

Inside Philanthropy



The State of
American Philanthropy

Giving for Early
Childhood

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ABOUT INSIDE PHILANTHROPY

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Through our GrantFinder resource, we also profile and track thousands of funders working across key issue areas and geographic regions. Inside Philanthropy is supported by reader subscriptions and advertising. We do not receive funding from any other source. Learn more at insidephilanthropy.com

ABOUT THE STATE OF AMERICAN PHILANTHROPY

The State of American Philanthropy is a series of background papers on important topics and trends in U.S. philanthropy. The papers draw on past research and reporting by IP writers, as well as new interviews, grantmaking data, and other sources. Learn more at insidephilanthropy.com/state-of-american-philanthropy.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Until recently, philanthropy has neglected early childhood education (ECE) in favor of higher-profile funding areas, like K-12 education and healthcare. But that has begun to change in recent years as it has become increasingly clear that investments in the earliest years can yield outsized and life-long benefits in many areas of concern to philanthropy. Advances in brain science have helped bring about that shift. We now know that the brains of infants and young children grow at an astounding rate and that early experiences and environments can have a tremendous impact on development.

With growing awareness of research on early childhood development, more funders – including well-established legacy giants and younger philanthropies fueled by tech fortunes – are including early childhood in their funding priorities. But ECE remains underfunded, given the vast number of families without quality care and the daunting impediments to creating a coherent system from the disarray.

The U.S. early care system isn't a system at all, but a disconnected agglomeration of day care facilities, preschools and home-based family care centers with inconsistent requirements and insufficient funding. Many parts of the country are now considered child care “deserts” because there aren't enough facilities to meet the need. Many families can't afford the rising cost of care, and many child care workers can't live on the low wages most early care facilities can afford to pay.

As consensus builds that the dearth of early education options for families is costing the nation dearly, funders are deploying a broad variety of strategies to improve programs and systems. We will explore this and other issues in this brief, including:

Who's Giving

- Private foundations provide the most charitable dollars for ECE, and for the most recent years for which data is available, those included household names like the Bill & Melinda Gates and W.K. Kellogg Foundations, as well as funders with an exclusive ECE focus, like the Buffett Early Childhood Fund and the Pritzker Children's Initiative.
- Tracking of donations by categories is challenging, but ECE funding from all categories of private funders totaled at least \$4.6 billion.
- Community foundations and corporations give far less than private foundations, but still provide substantial, usually targeted support.

Who's Getting

- Nonprofits that receive funding for Early Childhood work include those that provide direct services, conduct research, support educator training and improved compensation, and advocate for reform on the state and national levels; some focusing on just one of those areas, but others leading on several fronts.

- Start Early, the largest recipient of ECE funds according to the most recent Candid data, employs a range of strategies to improve early care, including direct care, research, educator training and advocacy.
- Looking past some of the largest recipients of funding, most ECE grantees (and funders) focus on particular regions, states or communities.

The Big Issues and Funding Trends

- Improving access, quality, and affordability are goals that virtually all ECE funders share, but pursue with wide-ranging strategies.
- How to develop and support a skilled and fairly-compensated ECE workforce is another big issue for ECE funders.
- Support for the "whole child," including providing healthcare and family support before birth and beyond, as well as quality early care, is a focus for many ECE funders.
- Increasing reliance on funder collaborations is happening with many philanthropic concerns, but especially in early childhood, which enables funders to pool resources and share information and best practices.

Equity in the Sector

- For many funders, equity analysis is integral to their ECE giving strategies since low-income children and children of color are less likely to have access to quality early care, and funders have long recognized the need to target funding to communities with the most need.
- Many ECE funders focus on the low-wage workforce of early care educators, many of whom are women of color, so funders are working to improve both training and compensation.
- There is an ongoing need for more funding for early care for children with special needs, dual-language learners, foster children, unhoused children, and children whose parents or caregivers are incarcerated.

Fundraising Now

- The pandemic has increased public and funder awareness of the importance of early care, and ECE nonprofits IP interviewed said there is increased funding and more diverse funding streams.
- Some ECE nonprofits are seeking funding for apprenticeship and mentorship programs to address the lack of early educators.
- While some are hopeful President Joe Biden's plans for a major influx of federal funding for ECE systems will eventually advance through Congress in some form, funding for ECE providers today is coming primarily from a mix of federal government (often via block grants through state intermediaries) and from private foundations and individual donors, with volunteers, staff, and board members alike still hustling to cover the gaps left by public dollars.

