

Five Steps for State and Community Leaders to Increase Equitable Access to Early Care and Education

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Introduction

Long-standing discriminatory practices and systematic barriers have perpetuated inequitable access to early childhood resources and opportunities for families living in the United States. For example, recent research has found inequitable access to bilingual early learning opportunities, unequal application of disciplinary practices, and the segregation of children with disabilities in learning settings.ⁱ Therefore, children and families experience barriers along different and intersecting dimensions of their identity—for example, their race and ethnicity, income, geographic location, primary languages, gender, and other characteristics.ⁱⁱ

For young children and their families, inequalities are perpetuated when parents cannot access consistently high-quality child care and other supportive services. These programs and services not only promote young children's ability to thrive but are critically important for facilitating parents' and caregivers' participation in the workforce and enhancing their job stability.ⁱⁱⁱ The early care and education system exhibits inherent equity concerns—demonstrated, in part, by the lack of accessible and affordable care across the country, particularly for marginalized families.^{iv} Beyond the absence of accessible and affordable care, young children and their families can experience early learning environments that are discriminatory and fail to meet both families' and children's needs.^v Failure to attend to the unique needs and preferences of families and children can lead to investment in services that are neither trusted nor used by families. Therefore, a true understanding of access requires a comprehensive examination of barriers and needs from families' perspectives.

To adequately understand whether child care is accessible from families' perspectives, Child Trends and a panel of researchers and state policymakers created a multidimensional definition of early care and education (ECE) access in a 2017 report, [Defining and Measuring Access to High-Quality Care and Education: A Guidebook for Policymakers and Researchers](#)—work supported by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation at the Administration for Children and Families. This [family-centered definition of access](#) (the Access Framework) considers family needs and preferences when accessing programs and services. The Access Framework allows state and community leaders to define, measure, and assess families' access to early care and education. By examining access through four dimensions (see textbox), state and community leaders can better understand families' access challenges. Equipped with this understanding, state and community leaders can better tailor policy and programmatic solutions that mitigate specific challenges and elevate family preferences.^{vi,vii} And by pairing this definition of access with a comprehensive understanding of equity—in which discrimination based on the dimensions of a person's identity do not create a barrier to access—we can strive to ensure that all children and families have access to the early childhood programs and services they want and need.^{viii}

This brief first presents case studies to highlight efforts from three states using the Access Framework to engage community-based partners and families in identifying and addressing barriers to equitable access. We hope that sharing their work may help other states identify opportunities to create more equitable access to ECE. The brief concludes with five concrete steps that state and community leaders can take to promote equitable access to ECE.

Definitions and four dimensions of the family-centered definition of access

"Access to early care and education means that parents, with reasonable effort and affordability, can enroll their child in an arrangement that supports the child's development and meets the parents' needs."^{ix}

- **Reasonable effort** refers to a family's ability to find a suitable early childhood program or service based on factors like quality, cost, and location. It involves ensuring that information is accessible to families so that it can inform their decision-making without placing an undue burden on their time or ability to apply to, participate in, or access early childhood programs or services.
- **Affordability** refers to the financial burden experienced by families when participating in an early childhood program or service. Affordability includes factors such as out-of-pocket expenses, income-based co-payments, and the percentage of family income dedicated to the costs of participation.
- **Meets the parents' needs** refers to factors that meet the needs and preferences of the entire family—for example, program type, transportation availability, and program hours of operation; or the program's ability to meet families' specific needs and preferences.
- **Supports the child's development** refers to the degree to which an early childhood program or service supports a child's physical, cognitive, and social-emotional development. This can include a program's quality designation and their ability to coordinate with additional health and development services, early care and education, and/or early intervention services. Additionally, it includes provisions to support children with unique needs, such as those with developmental disabilities, experiences of homelessness, or who speak languages other than English.

State Efforts to Promote Equitable Access

The case studies summarize four key features of states' equitable access efforts.

1. The equitable access goal the participating organization is working to address
2. The strategy used to examine equitable access and the types of information collected across the four access dimensions
3. What was learned from the information gathered
4. How the information was used to advance a change in policy or practice

Illinois

Goal: Address disparities in access to early learning for children and families connected to the child welfare system. The [All Families Served Subcommittee](#) (the lead organization, referred to hereafter as the Subcommittee) of the Illinois Early Learning Council, led by Illinois Action for Children and Start Early staff, was charged with serving more young children with families involved with the child welfare system (referred to simply as ‘families’ hereafter) in high-quality early childhood programs. The Subcommittee worked to identify and promote policies and practices that would facilitate equitable access to early care and learning programs and services for these families.



