

Embedding Equity in Systems of Early Childhood Care and Education

Brief | December 2022



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States and territories have an important opportunity to operationalize equity through their early childhood care and education (ECCE) systems. Many have begun to move beyond reflection to taking actionable steps to ensure their programs do not create opportunities for some and limit opportunities for others.

The Preschool Development Grants Birth through Five (PDG B-5) initiative supports states and territories in strengthening their comprehensive ECCE systems to better support children and families, with a focus on underserved populations such as families with English as a second language, families from racial or ethnic minority groups, families with children with disabilities, and families in rural areas. States and territories seeking to support vulnerable families and embrace equity should explore their current ECCE systems and work for change by supporting diverse ideas, sharing leadership with communities and families, shifting resources, and adopting new strategies.

In this brief, we provide examples of how states and territories are embedding equity in four facets of ECCE systems building:

- Building equity into the state infrastructure
- Equitable service delivery
- Meaningful engagement of diverse communities and families
- Use of data for equity

“Equal opportunity is the bedrock of American democracy, and our diversity is one of our country’s greatest strengths. But for too many, the American Dream remains out of reach. Entrenched disparities in our laws and public policies, and in our public and private institutions, have often denied that equal opportunity to individuals and communities. Our country faces converging economic, health, and climate crises that have exposed and exacerbated inequities, while a historic movement for justice has highlighted the unbearable human costs of systemic racism. Our Nation deserves an ambitious whole-of-government equity agenda that matches the scale of the opportunities and challenges that we face.”

(Exec. Order No. 13,985, 2021)

Key Terms

Equity—Equity means the consistent and systematic fair, just, and impartial treatment of all individuals, including individuals who belong to underserved communities that have been denied such treatment, such as Black, Latino, and Indigenous and Native American persons, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders and other persons of color; members of religious minorities; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) persons; persons with disabilities; persons who live in rural areas; and persons otherwise adversely affected by persistent poverty or inequality (Exec. Order No. 13985, 2021).

Systematic equity. Systematic equity is a complex combination of interrelated elements consciously designed to create and sustain social justice. It is a robust system and dynamic process that reinforces and replicates equity in diverse ideas, and power through shared leadership, resources, strategies, conditions, habits, and outcomes (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014).

Building Equity Into the State Infrastructure

Developing the infrastructure needed to support high-quality ECCE programs in all areas of a state or territory is essential to state systems building. Examples of components of the state infrastructure include governance structures, funding levels and strategies, policies, communication, monitoring procedures, and support for professional development. Any of these components can be mechanisms to improve or work against equitable service delivery and outcomes. The state infrastructure also needs to support state leaders in understanding how to build equity throughout the state system. Through PDG B-5, states and territories have been able to explore new ways to build an infrastructure that aligns with their equity goals.

State Examples

Minnesota's PDG B-5 [Strategic Plan](#) 2020–22 lays out a vision for the state's ECCE system: "By focusing on and facing racial, geographic, and economic inequities, all children in Minnesota will thrive within their families and community." Aligned with that vision and its [Preschool Development Grant Guiding Principles](#), the state's mission focuses on creating an equitable system through establishing geographic and racial equity, dismantling structural racism, and recognizing the intersectionality of identity.

To build its implementation infrastructure for equity, Minnesota included equity efforts both in the specific activities of the PDG B-5 grant and in overall decision-making. For example, Minnesota conducted an equity audit of grant communications as a part of its state evaluation. This work informed the state's development of a cross-agency early childhood communications plan centered on racial equity.

Minnesota also is working to build an a more equitable infrastructure by including diverse voices in grant policy and other types of decision-making. Activities have included:

- Developing contract/grant application scoring rubrics that prioritize individuals with lived experience and organizations with staff that are reflective of the communities they serve.
- Hiring application reviewers from communities most impacted by inequity and compensating them for their time and expertise.
- Listening to elders when concerns are shared about implementing dominant culture processes in Black, Indigenous, People of Color communities.
- Including community members on governance committees.

