



EDUCARE POLICY FRAMEWORK

We live in a land of opportunity. Some children are born with limitless possibilities to receive a quality education, establish a promising career and chase their biggest dreams.

But many other children have an unfair disadvantage from the moment they take their first breath.

An opportunity gap emerges for children of color and children living in underserved communities or immigrant families, who often do not have access to the same high-quality education as their peers and the sufficient supports to achieve economic security. They face more obstacles to graduating high school, having a steady job and achieving their dreams.

At Educare, we believe every child and family deserves an equal opportunity to achieve their dreams, and it starts by leveling the playing field from the day we're born. With nearly two decades of pioneering work in early childhood programs and policies, we are at the forefront of a movement to close the opportunity gap.

Decades of research prove that high-quality early childhood education helps children from underserved communities develop the skills they need to succeed. Educare is dedicated to increasing the quality of early childhood education for young children in underresourced families across the country. We do this through our national network of 23 early learning schools in 15 states and the District of Columbia, field-building professional-development and research initiatives, and federal, state and local advocacy efforts.

Educare develops and tests innovative practices and shares that knowledge with early childhood providers across the country. Educare also brings together policymakers, business leaders and other champions to call for more-efficient use of existing resources and increased investments in early learning.

The Educare approach extends beyond the classroom to help children, families and communities thrive. We are dedicated to ensuring that all children and their families are provided with equal opportunity to achieve their dreams. Our country's future depends on it.



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Vision Statement

The Educare Learning Network will demonstrate that research-based early childhood education prevents the persistent opportunity gap for our nation's most at-risk young children. The Network's evidence, practice expertise and dynamic partnerships will help ensure that all children and families, especially those at greatest risk, will have access to effective early learning and that the first five years is an integral part of the nation's education system.

Our Voice in Advancing Policy and Funding Reforms

Educare has been implementing high-quality, evidence-based early learning services since 2000. Our leaders have experience operating programs that serve children and families from diverse racial, ethnic and cultural backgrounds in urban, suburban and rural communities.

Our schools are first and foremost center-based Early Head Start and Head Start programs, collectively serving more than 3,800 infants, toddlers, preschoolers and their families and driving professional development for more than 1,000 early childhood staff. Federal funds from Early Head Start and Head Start finance program operations, along with other public funding streams—including state child care, preschool and school-district dollars—to achieve Educare’s high-quality programming. Additional innovative features are funded by private philanthropic dollars.

Children from economically disadvantaged families, like those served by Educare, typically score well below the national average on standardized assessments because of the opportunity gap. With access to high-quality programming, the majority of students leaving Educare to enter kindergarten exhibit average or above average school readiness and social-emotional skills.

With our on-the-ground perspective and expertise, Educare knows what policies and systems are needed to deliver evidence-based early childhood practices on a national scale that will narrow the opportunity gap. We bring a unique voice and authority to speak to federal, state and local policymakers about:

- How policy plays out at the operational level
- The needs of young children and their families
- The results that early childhood programs can achieve
- How early education programs can challenge societal inequities and contribute to lasting economic and social returns

Over the years, the Educare Learning Network has utilized our unique lens to shape and enact policies through administrative rules and regulations, and legislation. The Network has worked with leading national partners and federal policymakers to address issues affecting the country’s most important early learning policies and programs, such as informing the Early Head Start and Head Start performance standards and how to approach future Head Start reauthorization, weighing in on the reauthorization of the Child Care and Development Fund and providing input on strengthening health and safety standards for all early learning programs.

Educare Policy Framework Purpose

The Educare Policy Framework guides our policy priorities, strategies, actions and partnerships across early learning and development, professional development, health and well-being, and family support and engagement. The framework also communicates the collective Network’s beliefs in what it takes to achieve equitable and effective early learning systems and how we advocate and take action to make this aim a reality in all levels of policy.

Whether you are an Educare school leader, staff member, parent or family member, partner or one of our supporters through advocacy, policy or program investment, we encourage you to use the framework as a resource to mobilize action, guide conversations and strengthen collaborations to deliver on our vision. It provides a road map to build on strengths and to address policy barriers and gaps within federal, state and local policies and systems.

Our Core Beliefs

The core beliefs serve as critical guideposts to inform Educare’s policy decisions. They also help us assess the extent to which policies and systems support increased access to equitable and effective early learning programs for young children and families.

Comprehensive, high-quality programming

(whole child, family centered, culturally responsive, outcomes focused)

Policies and practices must target the organizational conditions within programs, beyond the classroom, to continually improve the quality of practices that produce meaningful child outcomes. Additionally, effective early childhood education programs require policies and adequate resources, including funding and program improvement supports, to address equity and the education, development and support needs of children and their families.

Continuity of care from birth to age five

(with an emphasis on birth to age three)

To ensure all children have opportunities for a healthy start, early childhood education programs must serve greater numbers of eligible infants and toddlers and keep them enrolled through age five. Continuity of care requires policies designed to lengthen the time children can continuously participate in a program.

Consistency and stability for children and their families facilitates learning and healthy social-emotional development in a relationship-based context.



Evidence-based and innovative practices

Structural policies such as group size and ratio, curriculum and teacher qualifications and compensation are necessary supports for high-quality teacher-child interactions. In addition, effective teaching depends on the strength of organizational and instructional leadership supports. Teachers need these supports to ensure cultural competency in teaching and implement a focused teaching cycle that uses standards, data and goals.