Strategy: Examine equitable access through surveys of parents and child welfare case workers. To inform and provide equitable recommendations to a state legislative committee, a team of partners from the Subcommittee and Child Trends surveyed families and child welfare caseworkers based on the Access Framework. The goal of this survey was to capture the experiences and perspectives of these families and child welfare caseworkers in their efforts to access and refer families to early care and education programs and services.

The survey for families focused on:

- Understanding families’ needs and preferences for early care and learning programs and services (*Meets the parents’ needs and Supports the child’s development*).
- Families’ experiences obtaining information about or enrolling in their preferred program or service, which could include a child care program, a home visiting program, early intervention, early childhood special education services, and/or Early Head Start/Head Start (*Reasonable effort*).

For caseworkers, survey questions focused on their experiences supporting families searching for, enrolling in, and using early learning programs and services (*Reasonable effort*).

What was learned: Key findings from the surveys centered around themes related to *Reasonable effort* and *Supports the child’s development*.

- Families and caseworkers alike reported that early intervention and special education services were the most difficult resources for families to access information about and apply for, and for children to ultimately receive services to support their development.
- Parents/guardians indicated varying degrees of ease in applying for and enrolling in early learning programs, especially center-based, preschool, Early Head Start and Head Start, early intervention, and special education. Respondents described their confusion about applying for and receiving payment for child care and the time it took to finally receive access to care.
- After disaggregating these data by race and ethnicity, Black and Latine¹ parents/guardians were less likely to receive a direct referral for early care and education programs (e.g., Early Head Start), relative to their White counterparts.

How the information was used to change policy and practice. Survey findings underscored the need for more resources and training for caseworkers to provide equitable and comprehensive support to families in the child welfare system—especially to help these families access early care and education programs and services. In addition to emphasizing existing best practice and reviewing relevant research, the

¹ In this brief we use Latine to describe individuals who identify as being of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origins.

Subcommittee used these data to inform recommendations to the Illinois Early Learning Council and Senator Julie Morrison. These recommendations spanned five thematic areas:

- **Structural changes.** Examples of suggested recommendations included increasing funding to both early care and learning and child welfare systems, expanding the capacity of early learning programs so that children involved in the child welfare system have access, and centralizing all subsidized child care by the Illinois Department of Children & Family Services (DCFS) protective daycare and the Department of Human Services (DHS) Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP).
- **Policy and procedure changes.** One recommendation includes forming a cross-agency technical workgroup to overhaul policies and procedures at the intersection of early care and learning and the child welfare system, thereby eliminating barriers and maximizing alignment.
- **Data and research.** The Subcommittee recommended, for example, that the state strengthen the capacity of state agencies to collect, track, report, and use data related to children involved in the child welfare system.
- **Enhanced and expanded supports.** For example, the Subcommittee recommended that state agencies collaborate to create more social-emotional support for both families and professionals in the child welfare system. Additionally, they recommended improving the specialized knowledge and skill of child welfare professionals and early care and learning providers.
- **Strengthened cross-sector collaboration.** The Subcommittee recommended, for example, that state agencies strengthen collaborative service delivery across programs that serve children involved in the child welfare system.

The recommendations provided by the All Families Served Subcommittee informed the goals of bill [HB4242](#), which—among other provisions—ensures that families connected to the child welfare system are automatically eligible for the Early Intervention (EI) program.

New Jersey

Goal: Address inequitable access to early care and education for families with infants and toddlers. [Advocates for Children of New Jersey](#) (the lead organization, referred to hereafter as the ACNJ) works with local, state, and federal leaders to identify and implement changes that will benefit New Jersey's children. They have been working to increase equitable access to high-quality early care and education for families with infants and toddlers.



Strategy: Examine equitable access through focus groups and interviews. Child Trends and ACNJ jointly conducted focus groups to discuss the four dimensions of the Access Framework. In partnership with [Melinated Moms](#), ACNJ conducted focus groups with parents of infants and toddlers, including one focus group in Spanish, at a ZERO TO THREE Strolling Thunder event. Parents from ACNJ and Melinated Moms' Parent Leadership Council led the focus groups to better understand how families—in their own perspectives—wanted New Jersey's child care [American Rescue Plan Act](#) (ARPA) funding to be spent.

Child Trends also worked with ACNJ to co-create a six-week training for a new parent leadership group on leveraging the Access Framework to gather community stories from parents seeking child care and other services in New Jersey. Through these conversations, parent leaders learned about additional challenges related to *Affordability* and the availability of high-quality care that *Supports the child's development*. The parent leaders are planning ways to share their findings back to the community, as well as with legislators.

What was learned: Key findings from the focus groups included the following:

- Services that are marketed as “affordable” are not always services that meet families’ needs, nor are they always high-quality programs.
- While many great services are available to families of young children, they are often difficult to access and families may not be aware of them.

