

# SOCIAL JUSTICE & EQUITY

## FOR CHILDREN IN ECE

### INTRODUCTION

For decades, the Massachusetts state legislature has continually included early childhood education (ECE) on the broader agenda, and just recently passed a state budget that makes a historic movement in ECE <sup>1</sup>. Nevertheless, deep concerns about equity and equality have been sustained in all sectors of education – and none so prominent as in the field of ECE <sup>2</sup> which contributes a great deal in shaping children’s readiness and success in future schooling.

For this paper, equity is defined as the absence of racial or social class distinctions in access to early childhood education, or to the quality or outcomes of that education. Access to early childhood education can be measured in many ways, including cost, capacity/ enrollment, and school readiness as an outcome of early childhood education. This paper examines equity in ECE from a social justice lens, using the perspective of its advocates in Massachusetts today.

*We acknowledge the valuable contributions of the CAYL 2021 Social Justice & Equity workgroup who made this paper possible.*



### COST



Issues of affordability – and therefore accessibility and equity – are particularly challenging for people of color in Boston <sup>3</sup>, reflecting a racial wealth gap that likely covers the rest of the state.

Massachusetts is one of the most expensive child care environments in the country. The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) considers costs for child care affordable at up to 7% of annual income. In Massachusetts costs are 22.7% for a “median family” and balloon up to 78.9% for a low-wage worker <sup>4</sup>. These numbers increase steeply in families with multiple children, multiplying its inaccessibility.

Many families rely on subsidies to afford access, but the subsidy system is not a guarantee of service and many families fall through the cracks of this system.

“The state reimbursement rate is too low and the way that it’s reimbursed reinforces a negative cycle putting programs into deficit mode.”\*





## CAPACITY/ ENROLLMENT



Nationally, there was already an ECE access gap prior to the pandemic, with families of color more likely to experience job interruptions due to child care concerns than their non-Hispanic White counterparts. Fallout from the pandemic has likely deepened the equity divide in both system capacity and student enrollment <sup>5</sup>.

ECE is provided in a variety of settings including public schools and community based child care such as child care centers (centers) and Family Child Care (FCC) programs. Some Massachusetts public school systems offer enrollment beginning at 3 years old. However, with limited hours and just 180 days in the Massachusetts school-year calendar, many families still require additional care to work full time jobs.

“There is a difference between what we know and what we do – MA state rhetoric supports the critical importance of early childhood education, but in practice will tell programs to disenroll families if they cannot afford their [already low] copays, will tell programs to ‘pay whatever you want’ to teachers but reimburse below the true cost of care...”\*

Moreover, the capacity and enrollment of public schools for young children remains quite limited. According to NIEER <sup>6</sup> just 22% of Massachusetts 3 year-olds and 34% of 4 year-olds have access to public school enrollment. Consequently most families rely on community based child care, but many of those programs were lost at the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic and the MA sector has recovered slowly <sup>7</sup>.



## SCHOOL READINESS



There is a gap in our broad understanding of the birth-3rd grade continuum in Massachusetts. It is a crucial time for children to develop their cognitive, social, physical, and emotional development to prepare them for school readiness <sup>8</sup>. Currently, the first standardized assessment given is the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) test, administered in 3rd grade.

Although Massachusetts consistently scores highly among all states on pupil assessments, these numbers veil persistent equity gaps across the state. Looking at 2019 scores, the latest pre-COVID, we see that statewide 56% of students passed a 3rd grade reading assessment, but a breakdown reveals an equity gap between Black students (38%), Hispanic or LatinX students (38%) and White students (63%) <sup>9</sup>.

2021 test results from MCAS suggest that the state continues to have large achievement gaps based on race, class, and language <sup>10</sup>.



“Everybody has a different concept in their own minds of quality care: all of these concepts they make at the state and then bring down to us without our input – It takes away from quality. Many providers drop from these programs because they’re not taking into consideration what provider’s think and their philosophy of quality care.”\*



# RECOMMENDATIONS



Here are five ways we envision the future:

To address costs and strengthen access, MA should

## 1. Build a universal child care system, honoring mixed-delivery program settings

A universal child care system creates a clear pathway for funding the true cost of high quality education and care for all children, irrespective of racial or class distinctions<sup>11</sup>.

To strengthen capacity and enrollment, MA should

## 2. Investigate and eliminate child care deserts



## 3. Expand the role and capacity of FCC across the state

The equity gap in accessing child care programs is well documented<sup>12</sup>. To truly address the expanding child care deserts across MA we must understand local policy drivers of inequality and real parent demand for care. Further, we must understand this nuance for infants and toddlers as a distinct group. FCC may be an ideal solution for addressing capacity issues for MA's youngest learners.

To strengthen school readiness for all children, MA should

## 4. Invest in the ECE teaching workforce



## 5. Align ECE with public education

A birth through 3rd grade alignment is a needed measure to ensure that the benefits gained through a high-quality early childhood education experience are brought forward into the K-12 school system<sup>13</sup>. To fully implement such alignment, we must develop and enhance support systems for ECE teachers who will be doing this work.

# CONCLUSION

We recognize that these five steps cannot happen overnight, but we can begin to imagine them and build a transition plan for their implementation.

In doing so, we take action towards creating equity and opportunity for all children so that their early childhood experiences are no longer distinguishable by race, home language, or social class.



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## ENDNOTES

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## ABOUT CAYL

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The CAYL Institute, or Community Advocates for Young Learners, is a non-profit organization with the vision of a nation where the right to high-quality early care and education is embedded in public policy, professional practice, and family engagement.