Washington’s PDG B-5 vision is that the state is “a place where each child starts life with a solid foundation for success based on strong families and culturally relevant early learning practices, services, and supports that lead to racial equity and the well-being of all children and families.” Central to this vision is an intentional focus on designing early learning systems that will eliminate systemic racism and forms of oppression that have been part of the American legacy. One way the state is moving to achieve this vision is through state agency processes that support equity. For example:

- To help Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families staff and partners embed equity in all planning and implementation efforts, the National Equity Project provided equity leadership trainings. These trainings helped move the state closer to ensuring that all aspects of its work are rooted in racial equity and that programs are co-created with the families who access them.
- To guide their work, the state’s PDG B-5 team adopted a set of foundational practices to support engagement and high-quality, ongoing evaluation. These practices include relationship building, engaging in continuous quality improvement (CQI), communicating programmatic value, and situating programs in systems change. As part of their CQI efforts, PDG B-5 evaluators continue to develop and implement an equity-first evaluation approach to evaluate the ECCE system in collaboration with communities served and staff supported through the PDG B-5 initiative.

Equitable Service Delivery

A state or territory’s ECCE vision, mission, goals, and objectives provide the foundation for systems building, but the impact is seen in how the activities are implemented and services are provided at the community level. Achieving equitable service delivery requires evaluating access and responsiveness of current services to marginalized families to identify gaps in services. Equitable delivery includes effective outreach to underserved communities and prioritizing funding for communities with fewer resources. Information for families, providers, and other community members needs to be available in multiple languages and accessible through various avenues—for example, face-to-face meetings, email, print, social media, and across all browsers and devices. Written materials should be reviewed to

ensure they are culturally relevant and respectful of all populations. Through PDG B-5, states and territories took steps toward providing services more equitably.

State Examples

The **Oregon [Early Childhood Equity Fund](#)** was created in 2019 and implemented in 2020. It provides up to \$10 million annually in grants (program and planning grants) to support a broad range of culturally specific kindergarten transition and parent-child support programs. Five planning grants and 30 program grants were awarded in 2020. Examples of funded activities include parenting education programs on child development and enhancing cultural parenting practices, weekly parent-child engagement and educational activities, and kindergarten transition home visiting programs conducted in Spanish.

Oregon also developed a training on equity for early educators in state-funded programs, which the educators could complete as part of their contractually required equity training (at least 4 hours every 2 years). The training includes a reflection handout to guide educators' learning, prompting them to think about how the lessons apply to or resonate with their own experiences, the experiences and cultural backgrounds of the families in their programs and communities, and their understanding of the state's early learning system. Providers and partners who receive funding from the state through an Early Learning Division contract or agreement are also required to complete an equity training.

PDG B-5 funding in **Minnesota** has supported the expansion of culturally responsive mental health consultation beyond licensed child care providers. Consultation is now offered to family, friend, and neighbor child care groups, trauma- and healing-responsive learning communities (with a special focus on early education and child welfare providers), and the Community Resource Hubs and their site partners. PDG B-5 funds have also supported the process of identifying and training clinicians who are able to provide consultation to culturally specific groups. The state added a consultant who speaks Somali and another who speaks Spanish. Consultation participants reported that they appreciate receiving support from someone who understands cultural nuances and that they are able to discuss how personal stressors impact their feelings and their child's functioning.

Additionally, Minnesota purchased a membership with **[WIDA Early Years](#)** to provide all early educators in the state with access to free courses on how to better work with young multilingual learners and their families. In addition, a cohort of 15 trainers/support specialists have been recruited across the state to provide additional support and implementation services to interested early childhood programs. The PDG B-5 workforce specialist has convened a WIDA Early Years State Leadership Collaboration team to help inform and guide this work. The team consists of early childhood educators; school district and Head Start staff; special education specialists; community experts in multilingual learners, including tribal and Hmong language revitalization advocates; and state agency representatives.

