

# Early Care and Education

## JUSTICE TOOLKIT




# Table of Contents



<b>05</b>	Introduction
<b>06</b>	Key Terms and Definitions
<b>09</b>	The Purpose of This Toolkit
<b>12</b>	Timeline of Federal Policies
<b>14</b>	The Groundwork for Justice
<b>21</b>	How to Use This Toolkit
<b>26</b>	Historical Context
<b>33</b>	Conclusion Acknowledgements Recommended Resources References



**An equitable and just society is one in which all people can participate and prosper, where everyone enjoys dignity, respect, and access to basic human needs such as housing, food, and safety.**



In this toolkit, when we refer to “early educators” or the “ECE workforce,” we mean all those who work in home-, center-, and school-based settings who provide group care and early learning to children prior to kindergarten. Throughout the United States, more than 2 million adults are paid to care for and educate nearly 10 million children between birth and age five in center- and home-based settings (McLean et al., 2024).

# Introduction

## Why a Justice Framework Is Needed for the ECE Workforce

An equitable and just society is one in which all people can participate and prosper, where everyone enjoys dignity, respect, and access to basic human needs such as housing, food, and safety. Yet many of the policies, processes, and practices within the early care and education (ECE) sector have resulted in economically challenging and inequitable outcomes for early educators.

### WHAT IF...

All early educators were compensated at levels that, at minimum, met a living wage in every state?

Every early educator had access to benefits that covered their physical, emotional, economic, and mental well-being?

Early educators were valued and treated as professionals and experts in their field?

Early educators did not have to choose between a career that they love and one that provides them with economic security?

Policy leaders and decision makers regularly sought the expertise of early educators, recognizing them as leaders and shaping policies based on their knowledge and experience?

**THE REALITY FOR EARLY EDUCATORS TODAY IS FAR FROM THESE PRINCIPLES. THIS TOOLKIT IS DEDICATED TO EARLY EDUCATORS AND SEEKS TO CHANGE THAT REALITY.**

# Key Terms

## Systemic Oppression

### DEFINITION

The systemic use of institutional power and ideological and cultural dominance, resulting in one group benefiting at the expense of another; the use of power and the effects of domination (Department of Inclusion & Multicultural Engagement, Lewis & Clark College, n.d.).

### EXAMPLES

Racism  
White supremacy  
Sexism  
Classism  
Heterosexism  
Ableism

### UNDERSTANDING CAN HELP US TO

Identify racism in the criminal justice system; gender pay gaps; biased hiring practices based on race, ethnicity, sexuality, immigration status, etc.; limited access to quality health care and affordable housing for communities experiencing marginalization; educational disparities based on socioeconomic status; and more.

## Equity

### DEFINITION

The situation in which all people or groups are given access to the amount and types of resources they need to achieve equal results. Equity differs from equality, which focuses on the equal distribution of resources rather than equal results (Department of Inclusion & Multicultural Engagement, Lewis & Clark College, n.d.).

Equity also means just and fair inclusion in society. An equitable society is one in which all can participate and prosper. The goals of equity must be to create conditions that allow all people to reach their full potential (National Resources Defense Council, 2019).

### EXAMPLES

**Racial equity** is a process of eliminating racial disparities and improving outcomes for everyone. It is the intentional and continual practice of changing policies, practices, systems, and structures by prioritizing measurable change in the lives of people of color (Obias & Yoko-Young, 2021).

**Gender equity** is a process of addressing inequalities that limit a person's ability to access opportunities to achieve better health, education, and economic opportunity based on their gender (Martinez, 2022).

### UNDERSTANDING CAN HELP US TO

Perceive the results of inequities for those furthest from opportunity, which include: poverty and limited economic opportunities; worse health and other well-being outcomes; housing and food insecurity; unemployment; and increased exposure to violence.

## Justice

### DEFINITION

The establishment and determination of rights based on legal rules, policies, and standards of equity (Department of Inclusion & Multicultural Engagement, Lewis & Clark College, n.d.).

The goals of justice include upholding universal principles that guide individuals in assessing what is right and wrong and ensuring fairness and ethical decision-making across all cultures, occupations, and geographies (Velasquez et al., 2014).

### EXAMPLES

**Social justice** is a process to create and sustain fair (re)distribution of resources, opportunities, and responsibilities. It challenges the roots of oppression and injustice, strives for all people to exercise self-determination, and builds solidarity and capacity for collaborative action (University of California, Berkeley, Social Welfare, n.d.).

**Economic justice** is a key component of social justice. It is a set of ideas or principles that institutions and communities can use to manage the economy so that everyone can have work, fair pay, good working conditions, and an equitable opportunity to earn what they need to have a good life (Center for Economic and Social Justice [CESJ], n.d.).

### UNDERSTANDING CAN HELP US TO

Identify historical and contemporary examples of injustices, which include enslavement, genocide, discrimination, starvation, poverty, gender inequality, and forced migration.

## Intersectionality

### DEFINITION

Refers to the interconnectedness of social categories, such as race, gender, class, sexuality, and ability—all of which impact an individual's experiences, opportunities, and quality of life.

The concept of intersectionality recognizes that different forms of oppression and privilege often intersect and create unique barriers for people with multiple social identities (United Way of the National Capital Area, 2024).

### EXAMPLES

An intersectional lens provides insight into the unique experiences of people facing oppression.

For example, trans women of color encounter oppression in multiple forms due to gender, sexuality, and race.

Likewise, an early educator who is a Muslim and immigrated to the United States confronts oppression based on religion, immigration status, and class.

### UNDERSTANDING CAN HELP US TO

Recognize people's layered identities: intersectionality reveals how groups impacted by oppression confront specific social and systemic barriers, underlining the importance of policies and support systems that address people's diverse needs.

The **Historical Context** section of this toolkit offers examples of how solidarity across social identities and job sectors has been built and maintained through an application of intersectionality.



## Policy

### DEFINITION

A specific action, plan, or set of actions/plans used as a basis for making decisions.

Includes legislation and/or a set of policies, processes, and practices intended to shape, create, or modify new or existing policies.

### EXAMPLES

National, state, or local legislation such as voting, housing, tax, and zoning laws.

Examples also include work sector and individual workplace practices and norms regarding hiring, promotion, and job requirements and standards.

The **Timeline of Federal Policies** provides information on a number of federal policies.

### UNDERSTANDING CAN HELP US TO

See how legislation and decision making impacts a group of people in a variety of ways, including quality of life, ability to implement effective work practices and access supports necessary to survive.

# The Purpose of This Toolkit

A critical lens and justice toolkit is needed to challenge institutionalized oppression that impacts the early care and education (ECE) workforce. This toolkit supports the clear naming of oppressive practices and policies, a better understanding of who they ultimately serve and harm, and the identification of equitable policies, processes, and outcomes.