How the information was used to change policy and practice. These findings were shared in a [brief](#) with the acting commissioner of the New Jersey Department of Human Services; this department manages the child care subsidy program, as well as Grow NJ Kids, the state’s quality and improvement rating system. The findings informed the following recommendations to the commissioner:

- Increase child care subsidy rates to increase the supply of high-quality child care, and pay early childhood educators more (*Affordability*).
- Ensure program flexibility and diversity and change the negative image of subsidized care (*Meets the parents’ needs*).
- Improve child care search tools, applications, and enrollment systems so they are less burdensome and more accessible (*Reasonable effort*).
- Address learning gaps for infants and toddlers due to COVID (*Supports the child’s development*).

Findings from these focus groups helped pass [legislation](#) that will increase the supply of infant and toddler care. Additionally, the state has continued to increase the child care subsidy amount, including an additional [\\$300 per month child care subsidy payment](#) that has been included on top of the subsidy utilizing ARPA funding to lessen costs for families. Finally, ARPA funding helped provide retention and recruitment bonuses to child care staff. With the findings from individual interviews, ACNJ will create one-page handouts on access to services to share with families, legislators, and state departments.

Michigan

Goal: Ensure equitable access to ECE for families of different races and ethnicities. Founded in 2005, the [Early Childhood Investment Corporation](#) (the lead organization, referred to hereafter as the ECIC) of Michigan is an inter-local, public organization whose mission is to advance the successful, effective, and efficient coordination and delivery of early childhood development and education programs and functions throughout the state. The ECIC identified its child care search website, [Great Start to Quality](#), as a starting point for examining families’ equitable access to early care and education programs using the Access Framework, specifically for racially and ethnically minoritized groups.



Strategy: Examine equitable access through the child care search website. ECIC and Child Trends partnered to complete two reviews of the website by using a Child Trend-developed tool to systematically examine key indicators across the four access dimensions, as described in [Supporting Families’ Access to Child Care and Early Education: A Descriptive Profile of States’ Consumer Education Websites](#). The Child Trends team also applied intersectional demographic and context data for minoritized populations to evaluate how the website may be accessed by these groups.

What was learned. Child Trends developed website audit reports for the ECIC team, which identified both strengths and areas of improvement that aligned with all four dimensions of the Access Framework. For example:

Strengths

- The website includes robust search filters that align with many families' identified needs. Search filters allow families to search within geographic areas, by licensed provider type (e.g., centers, home-based, etc.) and program type (e.g., cooperative, Early Head Start, faith-based, etc.), and by program name. This function falls within the *Meets the parents' needs* dimension.
- Additionally, the search filter enables families to identify specific educational approaches (i.e., Montessori and Reggio Inspired) to care for their children (*Supports the child's development*).

Areas for improvement

- The website lacks information on where to find in-person support for searching for care. This finding led ECIC to examine its website to ensure that the layout is mobile device-friendly with optimized loading speeds and search engine optimization (*Reasonable effort*).
- The website initially did not include information about the cost of various care options. ECIC made revisions and it now includes a section called "Free or Low-Cost Quality Care," which includes information about child care subsidies and free child care options, including Early Head Start, Head Start, and the state-funded Great Start Readiness Program (*Affordability*).
- National statistics report lower rates of desktop, laptop, and broadband internet use in the home for Black and Latine populations, compared to White populations. Efforts to share child care information online must be sensitive to unequal access to computers and broadband, and the use of mobile devices to access the internet. Using Google's test for mobile accessibility, we found that the main Great Start to Quality website is mobile friendly; however, the child care search website is blocked (*Reasonable effort*).

How the information was used to change policy and practice. ECIC continues to develop its child care search website, both in technical functionality and in including family- and provider-identified information to facilitate families' search for care. For example, they made the child care search website mobile-friendly and increased loading speeds. Additionally, families can now enter the ages of the youngest and oldest children for whom they are seeking care and modify their search results by selecting specific hours (i.e., full-time, part-time, drop-in/hourly, etc.). These continued and incremental improvements to ECIC's Great Start to Quality child care search website—and the organization's proposed inclusion of family and provider voice into its continual updates—exemplify how an organization can commit to ongoing progress toward developing more equitable access to early childhood services.

Moreover, to support the ECIC's capacity to continue using and applying the Access Framework to other aspects of their work, Child Trends provided a two-part training series for all ECIC leadership and staff. In these sessions, we shared key equitable access concepts and facilitated discussions about how the access framework could be applied to other areas of ECIC's work, including outreach and data collection.