Meaningful Engagement of Diverse Communities and Families

Family and community engagement, with a focus on underserved populations, is at the core of advancing equity. Listening to the people who experience system challenges provides a deep understanding of the barriers, community needs, and solutions that work for communities and their families. Levels of engagement and participation exist along a continuum beginning with informing, consulting, and involving partners and progressing to collaborating with partners (Washington State Department of Health, n.d.). Community and family engagement—where communities initiate and lead the efforts—opens the door for more diverse voices for policy development and ultimately more effective programs.

Deep equity means working toward outcomes in ways that model dignity, justice, and love without re-creating harm in our structures, strategies, and working relationships. (Petty & Dean, 2017)

Engagement with communities and families can advance equity through four ways:

- Creating stronger connectedness, trust, and partnerships among the people impacted by inequities, including service providers
- Improving efforts to identify the equity issues in the ECCE system
- Enhancing the effectiveness of proposed strategies and solutions
- Promoting the long-term sustainability of strategies to maintain changes into the future

With the support of PDG B-5, states and territories are implementing processes like these to build comprehensive ECCE systems grounded in community values and long-term authentic relationships.

State Examples

As part of the PDG B-5 initiative, **North Carolina's** Smart Start community agencies use a **Family Engagement and Leadership Framework** to develop action plans to expand local family leadership. By using this framework, North Carolina hopes to create birth to five early childhood systems that are family-centered and equitable, serving children in the context of their families and communities. The framework was developed by the State Family Engagement and Leadership Coalition, a 74-member coalition that was launched in 2019 that includes providers and families. The framework includes a systems-level model of family leadership in which families share responsibility for making decisions, implementing actions, collecting and analyzing data, and participating in strategic planning in the comprehensive ECCE system. An annual Early Childhood Family Leadership Conference is provided for parents to gain information and skills to support their leadership in the ECCE system.

In 2022, the **Connecticut** PDG B-5 initiative supported and funded the governor's efforts to establish the **Office of Early Childhood Parent Cabinet**. The purpose of the Parent Cabinet is to give parents

and caregivers of children from birth to age 5 a greater voice in shaping programs, policies, and laws that impact children and families. The Office of Early Childhood is the state agency that oversees child care subsidy and licensing, home visiting, and early intervention. The Parent Cabinet is designed to ensure the state's work is "equitable at the core" because it will be informed by the voices of diverse parents. The Parent Cabinet includes 15 members, chosen through an extensive application process, with two members from each of the state's six regions plus three at-large members. PDG B-5 funding supported the creation of a rubric to ensure the selection process was fair and objective and to train advisory committee members in the interview process and scoring rubric. Cabinet members meet with community members regularly to gather information on community and family needs. The full Cabinet meets monthly with the Office of Early Childhood leaders to raise awareness of the concerns and needs of parents; improve programs, policies, and laws related to children and families; and share how to form lasting effective partnerships with families.

Use of Data for Equity

Data are a key ingredient for states and territories in moving to more equitable systems because data provide a guide to issues that need to be addressed and show whether solutions are effective. In addition to collecting data for their PDG B-5 needs assessments and strategic plans, states and territories need high-quality data for their Program Performance Evaluation Plans, a PDG B-5 grant requirement, to evaluate their work and support continuous quality improvement to their systems. Grantees need data on access to resources, experiences, and key outcomes to understand systemic differences across groups. Qualitative data can provide an understanding of the issues and solutions from communities and families with lived experiences.

States and territories should disaggregate data by group such as race/ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, and disability. If possible, they should also disaggregate data by subgroup to understand the differences and intersectionality within a group. Disaggregated data can help states and territories better understand gaps in opportunities, identify solutions, and measure their impact on targeted communities.

State Examples

Through its PDG B-5 initiative, **New Hampshire** updated its needs assessment to examine underserved populations in the state. Focus groups and a statewide family survey conducted as part of the [needs assessment](#) helped the state identify needs and challenges in obtaining services. A series of [maps](#) was developed to expand the concept of child care deserts to reflect demand in addition to supply. In addition, [online interactive maps](#) were developed that include layers for community-level characteristics such as child population, health care access, immigration status, households with English as a second language, poverty status, and race/ethnicity. These maps also informed the development of New Hampshire's [Early Childhood Regional System](#), applying the location and use of ECCE programs and services and access gaps to form coordinated early childhood regional partnerships responsive to families' needs.