## Why an Understanding of Systemic Oppression Is Necessary for Analyzing ECE Policies

Systemic oppression is evident in early care and education throughout the United States in the [enduring inequities](#) early educators continue to experience: poor pay and conditions; insufficient and unstable funding; racial disparities; and the prioritizing of education over care (Center for the Study of Child Care Employment [CSCCE], 2022b).

### POOR PAY AND CONDITIONS

- » Caring for and teaching young children has always been seen as “women’s work” and therefore of little value. After emancipation, Black women were paid very little when hired for domestic work, which contributed to low pay for caregiving as the norm (CSCCE, 2022b). Today, the ECE workforce is predominantly women (98 percent) (McLean et al., 2024).
- » Women of color make up a significant percentage of early educators.
  - » About 40 percent of center-based teaching staff, about 49 percent of listed home-based providers, and 56 percent of unlisted home-based providers are women of color (McLean et al., 2024).
- » Poor pay and working conditions are embedded in the foundation of the ECE system. Today, those who teach the youngest children continue to be paid the least among all educators. The ECE workforce is one of the lowest-paid occupations in the United States, even though early educators often have college degrees and extensive experience working with young children.
  - » In 2022, the median hourly wage for the ECE workforce was \$13.07, compared to \$22.92 for all other occupations in the United States (McLean et al., 2024).
  - » In 2022, early educators experienced poverty at nearly six times the rate of K-8 teachers (McLean et al., 2024).
  - » Today, most early educators still do not receive benefits (sick leave, vacation, health coverage, etc.) that would support their ability to teach young children and maintain their personal well-being (McLean et al., 2024).

### INSUFFICIENT AND UNSTABLE FUNDING

- » In the United States, the care and education of young children have almost always been the responsibility of families. Mothers face the unfair expectation of securing child care and shouldering its cost, a burden often made possible only through the unpaid labor of family members and the underpayment of other women providing care. Early care and education has never been a right for all or an obligation of the government (CSCCE, 2022b).
- » There have been periods of greater public investment in early care and education but typically in response to an emergency. The Emergency Nursery School Program (Great Depression), the Lanham Act child care program (World War II), and the American Rescue Plan Act (COVID-19 pandemic) are all examples of time-limited policies and funding established during a crisis that ended when decision makers ruled that the emergency was over (CSCCE, 2022b).
- » Public funding for child care and early education has increased over the past four decades, but the vast majority of children

under age five in the United States remain ineligible for any publicly funded ECE services. And these funds are inadequate to cover all families living in poverty, let alone whole communities (National Women’s Law Center, 2022).

## RACIAL DISPARITIES

- » The political and economic system of the United States was established through racial and gender exploitation and harm: the colonization of Indigenous lands and the enslavement of Black and Indigenous people. The unpaid and underpaid labor of Black women is the cornerstone of the ECE system. Throughout the history of the United States, Black women have taken care of other people’s children while their own child care needs and the education of their own children have been denied, impeded, and under-resourced (CSCCE, 2022b).
- » Racist immigration and citizenship laws and deportation policies imposed throughout U.S. history and today have resulted in children experiencing traumatic and devastating separations from their homes, families, and communities and caused severe economic adversity for their families. These policies have limited the ability of impacted families to access publicly funded early childhood services or afford other types of formal care and education (Kamasaki, 2021).
- » The majority of home-based early educators and nearly one half of center-based ECE workers are women of color. They are also most harmed by differences in funding across settings and programs defined as care rather than education. Educators of color are paid lower wages

than their White counterparts, they are more likely to teach the youngest children (which pays less), and they are less likely to be lead teachers or administrative leaders (which pays more) (McLean et al., 2024).

## PRIORITIZING EDUCATION OVER CARE

- » In the 1800s, kindergartens and day nurseries were fairly similar in terms of funding and goals. Both aimed to preserve the family and help children learn, particularly in under-resourced communities (CSCCE, 2022b).
- » In the first decades of the 20th century, federal policies undervalued day nurseries and ignored the needs of working mothers. Instead, they encouraged efforts in states and local communities to include kindergartens for children age four to six in public schools (CSCCE, 2022b).
- » In the 21st century, federal ECE policies continue to strengthen the artificial divide between care and education. The government has provided secure and increased funding for educational programs such as preschool and Head Start rather than child care—a sign that people in influential positions value education more than care, reinforcing this distinction across society. But “educational” settings rarely meet the needs of families the way child care does with non-traditional hours, care starting at infancy, etc. Child care options aren’t always accessible because funding sources are built around educational programs. No matter how a program is categorized, children thrive due to stabilizing relationships with educators (CSCCE, 2022b).

# Timeline of Federal Policies

Over the past 200 years, several federal policies have impacted and continue to affect the lives and livelihoods of people of color, women, and early educators. The policies we have identified represent a foundation that can be built upon by readers interested in learning more (CSCCE, 2022b; Lloyd et al., 2021).

## 1819 **The Civilization Fund Act**

**1830 **The Indian Removal Act**** forced American Indians to leave their homelands and cede the land to White settlers. American Indian peoples were also exploited by colonizers for their labor and knowledge of the land to facilitate settler survival.

**1865 **The 13th Amendment in 1865** and the **14th Amendment in 1868**** abolished legal enslavement and gave basic rights and citizenship to Black people. Yet many Black people were forced into poor and barely paid occupations, including domestic work for Black women, which continued to benefit White people and the U.S. economic system. The roots of Jim Crow laws began as early as 1865, immediately following the 13th Amendment.



1870 **The 15th Amendment**

1887 **The Dawes Act**

1920 **The 19th Amendment** legally guaranteed the right to vote for women born in the United States.

1933 **New Deal legislation 1933-1939**

1940 **The Lanham Act** was designed to support communities in the context of WWII. The Lanham Centers were the first instance of the federal government providing widespread child care.

1964 **The Civil Rights Act** and **Executive Order 11246** included the implementation and enforcement of laws to prevent gender-based and workplace discrimination.

1965 **The Head Start Act and the Voting Rights Act**

1971 **The Comprehensive Child Development Act in 1971** was a bill to establish a nationwide comprehensive child care system passed with bipartisan support in both chambers but vetoed by President Richard Nixon.

1974 **The 1938 Fair Labor Standards Act** was amended in 1974 to include domestic service workers.

1989 **The Military Child Care Act (MCCA)**

1990 **The Act for Better Child Care**

1996 **The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act** (referred to as national "welfare reform") ended the New Deal's Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), which had provided cash aid to families in need. Time limits and work requirements dramatically decreased the number of welfare recipients and increased the demand for child care services and funding but did nothing to alleviate poverty.

