

Shaping Equitable Early Childhood Policy

Incorporating Inclusive Community Engagement Frameworks into Expanded Data Strategies

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Data collected from across the child care and early education (CCEE) field, both during and prior to COVID-19, have been critical in helping policymakers identify and scale public resources to meet the increasing needs of children, families, early educators, and providers. Prior to the pandemic the child care system was critically underfunded, incredibly fragile, and glaringly inequitable; and the pandemic only magnified the state of the sector. Much of the data collected throughout the global health crisis has shown how the pandemic exacerbated long-standing inequities for communities with low incomes.¹ And Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI), Black, Indigenous, Latinx, immigrant, and other communities of color with low incomes, who have been historically marginalized and under resourced for generations, have borne the brunt of these inequities.

As states seek to implement strategies to identify and address these inequities, program administrators and researchers must expand data strategies beyond disaggregating outcomes by race/ethnicity. However, it won't be enough to simply expand data strategies without addressing the limited engagement of directly impacted communities—and specifically communities of color. Current processes for collecting, analyzing, and contextualizing state administrative data are often far removed from equitable community engagement practices. These processes almost exclusively involve predominately white researchers, analysts, administrators, and policymakers who are often disconnected from communities of color.

We propose a set of recommendations for expanding data strategies. When coupled with equitable community engagement frameworks, these expanded data strategies can have a lasting impact on how states support the range of CCEE needs across communities—and specifically within communities of color. We recommend:

- Integrating data across state agencies to better understand and meet community needs and create aligned CCEE resources.
- Using data to physically map resources through spatial analyses to gauge and increase equitable access to appropriate resources.
- Making data accessible, usable, and inclusive for practitioners, families, and advocates; not just researchers, policy analysts, and policymakers.

¹ A person or a family with low income is defined as those whose income is at or below the 200% Federal Poverty Line or 85% State Median Income. However, this is not a comprehensive definition that incorporates the number of ways families and communities experience poverty.

Recommendation 1: Integrating Data Systems Across State Agencies

When administrators integrate and link data across state agencies, it provides them with a crucial understanding of what public CCEE supports communities are accessing across state agencies and programs. However, when combined with equitable community engagement, integrating data across state agencies can do so much more. Centering equitable community engagement practices that value community members for their time and expertise has many benefits. Doing so creates space for community members to lead and inform what data are collected, how the data are used, and how to analyze these data through the appropriate cultural, linguistic, historical, and other existing community context. And this helps administrators by:

- Identifying what programs, services, and supports exist across state agencies and how they are directly or indirectly related to CCEE.
- Informing how communities access these supports; identifying where there are gaps in supports; and understanding how race/ethnicity and other intersecting demographics impact this access.
- Showing how and where these programs, services, and supports can be better aligned to expand equitable access.
- Promoting policy making that tailors CCEE supports by using information that incorporates longitudinal data—or data collected over time—to understand who has access to what supports and how that access (or lack thereof) has impacted long-term outcomes.

Recommendation 2: Equity Mapping

Using data to physically map resources and supports through spatial analyses, or equity mapping—when combined with integrated data across state agencies and equitable community engagement strategies—can provide administrators with a more comprehensive picture of accessibility. It allows for the inclusion of historical, cultural, and social context; a comprehensive view of supports across programs and agencies; and an understanding of how placed-based resources impact access geographically. Equity mapping, when done in this way can visualize:

- How inequities rooted in past and present racist location-based policies have created economic and social disadvantages within communities that span across generations.
- Current resources for children and families and how the physical location of those resources impacts access.
- Where tailored programs and resources can be strategically placed within communities to increase access.
- The availability of providers and their level of access to various resources and programs.
- How the gaps in resources and programs impact social, developmental, economic, and other measures of well-being.

Recommendation 3: Making Data Accessible, Usable, and Inclusive

Data cannot be useful if it isn't accessible. And if data aren't inclusive, they aren't accessible or useful to all audiences. Therefore, equitable data often fuse accessibility, inclusiveness, and usability. To make data accessible, usable, and inclusive researchers should:

- Use appropriate language that is understood by, relevant to, and best fits the context of each individual community, as detailed from within that community.
- Create inclusive data visualizations that consider underlying biases in color use, meanings behind imagery and icons, visual impairments such as colorblindness, and how the order of data labels can signal a hierarchy of race/ethnicity.
- Avoid consolidating ethnic groups in data. Instead, when sample sizes are large enough to further disaggregate, researchers should highlight specific differences within racial and across ethnic groups.
- Consider technology access issues such as appropriately formatting online resources for tablets and smartphones, avoiding platforms that require an email or paywalls, and expanding offline options.
- Seek community input to understand how accessibility, usability, and inclusiveness are defined within specific communities.

Conclusion

The global health crisis laid bare many of the existing inequities in CCEE that deeply impact communities of color. While increased federal COVID-19 investments in CCEE were meant to address immediate needs, doing so without an intentional focus on equity will further exacerbate inequities now and well into the future. Expanding data strategies to include integrated data systems across state agencies and equity mapping will begin to expand our understanding of how the current CCEE system is used across communities. However, the current system reflects the same systemic racism and white supremacy culture that has created far-reaching and deeply rooted inequities. Therefore, collecting more data from the same sources and using the same methods to analyze those data will inevitably result in the continuation or exacerbation of the same inequities. Equitable community engagement frameworks must be foundational to expanded data strategies. This will engage and empower directly impacted people with the knowledge and expertise to identify harmful practices and provide actionable restorative solutions to address those harms.

For more detailed information and additional resources, please see the full version of this brief [here](#).