In addition, New Hampshire's Council for Thriving Children supports efforts related to interoperability of data systems across state agencies, which will assist with monitoring equitable access to services. The PDG B-5 initiative is funding the integration of program data—such as child care scholarships or subsidies, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), and IDEA Part C—with other data sources to identify geographic areas of underserved communities and track child program eligibility and participation rates. The state will use this information to improve access to services and evaluate long-term outcomes from program participation.

A priority for **Michigan's** early childhood integrated data system was to [examine equity in access to and participation in the early childhood mixed delivery system](#). Interactive tools, a step-by-step training video, and consultation were made available to support Head Start grantees in exporting their data into the state data system. Combining multiple data sources has allowed Michigan to identify neighborhoods with relatively few or no public prekindergarten sites and the extent to which Black, Hispanic, and Native American children are concentrated in these neighborhoods. Additional studies used the data to track and measure equity in services and outcomes for the infant mortality prevention programs and policies and supports for families with young children with disabilities.

Also, with support from PDG B-5, Michigan launched a [Rural Child Care Innovation Program](#) to address the challenges of child care access, availability, and cost, which threaten the stability of the workforce as well as child well-being in rural communities. During their kickoff activities, the communities were provided with datasets to understand the needs of children, families, and providers in their areas. The communities also held child care appreciation events and town hall meetings, and created surveys to gather family, provider, and business input about the challenges. The information gathered is being used to create Community Solution Action Plans. Additionally, [county-level fact sheets](#) were created as part of the needs assessment to provide snapshots of wellness indicators for families with children birth through five. The indicators included population, eligibility, and participation in safety net programs, poverty level disaggregated by race, child protective services involvement trends, lead testing trends, community mental health usage, participation in IDEA Part C and Part B 619 programs, and licensed child care availability.

Washington's Office of Innovation, Alignment, and Accountability has supported the Department of Children, Youth, and Families [in using data to become an anti-racist organization](#) through data collection, data management and use, development and reporting of agency performance metrics, program evaluation, research, and supporting organizational reforms. Washington's PDG B-5 evaluation team has adapted [A Toolkit for Centering Racial Equity Throughout Data Integration](#) to intentionally include project contributors and recipients at every stage of the evaluation process. Evaluators created a data self-assessment tool to further explore problematic and positive practices with fellow agency researchers and evaluators. PDG B-5 evaluators continue to develop and implement an equity-first approach to evaluating the ECCE systems, which means carrying out the work in collaboration with communities served and staff supported through the PDG B-5 initiative. This

evaluation framework supports the application of implementation science principles to produce high-quality projects.

Conclusion

In this brief, we have described a few of the many ways states and territories can embed equity in a comprehensive ECCE system. The examples illustrate how Grantees have used their PDG B-5 funds to put their values into action. ECCE systems-building work provides opportunities to identify and address key issues such as inequitable access to high-quality services and programs across the state. Strengthening equity in access, experiences, and outcomes for young children provides the foundation for a better future. Through partnerships with families, communities, government, nonprofit organizations, advocates and philanthropists, the PDG B-5 Grantees are working to move closer to equity, inclusion, and opportunity for all.

Additional Resources

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Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank Tasha Owens-Green, Child Care Services Director, Tennessee Department of Human Services and the states who provided details of their equity work for their contributors to this brief.

Suggested APA Citation:

Robinson, S., vonBargen, N., & Hebbeler, K. (2022). *State Highlights: Embedding Equity in Systems of Early Childhood Care and Education*. SRI International.

For more information on this and other early childhood topics, please visit The Office of Child Care's Technical Assistance webpage at <https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/> and the Office of Head Start's Technical Assistance webpage at <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/about-us/article/training-technical-assistance-centers>.

This Center is funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Child Care. Contract Number: HHSP2332015000411



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