Open doors: Supporting children and families' access to early care and education

Early childhood is an amazing period of physical and mental growth. Research shows[1] that supporting children in the first 8 years of life can set them on a path for better life outcomes in education, health, and economic mobility. Early care and education (ECE) programs can play a big role in that support: children who attend high-quality ECE programs are less likely to repeat grades, need special education, or have future behavior problems.[2]

However, parents encounter multiple barriers accessing the kinds of ECE they most want and need. In many communities, there are not enough high-quality programs to meet the demand of all children and families interested in participating. In addition to overall scarcity, many families face barriers to finding high-quality ECE close to their homes or work—it is often logistically difficult or even impossible to enroll while meeting their other work and family obligations. This challenge becomes even greater for low-income families who rely on child care assistance to defray the costs of their ECE program.

In recent years the federal government and states have taken steps to minimize barriers and improve access to high quality ECE. Through policies that promote increased quality of child care, increased professional development opportunities for child care providers, and improved communications with families concerning the availability of care, states are aiming to make child care more accessible for vulnerable children and families.

In addition to policy efforts, states are also adopting strategies **to use their ECE data** to better understand the needs of families and the availability of services in communities. Below, we share strategies and recommendations for states and communities to use data to open even more doors to children and families.

State data strategies to measure and increase access

Risk and reach reports: Several states have conducted research to map the potential risks to healthy development, both economic and health

What does "access to high quality early care and education" mean?[a]

Access is a robust concept that means more than simply providing child care that is available and affordable. Over the years, the ECE community has expanded the definition of access to include other important components, such as:

1. the process of finding and choosing an ECE program is reasonable and not overwhelming for parents—in other words, there are programs nearby that have vacancies and parents are able to access information on those programs;

2. parents can afford care, through parent contribution and when necessary subsidies, so that the total cost of providing care is covered;

3. the program supports the child's healthy development and meets his or her unique needs; and

4. families also have their needs met, with care that fits their language and cultural needs, and works with their schedules and transportation limitations.

[a] Friese, S., Lin, V., Forry, N. & Tout, K. (2017). *Defining and Measuring Access to High Quality Early Care and Education: A Guidebook for Policymakers and Researchers.* OPRE Report #2017-08. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

related, with programs and services available to support early development. For example, Washington, DC's Risk and Reach Assessment[2] uses data from each of the city's communities, categorizing them as low-, moderate-, or high-risk. They then map the number of available child care centers, Head Start/Early Head Start sites, and pre-K programs to identify gaps in high-quality ECE program availability in DC communities with the highest risk.

Mapping: A few places have utilized data on early care and education programs to build interactive maps to help improve access in their states or communities. For example, the Illinois Early Childhood Asset Map (IECAM)[3] allows users to generate maps that display the demographics, risk factors, and location of early care and education programs at a community level. Philadelphia has as similar tool, the Childcare Map,[4] to support providers, investors, and policymakers, and help parents understand what resources are available across the city.

Leveraging integrated data: States that link together data from multiple services and supports for young children and their families are able to paint a clearer picture of the needs and service gaps in their communities. North Carolina's Early Childhood Integrated Data System (ECIDS)[5] provides standardized reports and customizable reports for users to learn about access at the state and county level. The state recently released reports[6] using ECIDS data that describes the total number of children enrolled in each program and an unduplicated count of children across all programs. Minnesota's Early Childhood Longitudinal Data System (ECLDS)[7] is an interactive tool allowing users to pull data from the Departments of Education, Human Services, and Health to support increased collaboration and to improve access to services across programs.

Recommendations

- **Use data to show what access to early care and education is, and tell the story of how it can support families in your state and community.** Policymakers need to know that access is more than simply the number of slots available at child care centers. Using data specific to your community can help policymakers understand the barriers that families face in your state.

- **Identify the available data in your state.** Has your state used any of the state strategies above? If so, what do those data say about young children and their families in your state? And what knowledge gaps still exist?

- **Develop strategies to improve your data, such as an integrated data system.[8]** The more we know about who is receiving services and where there are service gaps, the better policymakers and state decision-makers can support full access to high-quality early care and education to all children.

Endnotes

1. Alliance for Early Success and Child Trends. (2015). *Birth through Eight State Policy Framework: Research at a Glance.*

2. Moodie, S., Rothenberg, L., & Goldhagen, S., & Halle, T. (2012). *District of Columbia Early Childhood Risk and Reach Assessment.* Prepared for Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE), Division of Early Learning, Washington, DC.

3. Early Childhood and Parenting Collaborative at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, College of Education. (2017). *Illinois Early Childhood Asset Map.* Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) and the Illinois Department of Health and Human Services (IDHS).

4. Early Childhood and Parenting Collaborative at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, College of Education. (2017). *Illinois Early Childhood Asset Map.* Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) and the Illinois Department of Health and Human Services (IDHS).

5. *North Carolina Early Childhood Integrated Data System (NC ECIDS)* (2016). The State of North Carolina. https://www.ecids.nc.gov.

6. How many children used NC early childhood services during recent fiscal years? (2014-2015). *North Carolina Early Childhood*

7. *Minnesota Early Childhood Longitudinal Data System.* (2017). Funded by the Minnesota Department of Education using federal funding, CFDA 84.412A- Federal Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge Grant. *Integrated Data System (NC ECIDS).* The State of North Carolina. https://www.ecids.nc.gov.

8. The Early Childhood Data Collaborative. http://www.ecedata.org