Continuous improvement and accountability for results

Policies should support leaders, teachers and family and community partnerships staff to use data on child progress, outcomes, classroom quality and parenting aspects to inform practice, professional learning and program-wide improvement plans.

ONLY 7% of eligible infants and toddlers have access to Early Head Start

ONLY 31% of eligible children ages 3-5 have access to Head Start

Our Practices

Creating the high-quality early learning experiences that all children deserve requires leaders and staff to focus intentionally on building a program that supports effective practices. Educare has identified the following practices and program components that are essential to supporting the learning of children, families and staff. Attending to organizational conditions enhances the day-to-day work of teachers and staff in ways that lead to better student outcomes. Improving the quality of early learning programs across the country will require funding and policies that support these components.

- Strong leaders to create the organizational conditions that support effective teaching and strengths-based family engagement practices. Leaders nurture a culture of relationship-building and continuous quality improvement.
- High-quality teaching practices that promote research-based instruction that meets children's individual needs and helps them develop the language, social-emotional, early math and other skills they need to succeed.
- Intensive family engagement that promotes strong parent-child and parent-staff relationships. We also nurture peer connections among parents and equip parents with skills to be advocates for their children's long-term success.

- Ongoing, on-the-job professional learning that ensures staff are continuing to develop and enhance their skills.
- Continual data collection and analysis to assess children's progress, inform classroom instruction and guide goal setting for program improvements.
- Links to various community-based services that support access to health, mental health, housing, education, employment and other resources that support the well-being of children, families and staff.

What We Need

To close the opportunity gap for children who have traditionally been underserved, our country needs to invest in the following foundational elements that support the implementation and continuous improvement of high-quality early childhood programs.

- **Robust Early Childhood Investments:** Public funding for early care and education reaches barely half of young children in low-income families at age 4, and the percentage is less for children under age 3. Only 5% of eligible infants and toddlers are served by Early Head Start, and only about 16% of all infants and toddlers have access to federal child care assistance. In addition to the large numbers of children who are unserved, many others are served in low-quality programs. To increase access to high-quality early learning programs and to strengthen the quality of existing programs and systems of early learning, additional and more reliable public funding is essential to ensure continuous improvement and a high level of program effectiveness.
- **Strong Policies:** Federal, state and local policies enacted through legislative, regulatory and budgetary actions, as well as systems and resources that ensure policies are implemented fully, effectively and equitably, are critical to increase early childhood program access and quality. Such policies should consider the comprehensive needs of families and include strong policies that help families achieve economic security and support children's healthy development, well-being and learning.
- **Coordinated Systems:** Strengthening and expanding systems is an ongoing process of developing the policies, structures, behaviors and connections that make all the components needed to support young children and families operate as a whole. Comprehensive early childhood systems should address historical inequities faced by children of color, children in immigrant families and children from underresourced communities. They also require coordination and collaboration across the early learning, family engagement, health and leadership sectors and across the administration and implementation of the multiple early childhood funding streams.



- **Professional Learning Supports:** Early childhood programs need to attract and retain a competent, stable workforce of effective, racially and ethnically diverse and adequately compensated early childhood professionals. Practitioners need professional learning supports in higher education and during ongoing practice so they can acquire and apply new knowledge, skills and dispositions to continuously improve practice.
- **Compensation:** In most states, median preschool teacher earnings across various early childhood settings are significantly lower compared to the median earnings of elementary school teachers. How we value and support early childhood professionals—not only through access to higher education and professional learning supports but also compensation—has direct implications for their ability to do their job well and for programs' ability to attract, hire and retain highly skilled staff.

How We Work

Educare is uniquely positioned to take action and advocate for comprehensive early childhood systems that address the opportunity gap. We do this through the following strategies:

Raise Awareness, Conduct Outreach and Cultivate Champions

- Enhance the advocacy capacity of Educare staff and partners, including researchers, board members, K-12 partners and parents
- Engage and empower families with young children in communities
- Educate and mobilize external stakeholders, including diverse community leaders who understand the strengths, needs and challenges of the children and families in their area; business and civic leaders; philanthropists; and local early childhood providers
- Encourage public-private partnerships and approaches such as advisory councils, early learning partnerships, hubs or collaboratives that bring together the public sector (e.g., federal, state, local government entities) with the private sector (e.g., service providers, philanthropists) to improve and expand high-quality early learning
- Generate and share knowledge with the early childhood education field

Inform Policy and Funding Priorities and Proposals

- Proactively shape legislative and administrative policy proposals informed by Educare schools' practice, our research findings and the experiences of our families

- Collaborate with advocates and other partners to inform and advance policy priorities

Engage in Direct Policy and Funding-Advocacy Activities

- Strategically engage in legislative, administrative and communications advocacy
- Engage in relationship building with early childhood administrations at the federal, state and local levels
- Conduct Educare school tours with policymakers and key partners

Where We Focus

Since our inception, Educare has worked to advance policies toward the goal of ensuring that children and families, especially those most underserved, have access to high-quality early care and education. Our policy priorities and recommendations center on areas where we have authentic expertise, a distinct perspective and the potential to significantly impact the field.

Our work focuses on critical policies and investments that hold promise for preventing the opportunity gap for young children and their families. This includes policies that:

- Ensure access to high-quality early learning programs, including Head Start, child care, preschool and special education
- Support implementation of high-quality teaching and learning practices
- Build strong professional learning systems and our workforce
- Engage and support families
- Enhance the coordination of early learning programs and systems



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