It's encouraging that funders are directing more resources toward early childhood education, but there is a lot more work to do. The Biden administration had ambitious proposals to establish universal pre-K

nationwide, but legislation that could provide both massive funding and huge advances toward a more coherent child care system is currently stalled in Congress.

Whatever happens on the federal level, there will be a critical role for philanthropy going forward. If the Biden administration's child care plan becomes law, philanthropy can support implementation of what promises to be sweeping and complicated changes. If the administration's child care dreams end up on the cutting room floor, philanthropy will be left to recommit and enhance its support for ECE, including advocacy efforts to continue the push for reform.

“Many of us have been using the phrase ‘moment in time,’” said Jessie Rasmussen, president of the Buffett Early Childhood Fund. “This is a moment in time and we can’t blow it. We don’t want to miss this opportunity to create the kind of lasting, durable early interventions that are going to make such a difference in the lives of so many children and so many communities.”

Introduction

Philanthropy has a long history of showering resources on K-12 education, but has paid less attention to the care and education of children in the years before they start school. That has begun to change over the last several decades, and today, philanthropists, along with government and corporate leaders, are joining experts and advocates who have been working for years (and in some cases, decades) to improve our system of early childhood education (ECE).

The early education system in the U.S. isn't a system at all, but a random collection of government-run facilities, day care centers, preschools and small family child care operations. For many families, child care costs are prohibitive, while the facilities themselves run on paper-thin profit margins and few can afford to offer their teachers sustainable wages.

The U.S. has not made early childhood education a funding priority; a [Learning Policy Institute](#) report points out that "... funding for ECE represents a remarkably small portion of public spending: less than 0.2% of gross domestic product compared to an average of 0.7% in other economically developed countries. As a result, many children do not get any formal early learning opportunities before age five, creating a structural disadvantage from the start that even the best K-12 public schools will struggle to address."

The early childhood sector was already struggling before 2020 and the pandemic only made things worse. ECE experts say that minor fixes around the edges aren't enough; the system needs a complete overhaul. "The fact is that the American child care system is deeply broken," Elliot Haspel, the author

of "[Crawling Behind: America's Childcare Crisis and How to Fix It](#)," and program officer for the Robins Foundation [told IP](#). "It doesn't just need incremental patches, it needs wholesale reinvention."

Experts like Haspel point out that among other flaws, the current approach is failing to keep up with the latest brain science, which confirms that the brains of even the tiniest babies are powerful learning machines that can be positively or negatively affected by early experiences. Quality early education experiences nurture young brains and help children develop skills that prepare them for kindergarten and beyond. If we were to design an effectively holistic education system today, we would start much earlier than age five, said [Scott Moore](#), executive director of Kidango, a Bay Area-based early education program. "If you don't start until five, you are missing so much."

But far too many children don't have access to quality early education. According to the [National Institute for Early Education Research](#), "less than 5 million of the nation's roughly 8 million three- and four-year-olds attend any preschool, most of their programs are not high-quality, and 45% are part-day. The situation is worse for three- and four-year-olds in poverty, as more than half do not attend any program, even though Head Start and other targeted programs have been around for more than 50 years."

Most kids enter kindergarten at age five, but sometimes age four. The growing movement for expanding public education downward to pre-K usually only serves ages three and older, so expanding the public education system to children from birth to two doesn't seem to be on the table. In the early years of public education, school started at

first grade (six years old), and in [the 1950s](#), only half of all five-year-olds were enrolled in kindergarten, which gradually became a fairly universal part of public school systems. And now, some districts – notably the nation’s largest, New York City – are instituting universal pre-K, which attempts to give low-income families the same educational programming most middle-class and wealthy parents have been paying to provide their kids in preschool programs for decades.

Many people assume that Head Start, which was established in 1965 as part of President Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty, makes quality early education available to all disadvantaged children. That was the program’s intention, but as the [National Institute for Early Education Research](#) outlines in its report, “[The State of Preschool 2020](#),” the government has inadequately funded Head Start, and many children who qualify don’t have access.