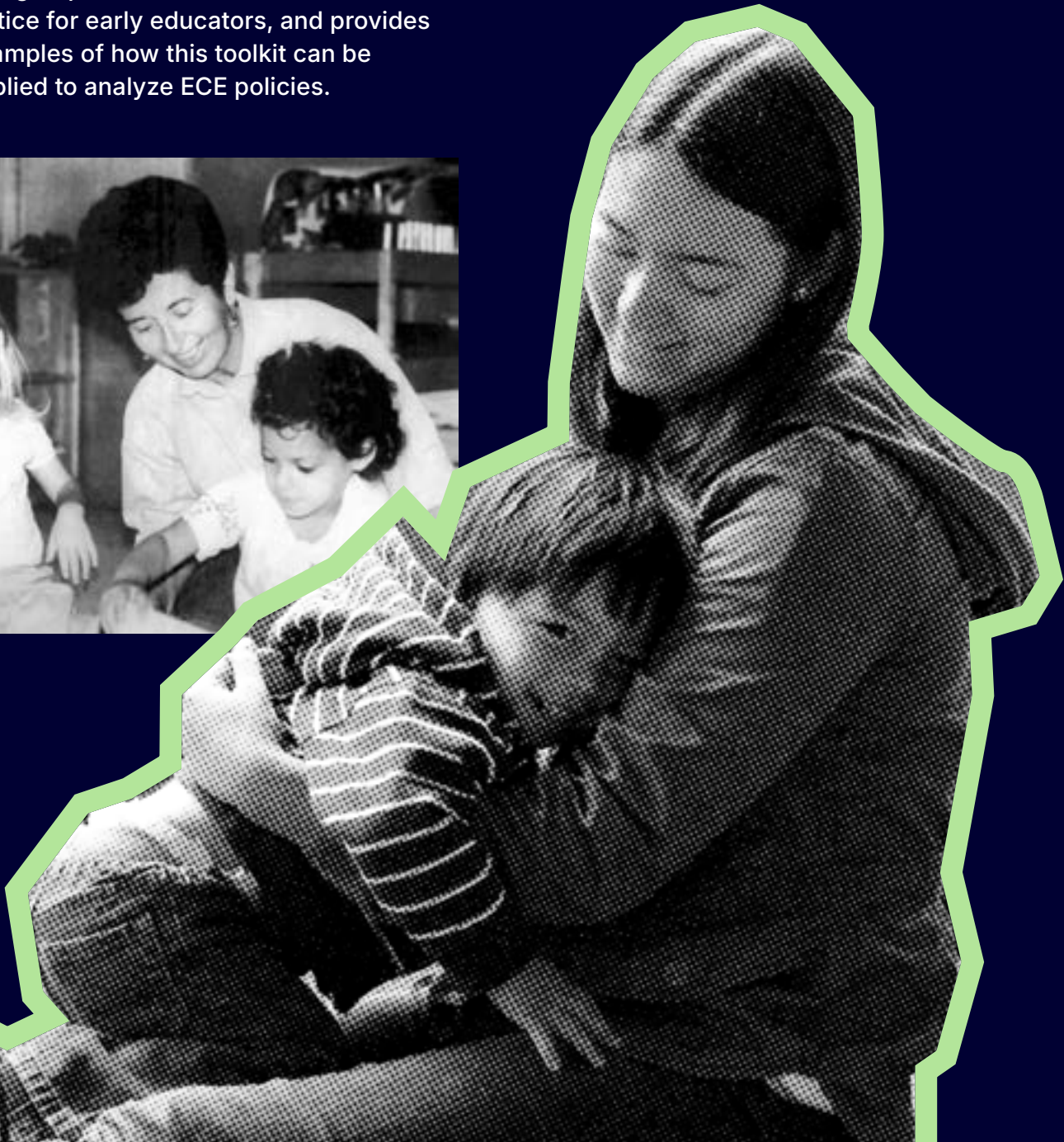
2020 **The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act** provided the largest amount of funding for child care relief to date. The federal government allotted states \$3.5 billion via the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) and \$750 million via Head Start programs.

2021 **The American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA)**



# The Groundwork for Justice

This section connects equity and justice, suggests potential strategies and actions that groups can use to work towards justice for early educators, and provides examples of how this toolkit can be applied to analyze ECE policies.



## CONNECTING EQUITY AND JUSTICE

The paths to justice and equity are intertwined. For example, equity in housing means that an individual's access to adequate housing is not determined by the social group they belong to, while justice in housing guarantees that no one is excluded from accessing the housing resources that they need. This logic can be applied to remedying inequities in access to physical and mental health, education, economic well-being, and more.

## THE QUALITIES OF EQUITABLE AND JUST SOCIETIES AND SYSTEMS AND HOW THEY CAN BE APPLIED TO THE ECE WORKFORCE

Early educators are more than stakeholders: they are community leaders and trusted experts in child development. Progress in early care and education has historically been achieved through the collective action of educators and other advocates. Centering educators is central to achieving a just and equitable ECE system. Low pay, poor working conditions, unstable funding, racial disparities, and the devaluation of care work must be addressed.

### SOME QUALITIES OF AN EQUITABLE AND JUST SOCIETY

### EXAMPLES OF SOCIAL JUSTICE IN EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION

People from all backgrounds and social identities are encouraged to participate fully.

Early educators across the mixed-delivery system are central to decision making at the national, state, and local policy levels.

The population as a whole benefits.

All early educators have access to benefits and earn compensation that amounts, **at the very least**, to a family-sustaining wage in their state.

Everyone can access essential resources of health care, education, social services, etc.

Child care is acknowledged as a universal public good that is affordable to all parents and does not rely on exploitative practices that undermine the humanity and dignity of the ECE workforce.

Individuals' minimum basic human needs (housing, food, clothing, and safety) are met.

All early educators and programs have access to the resources (funding, supplies, classroom space, etc.) that they need to effectively educate young learners.

Institutions and leaders are held accountable for their actions.

Policy leaders, decision makers and governments are held accountable for and are actively working to address any future inequities that result from ECE policies, processes, and practices.

Human rights (freedom of speech, freedom of religion, bodily autonomy, right to privacy, etc.) are protected.

All early educators work in environments that support their physical, mental, and emotional health and well-being.

A concerted effort is made to address past injustices and inequities and to prevent them from occurring in the future.

The current inequities that exist within the ECE system are addressed.

Fairness is practiced in decision making, policies, and enforcement of laws to ensure that everyone is treated equitably.

Early educators across the mixed-delivery system are recognized as skilled professionals, experts, and leaders within the ECE sector and society in general.

## 10 Questions Towards ECE Justice

These questions should be asked about ECE policies, processes, and practices before, during, and after the decision-making process.

1

Have policymakers established that teaching and caring for young children should be a family-sustaining job? If not, why? If so, how are they contributing to that goal?

2

What data are available about disparities within the ECE workforce related to education and training, working conditions, and compensation? What data systems track how the policy impacts the workforce and disparities over time?

3

Who is responsible for administering the policy, practice, or process? How do they ensure that early educators' needs and experiences are addressed?