Five Steps for State and Community Leaders to Increase Equitable Access to Early Care and Education

Child Trends supports numerous state and community early childhood teams in their efforts to identify and address barriers to equitable access. Using insights from these experiences, including the case studies provided above, we've identified five initial steps ECE leaders can take to understand and address barriers

to equitable access. Although the case studies reflect state efforts, these steps can also guide community-level efforts.

Step 1: Adopt a family-centric definition of equitable access.

By expanding the definition of access to focus on a family's perspective, states and communities can gain a more accurate assessment of the child care market. An equitable access approach acknowledges that there is no one-size-fits-all approach for addressing shortages in high-quality early childhood programs and services. Understanding the unique needs and circumstances of individual children and families and acknowledging their multiple and intersecting dimensions of identity (and how these can affect their uptake of certain programs and services) can provide policymakers with a better understanding of how to tailor policy and programmatic solutions.

Step 2: Examine and, when possible, disaggregate existing data on early childhood programs and services to identify equitable access challenges.

Data can provide a powerful starting point for gauging whether early childhood programs and services are reaching their intended audiences. While disaggregated data may not always be available, state and community leaders can use existing information to inquire about potential equitable access challenges. For example, aggregated county-level data may show that a small proportion of families with young children are receiving financial assistance, relative to the number of eligible families within the county. This lower rate of usage may highlight—and mark for further exploration—unequal access to child care financial assistance. More specifically, further study could aim to better understand the magnitude and locations of access challenges, as well as specific populations that are particularly affected.

Step 3: Identify a specific region, county, community, or zip code within which to focus an exploration of equitable access.

Once state ECE leaders identify an equitable access challenge, they may need to use additional tools to identify a focal region or community within which to further examine the identified challenge. State and community leaders can utilize data mapping tools and administrative data to identify a specific geographic area within their state. For example, if state-level data indicate that the proportion of Black and Latine families accessing child care subsidies is not aligned with the proportion who are eligible, a data mapping tool can help states identify counties with a high proportion of Black and Latine families who are eligible for child care subsidies. These counties can then become candidate locations for further collection of information about community- and family-level perceptions of experience with access.

Step 4: Collect information about community- and family-level perceptions of and experiences with access.

Once a specific location or locations have been identified, state and community leaders can then identify partners within these communities to better understand their perspectives on the data examined in Step 2. State leaders can ask these partners if the identified inequities are relevant within their communities. For example, are local initiatives already working to understand or address barriers to equitable access? Are any local initiatives actively engaging with families to understand their access barriers? The transition from data analysis to action begins by establishing and building relationships with local partners, which can lead to a better understanding of barriers to equitable access.

Experiences and insights from families can equip policymakers with vital information to shape experience-informed and data-driven decision making. However, state early childhood leaders may have varying degrees of experience engaging families in a process to identify challenges and co-create policy solutions. Research partners, community-based organizations, and other intermediaries with experience engaging families and amplifying their voices can play a vital role in supporting or building the capacity of state leaders. When collaborating with community partners and families, leaders can structure conversations around the four dimensions of access. By asking about families' needs, preferences, and current engagement with programs, leaders can better understand barriers and challenges to access, but can also learn about factors that facilitate access. Data collection may include focus groups, surveys, and interviews conducted directly with families.

Step 5: Co-develop strategies with families and early childhood community partners.

Using information from families and community partners (e.g., community-based organizations, resource and referral agencies, and early childhood services providers), state and community leaders can co-develop strategies that address identified challenges to equitable access. For example, a family's application for financial assistance might require parents to complete a form online with a computer; however, families in the community may only receive reliable internet access on their phones. An early childhood team looking to increase equitable access might strategize with partners to create an online form that can be completed via a smartphone. This and similar strategies leverage existing strengths and assets in the community to expand, adapt, or improve equitable access to programs and services. Collaborating with families, providers, and community organizations ensures comprehensive and sustainable solutions, and ongoing monitoring and evaluation can maintain the effectiveness of these strategies over time.

Conclusion

Promoting equitable access to early childhood programs and services requires a family-centered approach. Families and communities within a state will have a wide range of needs and preferences, so selecting one or a few communities as a starting point is a practical and achievable way to start examining equitable access that can be expanded over time. By examining existing data, collecting community- and family-level insights, and co-developing strategies based on this input, early childhood leaders will be better equipped to address equitable access challenges and better serve all children and families. Ongoing collaboration between families, providers, and community partners is key to ensuring long-term effectiveness and sustainable solutions. In the long run, adopting equitable access as a goal can create broader and more systemic changes within an organization. Through continuous improvement and refinement of their strategies, early childhood systems can make significant strides toward equitable access for all children and families, breaking down barriers to receiving services, and fostering opportunities for every child to thrive.

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