While there is some government funding, there are many yawning holes in our early care apparatus, and federal and state-funded programs cover a shockingly small portion of the children who qualify. The federal funding program intended to help families pay for child care, Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG), is badly underfunded: Only 1 in 6 eligible children receives a subsidy, according to the [Center for American Progress](#).

Furthermore, the high cost of infant and toddler care is rarely covered by the subsidy payments that providers receive, potentially discouraging them from accepting subsidy-eligible infants and toddlers. Philanthropic donations fill in some of the gaps in patchwork public funding for ECE; they also play a critical role by funding research, seeding and

growing new ideas, supporting innovative ECE programs, helping to build a diverse and skilled early education pipeline, and advocating for overall system reform.

“I think the role of philanthropy is to spark new ideas, to do things that wouldn’t get done otherwise,” said Helene Stebbins, executive director of the [Alliance for Early Success](#). “You need someone to say it’s possible and to give people sustained support over time – and I can’t say that enough – sustained support over time. To not change the goal posts or switch the funding. The advocacy community will figure out how we bake it into our public funding streams and our public institutions so that once we’ve developed it, we can sustain it. Philanthropy’s role is not to sustain it forever, but they have a very important role to play.”

The COVID-19 pandemic simultaneously boosted awareness of the critical role ECE plays – and pushed it to the brink. Many facilities shut down in 2020, creating [child care deserts](#) around the country. Facilities that are now open face higher costs because of COVID safety requirements and other related costs, as well as labor shortages.

There is evidence of growing public support for increased investments in early learning, and many U.S. philanthropies are stepping up, as well. The sector has increased its support for early education in recent years, according to Grantmakers for Education. In its 2018–2019 “[Trends in Education Philanthropy Benchmarking](#)” report, GFE identified early education as an area of greatest increase for philanthropic funding (along with postsecondary education and preparation for career and workforce). According to the report, “Overall, one-third of education funders responding to the

2018 survey funded efforts to provide access to early learning and/or to ensure the quality of these programs. Well over half of these funders (58%) also anticipate increasing their funding for this priority over the next two years—the highest percentage reported among all of the education priorities tracked in the latest survey.”

Despite growing funder support, ECE continues to receive only a small proportion of philanthropic dollars, as the GFE authors noted: “Early learning has benefited from an increased focus by education funders on the learning stages before and after K-12 education, although it accounts for a small share of grant dollars.”

This brief explores the many philanthropic approaches to ECE. Some funders support research on the brain and child development, others focus on direct services including prenatal and healthcare; still others are advocating for increased access. Some funders are focused on increasing preparation and compensation for ECE educators, and others support advocacy for comprehensive systems change to boost access and affordability for all families.

A number of ECE advocates and funders believe it will take a synergy of all these strategies to successfully overhaul the system. They are pushing for a comprehensive approach to early care that starts even before birth, with prenatal care, continues through infancy with home visits, nutrition and healthcare, and provides quality care all along the way. The experts we talked to for this brief – including advocates, researchers and funders large and small – were cautiously hopeful that the early child care issue has finally reached a critical mass, and that forces may be aligning for fundamental change.

The Lay of the Land

Who's Giving

Over the last several decades, more funders have broadened their focus to include early care and education, especially high-profile private foundations. Still, support for the education of young children remains glaringly small compared to funding for K-12. ECE funding from all categories of funding, including private foundations, corporations, community foundations and collaborative funds documented by Candid between 2014 and 2018 (the most recent data available for this brief) totaled at least \$4.6 billion. Analysis by the [Early Childhood Education Funding Collaborative](#) incorporates data from 2006 to 2016. Its [ECE Funding Landscape](#) project, a tool developed in partnership with Heising-Simons Foundation based on Candid data, found that “since 2006 private foundations in the U.S. have made grants of more than \$6 billion toward improving early childhood care and education...”

The funders who give the most for early childhood education include some of the country's largest and most well-known philanthropies, including the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, as well as legacy funders like W.K. Kellogg Foundation. Candid captures as much private giving data as it can, and its tracking indicates that the 10 private funders giving the most to early education provided close to \$900 million from 2014 to 2018.

Early childhood has long been a major focus for the J.B. and M.K. Pritzker Family Foundation, which, through its Pritzker Children's Initiative, has made early learning a priority for over two decades. The Einhorn Collaborative (formerly the Einhorn Family Charitable Trust) emphasizes the

importance of emotional connection for healthy child development.