4

How are early educators involved in the decision-making process? What are the outlets for their perspectives and expertise to be heard and incorporated?

5

If early educators are not involved in the beginning, development, and evaluation of the policy, why not?

6

How are policy designers and implementers working to build and sustain relationships with early educators moving forward?

### PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS FOR THE 10 QUESTIONS

Ask these questions in ECE policy- or decision-making spaces. Ask policymakers or committees these questions during public comment opportunities or other public forums. The answers to these questions could also be implied through the absence (or presence) of explicit language, goals, or processes used to guide the decision-making process.



7

What processes are needed to ensure the policy reflects the diverse range of early educators? How can they be supported and not excluded or harmed by the policy?

8

Who benefits from the existing system, its current policies, or lack of specific policies? Who is being harmed?

9

Have the perspectives of those furthest from opportunity or experiencing the greatest harm and/or inequities been shared?

10

Who does the policy target or impact? Who is the policy not reaching or excluding?

**USE THESE QUESTIONS TO GUIDE GROUP DISCUSSIONS AND RESEARCH AND POLICY ANALYSIS.**

Early educators and advocates can use these questions together to:

- » Learn more about an issue;
- » Identify their expertise and perspective on the issue;
- » Learn about the expertise and perspective of other stakeholders; and
- » Build a shared understanding of challenges, opportunities, and strategies for change.

Researchers and policy analysts can also apply these questions to their own work.

- » Do research questions or the data available allow them to understand the varied impact of a policy?
- » Does their analysis of a policy consider who was involved in creating the policy or whether there is sufficient data to assess impact?

## Practical Scenarios for Applying the ECE Justice Toolkit in Policy Analysis

The following section explores how the 10 questions may be used in policy analysis, highlighting some recent and historical ECE policies.



### RECENT POLICY DECISIONS

#### Analyzing Policies Dedicated to Compensation Increases for the ECE Workforce

The Washington, D.C., [Early Childhood Educator Pay Equity Fund](#) was created and implemented following organizing efforts led by the [Under 3 DC Coalition](#), which includes parents, early educators, advocates, community-based organizations, and health professionals (Office of the State Superintendent of Education, n.d.; Under 3 DC, n.d.). While the fund is a “first-in-the-nation program aimed at achieving pay parity between early childhood educators and their K-12 counterparts,” gaps still exist (Office of the State Superintendent of Education, n.d.).

- » How are early educators involved in the decision-making process? What are the outlets for their perspectives and expertise to be heard and incorporated?
  - » Early educators and advocates were part of the [Task Force](#) that was consulted and made recommendations during the process (Early Educator Equitable Compensation Task Force, 2022).
- » Who is being harmed? Who is this policy not reaching?
  - » The Under 3 DC Coalition noted that the Pay Equity Fund does not compensate early educators according to their experience levels, costing child care workers between \$3,900 and \$6,700 a year, and recommended that future iterations of the fund address this issue (Koma, 2023; Under 3 DC, 2023).



### **Analyzing Pathways for Early Educators to Access Higher Paying Positions**

The expansion of universal transitional kindergarten (TK) in California has led to the creation of a new PK-3 Early Childhood Education Specialist Credential that authorizes holders to teach TK.

- » Who benefits from the new PK-3 Credential and pathway to TK teaching jobs? Who is being harmed? Who is this policy not reaching or is excluding?
- » An analysis of the pathways to the credential revealed that compared to teachers with K-12 experience, many experienced and degreed early educators were not provided with an equitable pathway to earning a credential and access to TK teaching jobs—positions that could more than double their pay (Williams et al., 2021).

### **HISTORICAL POLICIES**

#### **The Comprehensive Child Development Act of 1971**

This proposed legislation would have allocated substantial dollars toward developing nationally funded, locally administered comprehensive child care centers open to all families on a sliding scale depending on their income (Roth, 1976). It would have been the largest federal investment in child care, providing universal access for three- and four-year-olds. The act passed with bipartisan support in both chambers of Congress but was vetoed by President Richard Nixon, leading to a series of smaller, fragmented investments that have shaped today's child care system (Waxman, 2021).

- » Who is benefiting from the current system, its current policies, or lack of specific policies, and who is being harmed?

- » Funding from the Comprehensive Child Development Act would have provided child care access for three- and four-year-olds throughout the United States and reduced the burden on families of paying the high costs of child care.

### **The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (Welfare Reform)**

This policy included time limits and work requirements for welfare recipients to receive financial support, resulting in a dramatic decrease in welfare recipients without necessarily moving people out of poverty (Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, 1996). Demand for child care increased due to the policy, and many communities looked to the mothers who were welfare recipients to become early educators themselves (Whitebook et al., 2024).

- » Who was the policy for and how did it impact the “target” population?
- » Policymakers viewed lack of child care as a barrier to moving women off welfare rolls, so pushing these mothers into child care jobs seemed like a win-win solution. In reality, most child care jobs offered low pay and little opportunity for economic mobility or self-sufficiency—and not much has changed since then. Many child care providers then and now qualify for public assistance because their wages are so low.



- » By questioning who the policy serves and assessing its real impact, we can focus policy discussions on whether access to child care and fulfilling work requirements actually lead to economic advancement—or if they simply reinforce economic instability—and challenge policymakers to define the actual goals of such programs.

# How to Use This Toolkit

The systemic oppression and inequities experienced by early educators are not unique to the ECE sector, but the result of a history of subjugation enacted by people in power in the United States. This toolkit provides a framework to assess the impact of ECE policies, processes, and practices and better understand who they benefit, harm, and exclude. What we learn from the toolkit extends beyond the ECE sector: connecting the right to justice for the ECE workforce to justice for all those experiencing oppression is a powerful step towards generating collective power to disrupt oppression in the United States.



**THE TOOLKIT CAN BE USED TO...**

- » Build a shared understanding, individually and in group settings, of issues that impact the ECE workforce and undermine their dignity and humanity.
- » Create alliances across roles and organizations within and outside the ECE sector, connecting the issues that impact the ECE workforce to systemic oppression and inequities experienced by other groups
- » Amplify the voices of the ECE workforce in policy- and decision-making spaces and prompt discussions on equity and justice.
- » Guide the creation of questions to assess the impact of policies, processes, and practices on groups experiencing systemic oppression within and outside the ECE sector.
- » Understand the role of history and make connections between what has happened and what is *happening*.

**EARLY EDUCATORS CAN USE THIS TOOLKIT TO...**

- » Build shared understanding, identify needs and desires, and create alliances with other educators, individually and in groups.
- » Articulate their needs, desires, and potential pathways to achieving justice in conversations with other ECE stakeholders.
- » Amplify their voices in policy- and decision-making spaces and prompt discussions on equity and justice in early care and education.

