be culturally, linguistically and ability-responsive. They should center parent and caregiver voice to ensure that the service delivery system is accessible and responsive to community and family desires and needs.

## PRIORITY POPULATIONS

Many early learning and care programs provide specific rights and/or priority enrollment status to children with certain circumstances, including, but not limited to children experiencing homelessness, children involved in the child welfare system and children with disabilities. Although these “priority populations” have long been recognized as such for early childhood programs to serve, they remain under-served in early learning and care programs. Our vision is to close the opportunity gap for children from priority populations and their families by ensuring they have access to early learning and care programs that are specifically designed and resourced to support them.

### Federal Priorities

- Fully fund the IDEA, permanently authorize Part C of IDEA and increase funding significantly to the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Program and the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act.
- Ensure availability of fully-inclusive early learning and care programs and services, both in schools and community-based settings, for children with disabilities and delays by aligning policies, regulations and data collection efforts at the federal level across IDEA, Head Start and CCDBG and providing adequate funding for implementation.
- Embed requirements into future iterations of the Preschool Development Grant for states to design and implement infrastructure projects that improve access to high-quality early childhood programs and services for children in priority populations.

### Federal Priorities, continued

- Reconstitute the Early Childhood Homelessness Sub-Committee of the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness and charge the committee with identifying actionable policy and funding recommendations for improving housing, educational and well-being outcomes for children, pregnant people and families experiencing homelessness, as well as increased cross-system collaboration at the state and local levels.
- Develop and launch cross-agency federal demonstration projects focused on these populations to identify innovative cross-sector approaches and models that can be scaled for impact.
- Fund research that identifies facilitators and barriers to early learning and care programs for children and families from priority populations and opportunities to optimize or adapt current program models/approaches (or develop new models/approaches) to improve outcomes specifically for priority populations.

### State-Level Priorities

- Increase state investment in Early Intervention, Early Childhood Special Education, education and family support aspects of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act and other relevant funding streams that support priority populations.
- Provide each and every child access to inclusive early care and education in the least restrictive environment by developing and implementing models for providing IDEA services in community-based settings, such as child care and Head Start programs.
- Provide grants and contracts to early childhood programs that provide sufficient funding and support to enable them to promote access, participation and supports for children from priority populations and establish systems of accountability.
- Establish a State Interagency Council on Homelessness that includes active representation from early childhood stakeholders to develop a state plan to prevent and end homelessness that is focused on addressing the unique needs of children, families and pregnant people who experience homelessness, as defined by the Department of Education.
- Partner with institutions of higher education to conduct research that identifies state-level policy facilitators and barriers to early learning and care programs for priority populations, as well as opportunities to optimize or adapt state-funded and designed early learning and care programs to improve outcomes specifically for priority populations.
- Strengthen and align state-level data collection and reporting in early learning and care programs on priority populations.

### Community-Level Priorities

- Promote cross-sector relationships in communities across service providers from disparate service systems to increase knowledge of and ability to navigate unfamiliar service systems and establish a platform for future cross-sector collaboration at the local level so that they can better serve common clients.

### SYSTEM INFRASTRUCTURE

Start Early believes that a cohesive, coordinated early childhood system starts in partnership with families and providers. Strong early childhood systems are reflective of the full spectrum of a child's development, and must provide equitable, responsive and inclusive access to health, nutrition, mental health, early learning and family supports for all young children.

Effective system leaders understand that strong infrastructure is what sustains a system when conditions change, including new leaders, changes in funding and evolving political conditions. The infrastructure represents the underlying scaffolding of policies, resources, organizational structures, feedback loops and networks necessary for programs to best meet the needs of children and families.

Start Early believes the federal early childhood system can act as a facilitator of strong systems and infrastructure at the state and community levels. Start Early believes that state systems and infrastructure must be designed and implemented based on data from the field, engagement and influence from families and policy-practice feedback loops that inform improvements and funding decisions. Program standards, monitoring and improvement systems, and payment and procurement policies all contribute to capacity of providers to deliver quality, responsive programming for families, and state systems and infrastructure must be designed to facilitate quality early learning experiences for all, regardless of income, funding stream or program setting.

Ultimately, the federal and state early childhood systems exist in service of the local-level systems. Strong, local early childhood systems and infrastructures create and sustain inclusive, equitable programs from maternal and infant well-being through success in the early elementary grades and beyond.

#### Federal Priorities

- Eliminate fragmentation by reducing differences across federal programs in composition, funding streams, eligibility requirements and quality standards by strengthening interagency and interoffice coordination and alignment.
- Ensure consistent and sustained funding for all states to build strong systems infrastructure, such as through the reauthorization of the Pre-School Development Grant Birth-Five.
- Invest directly in communities to build the human and civic infrastructure and solutions that foster well-being and equitable opportunity across the prenatal-to-age 5 continuum at the closest point of the end user of these systems: families and children.
- Increase funding for all existing federal programs to serve more families and structure the implementation policies for these programs to allow states and communities to deliver services that are responsive to the unique needs of families with young children in their catchment area, and to ensure the field has the capacity to deliver high-quality experiences in all settings.