ECE is an area that receives considerable support from funders that prioritize local and/or regional giving. The Lilly Endowment, for example, gives its substantial support for ECE only to organizations in Indiana, and the North Carolina Partnership for Children supports ECE in that state. The Charles Stewart Mott Foundation supports nonprofits in Flint, Michigan. Local giving overall for ECE is significant, according to Candid data, totalling over \$820 million between 2014 and 2018.

10 Early Childhood Funders to Know¹

Annie E. Casey Foundation

Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

Buffett Early Childhood Fund

Chan-Zuckerberg Initiative

David and Lucile Packard Foundation

Early Childhood Funders Collaborative

Foundation for Child Development

Heising-Simons Foundation

Pritzker Children's Initiative

W.K. Kellogg Foundation

Source: Candid

Community foundations, which distribute almost all of their funds locally, often include ECE in their giving portfolios—from the Boston Foundation on the East Coast to the Silicon Valley Community Foundation on the West Coast, and the Chicago Community Trust in between.

Even though only a tiny number of U.S. employers provide child care support for their employees (just 6% of employers provide child care services or child care stipends, according to a 2020 survey by

[Clutch](#)), a number of corporations are making ECE a funding priority. Many corporations give locally for early childhood education, while others support national ECE efforts. Still, corporate funding constitutes a small percentage of the revenue mix for most ECE-focused nonprofits. The ECE supporters detailed in the “Corporate Funders” section of this brief are a range of technology, financial services, apparel and healthcare companies, reflecting the fact that corporate support for early childhood isn’t particularly linked with any one subsector or type of business.

[Jumpstart for Young Children](#) CEO Naila Bolus [told IP](#) that she has seen more corporations stepping up to support early education in recent years. Jumpstart’s corporate funders include Franklin Templeton, TJX and Vanguard, among other companies. “More foundations are coming to this space and more corporate funders are coming to this space, as well,” Bolus said. “You’re seeing businesses being able to articulate the importance of early childhood for their own workforce, but also for the workforce of the future.”

Two huge managers of donor-advised funds have been significant funders in this space between 2014 and 2018. The Silicon Valley Community Foundation gave more than \$56 million and Fidelity Investments Charitable Gift Funds gave more than \$31 million.

ECE is a philanthropic area that seems to lend itself to collaboration. Many early education funders work together, like those who teamed up to create the [Early Childhood Funders Collaborative](#) (ECFC), for example, which calls itself “a venue for funders interested in early childhood.” ECFC has a long list of members, many of them dazzling names in the constellation of mega-donors; others that have a

lower profile. ECFC provides information, resources and networking opportunities for members across the country, and in turn, spawns and partners with other collaboratives like the Early Educator Investment Collaborative.

Eight funders already working in the early education space teamed up to create the [Early Educator Investment Collaborative](#). The goal of the collaborative, as IP reported, is to tackle one of the thorniest issues in ECE: how to create an educator workforce that is diverse, professionally trained and mentored, and fairly paid. Partners include the Foundation for Child Development, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Buffett Early Childhood Fund, the Ballmer Group, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, and the Heising-Simons Foundation (see entire list of partners [here](#)).

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August 2020 Survey

“[There is a growing] recognition by the larger community how important access to high-quality early childhood education is to the economy [and how] early childhood education supports the current and future workforce.”

—Fundraiser, Walled Lake, Michigan

Who’s Getting

Funding for early childhood programs supports a wide range of nonprofits, a few with a national focus, but most addressing ECE locally or regionally. Start Early, which, according to Candid data from 2014 to 2018, was the recipient of the most ECE philanthropic dollars, was founded almost 30 years ago, and worked initially on Chicago’s South Side and in rural Illinois. Over the years, it expanded its reach, and now has partnerships in 25 states.

Many of the largest recipients of ECE dollars are providers of direct services. Some provide early education; others provide birth-through-five care, including prenatal care, ongoing healthcare, and wrap-around supports for parents, families and communities.

Research is a major focus for many recipients of ECE dollars. Research by organizations like Harvard’s [Center on the Developing Child](#) and the [Erikson Institute](#) (which also provides graduate studies in early childhood development and education) have improved our understanding of brain development, adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), trauma-informed care, social emotional learning and other areas. [James Heckman](#) has conducted path-breaking research on the benefits of ECE. [Zero to Three](#) provides information for parents and caregivers on issues like the value of home care and the importance of play. Other grantees, like the [Early Childhood Funders Collaborative](#) provide research on the ECE sector.