**ECE ADVOCATES AND ORGANIZERS CAN USE THIS TOOLKIT TO...**

- » Design campaigns and initiatives with early educators to center their experiences, needs, and desires.
- » Identify pathways to achieving justice for the ECE workforce, inform their policy priorities, and create alliances with other stakeholders, individually and in groups.

**ECE POLICY LEADERS AND IMPLEMENTERS CAN USE THIS TOOLKIT TO...**

- » Collaborate with early educators in policy processes and seek alignment with their needs across the ECE system in an ongoing process that occurs beyond the development of specific policies.
- » Create, assess, and refine policies and implementation strategies that promote equity and justice in ECE systems.
- » Provide a framework for working with early educators during the formation, development, and evaluation of policies impacting the sector.
- » Build shared understanding with other policy leaders and implementers to analyze the impact of ECE policies regarding equity and justice for the ECE workforce.

**ECE RESEARCHERS CAN USE THIS TOOLKIT TO...**

- » Shape research questions and methodologies with early educators to reflect their lived experiences.
- » Translate findings into actionable insights for policy and advocacy efforts in policy-making spaces and discussions with researchers and ECE stakeholders.



## Everyone can play a part in remedying and eliminating systemic injustices.

The following are just some of the strategies and actions we can use to work towards justice for early educators. For example, the suggestions for policy leaders and legislators are bare minimum requirements for anyone in those positions who claims that equity and justice for early educators is important.

Everyone can play a part in remedying and eliminating systemic injustices. The pathway to justice and equity allows everyone to participate without shifting accountability away from those in power.

### EVERYONE CAN...

» Work to analyze and correct their own biases and assumptions regarding early educators and early care and education.

This individual and group work can help prevent the perpetuation of discriminatory and prejudiced actions and thoughts directed at the ECE workforce.

- » Regularly examine personal beliefs and assumptions about early childhood educators. For example, ask questions when you say or hear things like “we need a quality workforce.” Do you picture a different workforce or do you picture a different system for the workforce?
- » Engage in learning focused on identifying biases, and challenging stereotypes and assumptions.
- » Educate themselves on the issues that impact the ECE workforce. The [Early Childhood Workforce Index](#) has the most up-to-date data and research.
- » Support early educators (their movements and campaigns) by advocating and organizing **with** them. Uplift and amplify their voices and concerns and call out the moments that they have been left out of discussions or decisions that impact their well-being and livelihoods.
- » Use their individual and collective power to influence policy leaders and decision makers to address the inequities and injustices that early educators face. Examples include:
  - » Using social media to share stories, research, and calls to action and increase awareness;
  - » Attending public meetings or hearings and using public comment time; and
  - » Participating in direct actions like rallies and demonstrations.

- » Align themselves and their organizations with people and groups working towards justice for those experiencing oppression within and outside of early care and education.

#### **ECE POLICY LEADERS AND LEGISLATORS MUST...**

- » Champion and support increased public investment for early care and education.
- » Enact legislation that establishes family-supporting wage and benefit standards for early educators, adopts workplace standards that support educator well-being, disrupts racial and ethnic stratification, and results in consistency in program standards and funding.
- » Engage the executive branch as a partner on ECE policy.
- » Use their power and influence to convene and educate others about the need to support the ECE workforce.
- » Fund a robust system of ECE data collection and reporting. A good workforce data system requires a comprehensive plan and adequate funding to
  - » Include all members of the ECE workforce employed in schools and center- and home-based child care settings;
  - » Collect quantitative and qualitative data from early educators;
  - » Be comprehensive enough to identify disparities in such areas as compensation and educational attainment;

- » Analyze and disseminate data and reports on the economic status and well-being of the ECE workforce; and
- » Assess the impact of policy and funding decisions on early educators.

#### **EARLY EDUCATORS CAN...**

- » Support each other by building a shared understanding of the issues that they individually and collectively face through collective study and discussion.
  - » For example, by reviewing and discussing the [enduring inequities](#) that exist in early care and education and how they are still being experienced.
- » Join or create educator-led advocacy organizations.
- » Organize and advocate collectively.

#### **ECE PROGRAMS AND ADMINISTRATORS CAN...**

- » Work with the early educators they employ and develop a shared understanding and common policy goals that support a program's ability to provide better conditions.
- » Support and celebrate staff who participate in advocacy events or are involved with advocacy organizations and encourage other staff to join and participate.
- » Use available resources to create a work environment supportive of the individual and collective needs of the early educators they employ. A tool like the [Model Work Standards](#) may be helpful (CSCCE, 2019).



- » Work with other ECE programs and administrators to stay up-to-date on the best workplace and employment practices.

#### **ECE ADVOCATES AND ORGANIZERS CAN...**

- » Support early educators (their movements and campaigns) by advocating **with** them when they are present and avoiding speaking **for** them when they are absent.
- » Use their power to put pressure on policy leaders and decision makers to address the inequities and injustices early educators face.
- » Reflect on the power dynamics within the advocacy landscape and support organizations that do not have the same influence or connections.

- » Align themselves and their organizations with people and groups working towards justice for those experiencing oppression within and outside of early care and education.

#### **ECE RESEARCHERS CAN...**

- » Avoid extractive research processes by creating more collaborative research opportunities that center early educators' perspectives and experiences.
- » Develop and maintain a critical analysis lens that will help them identify inequities.
- » Interrogate the available data to identify any inequities and disparities that currently exist for early educators.
- » Disseminate findings in discussions, conferences, and policy-making spaces.