## State-Level Priorities

- Establish a state governance model that allows for coordination, alignment and accountability across the early childhood system to ensure all families have access to quality services regardless of geographic, cultural, linguistic or economic circumstances.
- Present multiple pathways for families and providers to engage with, have leadership within and provide feedback to groups of state administrators and policy makers. Increase the leadership and participation of Black, Indigenous and Latinx individuals and people of color in the design of policies, feedback loops and implementation decisions.
- Invest in early childhood (beyond federally required maintenance of effort and match) to ensure sufficient infrastructure capacity and to tailor programs and services that are responsive to the unique needs of families with young children in the state.
- Provide funding to support local early childhood systems governance and to ensure strong feedback loops that allow local stakeholders to share in the design and implementation of the state system that significantly impacts their capacity to meet the needs of the children and families living in their community, county or region.
- Support and build the capacity of local collaborations to obtain and use data in support of programs improving their services, develop the workforce, examine issues of equity and increase family leadership at the policy and program levels.

## Community-Level Priorities

- Establish a formal governance structure with cross sector leadership that ensures successful implementation, measurement and communication across the full spectrum of services for families with young children.
- Ensure that parent leadership and engagement is at the center of all policy and program design and there is leadership and participation of Black, Indigenous, Latinx and people of color in the design of policies, feedback loops and implementation decisions.
- Facilitate strong transitions and consistent community connections for children and families from the birth-to-five early childhood system into the early grades (K-3).
- Align their systems with state systems — filling in gaps and providing feedback and data to state level leaders to improve how families experience the early childhood system and services.

## RESEARCH-PRACTICE PARTNERSHIPS

The early childhood field must emphasize using research evidence and data to inform program development, implementation and program improvement to achieve positive outcomes at scale. Yet, the capacities needed to effectively achieve these accountability and process ideals are substantial and rarely achieved by practitioners or researchers working separately. Research-practice partnerships (RPPs) are a promising solution to improving early childhood program design, service delivery, outcomes, policies and systems.

RPPs' structures that fully integrate research within practice show great promise as a sustainable and effective approach not only to support effective implementation and change in practice, but to accelerate innovation within early childhood fields and have the potential to create critical bi-directional feedback loops with practitioners and families

### **Federal Priorities**

- Ensure federal early childhood funding streams, including the Every Student Succeeds Act, Head Start/Early Head Start and MIECHV provide support and incentives for the use of research in decision-making at multiple levels.
- Ensure federal early childhood research funding includes support and incentives for researchers to engage in RPPs and to generate relevant and actionable evidence that can be used to make decisions at multiple levels.
- Reauthorize and fund early childhood system-building and infrastructure programs that ensure strong state and community capacity for engaging in RPPs.

### **State-Level Priorities**

- Support state early childhood agencies in creating formal research partnerships.
- Increase state investment in research capacity and partnership to evaluate, understand and improve key early childhood programs and services.
- Align and improve state data systems across early childhood programs and services to support RPPs and data-driven decision making.

### **Community-Level Priorities**

- Support local early childhood systems in creating formal research partnerships.
- Increase the capacity for sustainable data collection and utilization in program implementation.
- Increase awareness of available research capacity in the community.

## **Elevating Family Voice and the Role of Families**

Families are a child's first and most important teachers, and family engagement is a critical component of high-quality early learning at both the program and system level. Strong family engagement practices at the programmatic level can support the healthy development of young children, while simultaneously benefiting their families by linking to supports that empower them to thrive in, connect with and lead networks of support in their home communities, increase their understanding of child development, and enhance their own economic security and health. Early learning investments should promote a two-generation approach that builds family well-being by intentionally and simultaneously working with children and the adults in their lives together. Start Early supports increasing funding and support to early childhood programs to partner and build relational trust with families, amplify family voices and build families' social capital and connections in their communities.

With a lens towards early childhood systems improvement, parents and caregivers have the clearest perspective of what families need from their own lived experiences. They know better than anyone how and why programs and policies fall short and what changes would improve outcomes. Start Early believes in increasing and centering family voice and lived experience at decision making tables, while also bringing policy makers to families' kitchen tables. We champion building and strengthening ongoing structures that embed bi-directional communication among families engaged in the early childhood system with providers, advocates and system leaders.

Finally, Start Early champions family-friendly policies that support time for parents and caregivers to bond with and care for their children without jeopardizing their ability to afford basic needs.

Relationships with parents and other caregivers are critical to a baby's early development, and subsequently their long-term cognitive, social and emotional development. Enacting public policies that provide parents with paid leave from work to care for their young children helps families begin their journey on a strong foundation of caring, consistent relationships.

### **Federal Priorities**

- Advance family-friendly work policies, such as paid family leave, that promote families as a child's first and most important teacher.
- Incentivize states to invest in embedding family voice in decision making and supporting programs in increasing their capacity to undertake meaningful family engagement.
- Protect and increase funding for dedicated family support staff in early learning programs.

### **State-Level Priorities**

- Advance family-friendly work policies, such as paid family leave, that promote families as a child's first and most important teacher.
- Establish or strengthen mechanisms to embed representative family voice in state-level decision making and governance structures with an intentional focus on empowering and elevating the voices of families, particularly those with lived experience of homelessness, child welfare and/or disability.
- Leverage state policies, regulations and funding to help ensure families are fairly compensated for providing their lived experience to inform policies.
- Support and incentivize early learning and care providers as they implement family engagement strategies that promote both child and family well-being through child care licensing rules, QRIS, technical assistance and funding family engagement-focused wrap around supports.

## Community-Level Priorities

- Advance family-friendly work policies, such as paid family leave, that promote families as a child's first and most important teacher, through partnerships with employers.
- Establish or strengthen mechanisms to embed representative family voice in local-level decision making, governance structures and program operations with an intentional focus on empowering and elevating the voices of families, particularly those with lived experience of homelessness, child welfare involvement and disability.
- Fairly compensate families, providers and other community members who share their lived experience to inform policy.



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