Other nonprofits in this arena, like [All Our Kin](#) and [Jumpstart for Early Success](#), focus on the educators in early childhood settings, recruiting and preparing a diverse, skilled workforce and ensuring that caregivers, teachers and administrators have ongoing professional development and support. Increasing compensation for early childhood educators is another priority area for some grantees.

Communications and advocacy are major line items on the agendas of many ECE grantees, like [Start Early](#) and [Alliance for Early Success](#). Groups advocate locally and at the state and federal levels for increased child care access and affordability, paid family leave, better preparation and compensation for educators, and overall systems change, among other areas.

Many ECE grantees, including national groups like the [Build Initiative](#), regional organizations like [Sheltering Arms](#) in Georgia, and local organizations like the [Glide Family, Youth and Childcare Center](#) in San Francisco, focus specifically on boosting access to quality early care and education for low-income children and children of color.

Some recipients of ECE funding conduct research, including [Child Trends](#), which explores a wide range of issues affecting children and youth, such as racial discrepancies in maternal and child health and the benefits of the expanded child tax credit. Improving the quality of preschools is one of the areas the research institution [MRDC](#) focuses on, along with K-12 education, health, and juvenile justice.

Other grantees have targeted goals. [Jumpstart for Young Children](#), for example, works with colleges and universities to recruit students to work in preschools in disadvantaged communities.

10 Leading Grantees in Early Childhood ¹

Alliance for Early Success

All Our Kin

BUILD Initiative

Child Trends

First Five Years Fund

Harvard Center for the Developing Child

Heckman

Jumpstart for Young Children

Start Early

Zero to Three

Source: Candid

Many organizations in the ECE sector have a programmatic focus that starts even before birth with prenatal and maternal care. These grantee organizations take a “whole child” approach, and provide not only early education but address other factors, including access to nutrition, housing and healthcare, and provide ongoing support for parents and guardians, as well as early education programs.

The vast majority of ECE nonprofits large and small support local and/or regional causes, and provide direct care to young children and their families through a wide range of services. The [Early Learning Coalition of Broward County](#), for example, supports early learning. [New Moms](#) supports young, pregnant women and new mothers in the Chicago area, helping to strengthen families by providing pathways to employment, housing and other services. Other grantees, like [Kidzcare Pediatrics](#) in Wilmington, North Carolina, the largest pediatric group in the state, provide healthcare to children regardless of their ability to pay. With two facilities in Omaha, Nebraska, the [Children’s Respite Care Center](#) supports children with special needs from birth through 21 years of age, and their families.

Funder Spotlight

[Buffett Early Childhood Fund](#)
investing in the early years

The Buffett Early Childhood Fund invests in organizations that “maximize the potential of the youngest and most vulnerable children and their families,” through its grantmaking. Buffett also partners with other funders to redefine U.S. education systems to include a child’s first five years. Current co-investors include the George Kaiser Family Foundation, Irving Harris Foundation, and the Heising-Simons Foundation.

Giving & Getting Deeper Dive

The subcategories of funding within the larger set of grantmaking for early childhood programs that receive the most support from institutional philanthropy, according to Candid classifications and data, include early childhood education, child care, child development, parent education, and single parent support. On the ground, these areas often overlap. And other categories of funding, like advocacy and research, also receive significant funding.

Many of the leading ECE funders are mammoth foundations that support many other causes, as well. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, for example, also channels funds to global health and K-12 education, among other funding areas. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, a longtime advocate for healthcare access, includes early childhood under its Healthy Children and Families program area. The Heising-Simons Foundation, a longtime champion of ECE, also funds climate and energy, human rights, community and opportunity, and science.

W.K. Kellogg Foundation was set up by its cereal mogul founder with the mandate to improve the lives of children. The organization’s tagline is “Putting Children First,” and it cites “improving access to high quality early childhood education” as a major focus. The Buffett Early Childhood Fund, a top ECE funder, focuses exclusively on early childhood, as its name makes clear. It funds hands-on early education through its Educare Schools, and also supports policy advocacy and research.