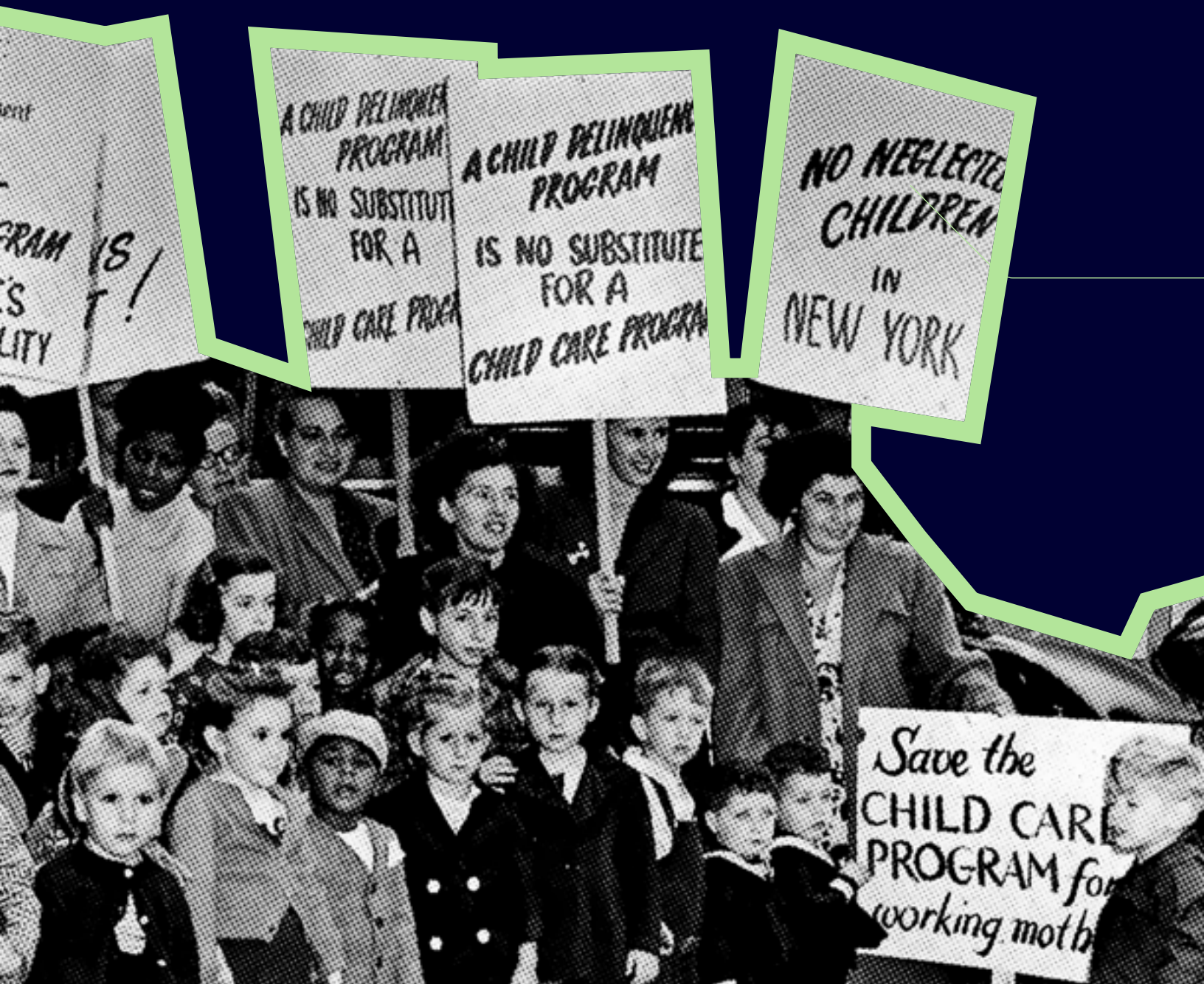
# Historical Context



## Oppression in the United States and Early Care and Education

Oppression faced by individuals and communities is part of a larger system of domination that affects people who are not powerful, wealthy, or influential. Inequities and injustices impact people of color in general as well as other specific groups based on a wide range of identities, including race, ethnicity, sexuality, and immigration or economic status. People in powerful and influential positions constructed and have maintained the systems that currently exist in our society.

The following overview of specific eras provides just a few of the countless historical and contemporary injustices in the United States, as well as examples of resistance, with a special focus on Black and Indigenous people and women in general. Connections are made to early care and education where possible. Insights from the [Mary Pauper paper](#) and the [Critical Junctures](#) section of the ECHOES website guided the creation of this overview and are cited where appropriate.



## Colonization of the Americas: 1400s-1619

White European settler colonizers invaded and colonized Indigenous peoples and their homelands in what is now called the United States of America. The continuation of settler expansion was made possible by the genocide and forced relocation of American Indigenous peoples (Lloyd et al., 2021). During this time, the first recorded Black Africans arrived in the Americas after they were imprisoned against their will and forcefully taken from their homelands for the purpose of serving White settler colonizers, becoming the one of the exploited classes of the “New World” (Lloyd et al., 2021). Additionally, White women generally had few rights, and their ability to own land, earn money, or participate in anything that encouraged their independence was restricted. Despite this, White women had privileges and access to resources and power that American Indian and Black women did not (Lloyd et al., 2021).

Black and Indigenous people did not passively accept enslavement or colonization. Tribes of American Indigenous peoples went to war with White European settler colonizers,



Credit: 1881 kindergarten, photo sketch from wood carving by Charles Upham, Library of Congress

resisting colonization and the theft of their homelands (Lloyd et al., 2021). Black Africans resisted enslavement through wars in Africa and continued to fight once they arrived in the Americas. Black and Indigenous people also acted in solidarity to support each other in resisting the oppression they experienced at the hands of White Europeans.

## Continuation of Colonization to Early Reconstruction: 1619-1870s

The economy of the newly formed and expanding United States relied on unpaid labor derived from the enslavement of Black and Indigenous peoples. The responsibilities forced upon Black and Indigenous women who were enslaved included the domestic work of housekeeping and caring for the children of their enslavers (Lloyd et al., 2021). These women represent the foundation of the child care workforce.

Life during this period of colonization and enslavement was structured on power dynamics and violence: Black and Indigenous people who were enslaved experienced racism and classism. American Indian and Black women additionally faced sexism, including the control of their bodies through rape by White men, and Black women who were enslaved were also forced into sexual relations with Black men who were also

enslaved (Lloyd et al., 2021). These forms of oppression based on race, gender, and class have continued over time and persist today.

As noted earlier, Black and Indigenous people did not passively accept enslavement and colonization, they often worked together to resist subjugation and land theft. Tribes of American Indigenous peoples went to war with the newly formed federal government, resisting colonization, the theft of their homelands, and their forced relocation

(Lloyd et al., 2021). Black people resisted enslavement and forced labor through organized revolts, including fighting their White enslavers, escaping to freedom, work stoppages, and abortions to avoid their children being born into enslavement. The resistance of Black people who were enslaved and the work of abolitionists, activists, and allies across the racial spectrum was crucial in fighting against legalized enslavement across the United States.

## Reconstruction Through World War II: 1870s–1940s

The financial and racial conflicts experienced by Black people in the previous periods continued and evolved during the time known as “Reconstruction.” The 13th and 14th Amendments to the U.S. Constitution abolished the form of slavery of the previous eras and gave basic rights and citizenship to Black people. Yet many Black people were forced into roles that mirrored their enslavement: sharecropping and tenant farming and, specifically for Black women, domestic work. These economically exploitative occupations allowed White people to continue to benefit from the labor of Black people (Lloyd et al., 2021).

During this time, many Indigenous children and adolescents were violently removed from their families and communities and sent to boarding schools, where they were forced to abandon their original languages and traditions and assimilate to White American culture and language. They were abused (with some cases resulting in death), and many were sent to White families as domestic “help.” The 1887 Dawes Act split up American Indian reservations, supporting

efforts to forcefully shift Indigenous American cultures from a collective focus to something resembling the dominant culture of the United States (Lloyd et al., 2021).

Between 1933 and 1938, a series of policies and programs called “The New Deal” aimed to address the Great Depression, yet key elements of the legislation discriminated against Black people in a variety of ways, including:

- » Black mothers were excluded from provisions of the Social Security Act of 1935, such as cash assistance.
- » Occupations in which Black employment was disproportionately concentrated, such as domestic and agriculture work, were excluded from requirements for a federal minimum wage and overtime pay established in the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 (Lloyd et al., 2021) and the right to form and join unions, bargain collectively, and engage in concerted activity for mutual aid or protection, as guaranteed under the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) (Valerio & Goity, 2023).



Credit: Photograph by Mary L. Langenfeld

Despite limited wage-earning options, Indigenous American and Black women exercised their agency and resisted systemic injustice. Black educators and activists like Haydee B. Campbell, Anna E. Murray, and Josephine S. Yates dedicated their lives to creating and expanding kindergartens for the children of Black and working-class women at a time when mothers—especially White mothers—were thought to belong in the home and schools were not seen as necessary for children under six (CSCCE, 2022a). The first kindergartens and day nurseries were established in the late 1800s but followed different paths by the 1920s: half-day kindergarten for children five and

older started in public schools, but private kindergartens and full-day nurseries serving younger children struggled to keep staff and stay open (CSCCE, 2022a).

Private nursery schools were established for some middle-class three- and four-year-olds in the 1920s, but the Great Depression reversed the growth of public kindergartens. In response to the demands of activists and the emergencies caused by the Depression and World War II, the federal government provided some emergency funding for nursery schools and educational child care programs, but these funds were temporary (CSCCE, 2022a).

## Social Movements Fight for Civil Rights: 1940s–1970s

Injustices from the 1940s onward include: rising income inequality between the wealthy and the rest of the population; wage gaps based on gender, race and ethnicity, and geographic location; racial disparities in policing and incarceration; and limited access to quality health care and affordable housing for communities experiencing marginalization. People working in solidarity across identities resisted and responded to these injustices through collective action in the form of protests, work stoppages, collective bargaining and unionization, political campaigning, and building alliances.

The 1960s and 1970s were instrumental in advancing explicit rights benefiting people of color, women, workers, and early educators, even though the fight for these rights dates back centuries. Social movements during this period include, but are not limited to, the civil rights, women's rights, anti-Vietnam War, Black Power, LGBTQ+ rights, and American Indian movements (Lloyd et al., 2021). As before, the rights gained during this era were achieved through collective action and resistance led by groups of people experiencing oppression with support from their allies. The people in power, including politicians and legislators, did not grant rights out of benevolence or simply because it was the right thing to do.

Yet working mothers still struggled to find and pay for child care and early education in the private market. After ending the wartime child care program, the federal government limited its funding to child care subsidies tied to welfare programs and Head Start for children experiencing poverty. By 1970, a majority of five-year-olds attended at least half-day public kindergartens, but President Richard Nixon's veto of bipartisan legislation in 1971 shattered hopes for publicly funded early care and education (CSCCE, 2022a).



## The Fight for Equal Rights and the Campaign for Worthy Wages: 1970s–2020s

The number of women of all races and ethnicities in the labor force rapidly increased during the 1970s and 1980s. Organizing and advocacy continued to be essential strategies during this time and were used to highlight the needs of women, which also benefit society as a whole, including child care and compensation for early educators (Lloyd et al., 2021).

Starting in the late 1970s and through the 1990s, teachers, providers, and parents acted together and separately to protest cutbacks. Simultaneously, they sought more funding to increase access for more children, lower parent fees, remove troublesome eligibility requirements for child care subsidies, and increase compensation for early educators (CSCCE, 2022a). The 1990s saw improvements

in federal funding for child care and Head Start, but the funds failed to cover all eligible families living in or near poverty. Most families struggled to afford services and still do (CSCCE, 2022a).

From 2001 to now, early care and education has remained at a crossroads. The Great Recession of the 2000s and the COVID-19 pandemic of the 2020s exacerbated existing inequities and the instability of an ECE system that relies on the private market and inadequate public investment. Will government investments continue to mirror approaches of the past, shortchanging families, children, and educators? Or will early care and education be transformed into a shared public responsibility like education for older children?



**The lessons from these and previous eras suggest that the impact of colonialism and enslavement continue in the form of racist, classist, sexist, homophobic, and paternalistic practices embedded in U.S. systems, policies, and laws. These systems restrict opportunities for people who experience oppression and stifle women's economic growth and independence by continuing to devalue female-dominated occupations like early care and education."**

# Moving Forward

Inequity and injustice are the result of choices; they are not inevitable. Systemic issues require systemic solutions—those who experience oppression are not responsible for fixing the systems that harm them. Placing the burden on the oppressed to make change absolves those in power of accountability for the policies they inherited, created, and uphold.

History shows that change often stems from collective action. The same systems that enforce inequality can be dismantled through collective action, often led by those affected, with allies acting in solidarity. Everyone has a role to play in challenging injustice, without shifting accountability away from those in power.



## Recommended Resources

Our timeline and historical content sections were inspired by two key resources:

The [Mary Pauper paper](#) offers a more in-depth look at the history of early care and education and policies affecting the workforce.

[ECHOES](#) is a treasure trove of ECE history and activism. The [Critical Junctures](#) and [Enduring Inequities](#) pages offer a comprehensive timeline of turning points in the history of early care and education and connections to what is happening today.

## OTHER USEFUL CSCCE RESOURCES

The [Early Childhood Workforce Index](#) is a rich resource that tracks state policies in essential areas like workforce qualifications, work environments, and early educator compensation. The 2024 report provides updated policy recommendations and spotlights states that are improving ECE workforce policies.

## References

Center for Economic and Social Justice (CESJ). (n.d.). *Defining Economic Justice and Social Justice*. <https://www.cesj.org/learn/definitions/defining-economic-justice-and-social-justice/>

Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (CSCCE). (2022a). *Critical Junctures*. Early Childhood History, Organizing, Ethos, and Strategy (ECHOES) project. Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley. <https://cscce.berkeley.edu/projects/echoes/critical-junctures/>

Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (CSCCE). (2022b). *Enduring Inequities*. Early Childhood History, Organizing, Ethos, and Strategy (ECHOES) project. Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley. <https://cscce.berkeley.edu/projects/echoes/enduring-inequities/>

Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (CSCCE). (2019). *The Model Work Standards*. University of California, Berkeley. <https://cscce.berkeley.edu/publications/report/creating-better-child-care-jobs-model-work-standards/>

Department of Inclusion & Multicultural Engagement, Lewis & Clark College. (n.d.). *ABC's of Social Justice*. <https://www.lclark.edu/live/files/18474-abcs-of-social-justice>

Early Educator Equitable Compensation Task Force. (2022). *Final Report of the Early Childhood Educator*

The [2024 Workforce Index Policy Toolkit](#) is a companion piece to the *Index* and highlights the five essential elements of early care and education policy to support early educators. The toolkit is created for early educators, policymakers, ECE policy advocates, state administrators, public and private funders, and allies passionate about strengthening the ECE workforce.

The [Model Work Standards](#) continue to provide a vision for meeting the work environment needs of educators in centers and home-based programs.

The [Early Educator Engagement and Empowerment \(E4\) Toolkit](#) was created in collaboration with early educators and ECE advocates and features key facts and policy solutions to support early educators in their advocacy, power building, and engagement with stakeholders.

*Equitable Compensation Task Force*. Legislative Information Management System (LIMS). <https://lims.dccouncil.gov/downloads/LIMS/49122/Introduction/RC24-0154-Introduction.pdf>

Kamasaki, C. (2021). *US Immigration Policy: A Classic, Unappreciated Example of Structural Racism*. Brookings Institution. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/us-immigration-policy-a-classic-unappreciated-example-of-structural-racism/>

Koma, A. (2023). *Child Care Workers Say They're Getting Shortchanged by the District on Salaries. It's Part of a Pattern of Broken Promises*. Washington City Paper. <https://washingtoncitypaper.com/article/615955/child-care-workers-say-theyre-getting-shortchanged-by-the-district-on-salaries-its-part-of-a-pattern-of-broken-promises/>

Lloyd, C.M., Carlson, J., Barnett, H., Shaw, S., & Logan, D. (2021). *Mary Pauper: A historical exploration of early care and education compensation, policy, and solutions*. Child Trends. <https://earlyedcollaborative.org/what-we-do/mary-pauper/>

Martinez, H. (2022, July 7). *What Is Gender Equity? Definition & Examples*. United Way of the National Capital Area. <https://unitedwaync.org/blog/what-is-gender-equity/>

McLean, C., Austin, L.J.E., Powell, A., Jaggi, S., Kim, Y., Knight, J., Muñoz, S., & Schlieber, M. (2024).

*Early Childhood Workforce Index – 2024*. Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley. <https://cscce.berkeley.edu/workforce-index-2024/>

National Resources Defense Council. (2019). *Definitions of Equity, Inclusion, Equality and Related Terms*. [https://www.broward.org/Climate/Documents/EquityHandout\\_082019.pdf](https://www.broward.org/Climate/Documents/EquityHandout_082019.pdf)

National Women’s Law Center. (2022). *At the Crossroads: State Child Care Assistance Policies 2021*. <https://nwlc.org/resource/at-the-crossroads-state-child-care-assistance-policies-2021/>

Obias, L., & Yoko-Young, E. (2021, September 14). *From Seed to Harvest: A Toolkit for Collaborative Racial Equity Strategies*. Race Forward. <https://www.raceforward.org/practice/tools/seed-harvest-toolkit-collaborative-racial-equity-strategies>

Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE). (1996). *The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996*. <https://aspe.hhs.gov/reports/personal-responsibility-work-opportunity-reconciliation-act-1996>

Office of the State Superintendent of Education. (n.d.). *Early Childhood Educator Pay Equity Fund*. <https://osse.dc.gov/ecepayequity>

Roth, W. (1976). *The Politics of Daycare: The Comprehensive Child Development Act Of 1971*. Institute for Research on Poverty at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. <https://www.irp.wisc.edu/publications/dps/pdfs/dp36976.pdf>

Under 3 DC. (n.d.). *Under 3 DC*. <https://under3dc.org/>

Under 3 DC. (2023). *Pay Equity Fund*. <https://under3dc.org/publications/pay-equity-fund/>

United Way of the National Capital Area. (2024). *Intersectional Identity: Definition, Importance & Impact*. <https://unitedwaynca.org/what-is-intersectionality/>

University of California, Berkeley, Social Welfare. (n.d.). *Student Resources - Social Justice Symposium*. <https://socialwelfare.berkeley.edu/student-resources/social-justice-symposium>

Valerio, D., & Goity, S. (2023). *Analysis of Labor Organizing, Unionization, and Collective Bargaining Strategies for the Early Care and Education Workforce*. Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley. <https://cscce.berkeley.edu/publications/studentpaper/analysis-of-labor-organizing-for-the-ece-workforce/>

Velasquez, M., Andre, C., Shanks, T., & Meyer, M. J. (2014, August 1). *Justice and Fairness - Markkula Center for Applied Ethics*. Santa Clara University. <https://www.scu.edu/ethics/ethics-resources/ethical-decision-making/justice-and-fairness>

Waxman, O.B. (2021). *Child Care’s Controversial Political History: Nixon to Today*. Time. <https://time.com/6125667/universal-childcare-history-nixon-veto/>

Whitebook, M., Haack, P., & Vardell, R. (2024). *Working for Worthy Wages: A Lived History of the Child Care Compensation Movement, 1970-2002*. Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley. <https://cscce.berkeley.edu/publications/report/working-for-worthy-wages-a-lived-history-of-the-child-care-compensation-movement-1970-2002/>

Williams, A., Montoya, E., Kim, Y., & Austin, L.J.E. (2021). *New Data Shows Early Educators Equipped to Teach TK*. Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley. <https://cscce.berkeley.edu/publications/data-snapshot/early-educators-equipped-to-teach-tk/>

## Acknowledgements

The *ECE Justice Toolkit* was generously supported by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and the Heising-Simons Foundation. The content is based on research from and about early educators, with input from early educators, activists, and advocates. Special thanks to the early educators, activists, and advocates who collaborated with us on this toolkit: Benu Chhabra, Tonia McMillian, Dr. Martha Melgoza, and Dr. Ashley Williams. Thanks to our colleagues at CSCCE for their support, guidance, and review: Tobi Adejumo, Arabella Bloom, Ana Fox-Hodess, Dr. Yoonjeon Kim, Anna Powell, Dr. Wanzi Muruvi, Dr. Marcy Whitebook, and Penelope Whitney.



**The content is based on research from and about early educators, with input from early educators, activists, and advocates.**

CSCCE provides research and analysis on the preparation, working conditions, and compensation of the early care and education workforce. We develop policy solutions and create spaces for teaching, learning, and educator activism. Our vision is an effective public early care and education system that secures racial, gender, and economic justice for the women whose labor is the linchpin of stable, quality services.

### **SUGGESTED CITATION**

Hess, H., & Austin, L.J.E. (2025). *Early Care and Education Justice Toolkit*. Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley. <https://cscce.berkeley.edu/publications/report/early-care-and-education-justice-toolkit/>

Edited by: Deborah Meacham

Designed by: KP Creative Strategy

2521 Channing Way #5555, Berkeley, CA 94720-5555  
(510) 643-8293 | [cscceinfo@berkeley.edu](mailto:cscceinfo@berkeley.edu)

© 2025 Center for the Study of Child Care Employment. All rights reserved.