The Bezos Family Foundation, started by Jeff Bezos’s parents, is a longtime funder in this area, and their son now gives for ECE, too, through the Bezos Day One Fund, which he seeded with a \$2

billion commitment. The fund is working to build a [network](#) of free, Montessori-inspired preschools in underserved communities.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation, another top ECE funder, promotes the wellbeing of children and youth, and its KIDS COUNT Data Center provides in-depth analysis of issues impacting children, families and communities. Child and Family Well-being is one of the Duke Endowment's four programs, and it funds ECE under that umbrella.

Many funders pursue a local agenda when it comes to ECE funding. The Lilly Endowment, for example, invests in early learning in its home state of Indiana by supporting [Early Learning Indiana](#), the state's oldest and largest education nonprofit. The Robin Hood Foundation, which works to alleviate poverty in New York City, created the [Fund for Early Learning](#) in 2016, a \$50 million effort to support ECE in the city. The foundation also collaborated with Columbia University to create the Early Childhood Poverty Tracker, an ongoing survey of 1,500 families with young children that explores how low-income families manage child care and other basic needs.

The [Kresge Foundation](#) also acts locally to support ECE. The foundation's overall mission is to expand opportunities in the areas of health, education, the environment, and arts and culture in American cities, but it invests in early education primarily in its home town, Detroit. The foundation launched a major five-year initiative that included investments in high-quality early childhood centers, and support for early childhood educators. Kresge Foundation partnered with WKKF to create [Hope Starts Here](#), an organization that invests in ECE in Detroit, coordinates programs, supports educator preparation and works to influence state policy.

Kresge also spearheaded a new cradle-to-college center in urban Detroit, as [IP reported](#).

The Omaha-based Sherwood Foundation, another ECE funder, does the opposite: While it primarily supports nonprofits in its home state, it funds regional and national early education through the Buffett Early Childhood Fund. The Kaiser Family Foundation in Tulsa, Oklahoma, funds several ECE-related initiatives, including Tulsa Educare, which serves over 500 low-income children in year-round care, and its Birth Through Eight Strategy for Tulsa (BEST) provides support for families of infants and young children through a comprehensive network of services.

Grantee Spotlight Early Learning INDIANA

Early Learning Indiana was founded in 1899 by the King's Daughters Society and initially focused on providing child care for working mothers. Since then, it has evolved to include expanded access to high-quality Pre-K, competency-based early childhood workforce preparation programs, and reducing barriers to early education access. Though the Lilly Endowment is by far the largest supporter of Early Learning Indiana, it has received consistent funding from other organizations including the Nina Mason Pulliam Charitable Trust, the Ayres Foundation and the Richard M. Fairbanks Foundation.

Advocacy is another major focus for many recipients of ECE funds. The [Alliance for Early Success](#) grew out of an effort by the Buffett Early Childhood Fund to encourage government policy to catch up with the latest brain science. Other prominent ECE funders now back the alliance as well, including the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, the

Annie E. Casey Foundation, and the J.B. and M.K. Pritzker Family Foundation (see a complete list [here](#)). The alliance advocates for systemic change by supporting state advocacy efforts around the country, as [IP reported](#).

The work of some nonprofits in the early childhood space cuts across nearly all subcategories. [Start Early](#), which tops the list of ECE grantees, does all of the above. It provides direct care to pregnant women and new mothers through its doula and home visiting services, offers early education through its Educare early learning programs, supports families with parenting classes and other resources, conducts research to evaluate programs and develop best practices, prepares early childhood educators, and advocates for ECE.

[All Our Kin](#), which was founded in the mid-1990s, provides training, support and other resources for family child care educators who operate small, typically home-based programs. The organization works with family child care educators across Connecticut and New York City, and the model has been so successful that the organization is now training agencies in 18 states and the District of Columbia. Jessica Sager, All Our Kin CEO and co-founder, points out that in New York City, 70% of children under three who receive subsidies are cared for in family child care settings. “It’s a very common form of care, especially for infants and toddlers, and for families working non-standard hours and families who have barriers to accessing transportation,” she said.

The Big Issues and Beyond

Big issues for early child care organizations include those that are inherent to the fractured system of care in United States (access, quality, cost), and other issues that leaders of the field are currently

debating or considering how to address (improving educator training and pay, whole child education, and improving early care for children with special needs and for dual-language learners). These issue types are often intertwined, and they are central to the work of both grantees and funders.

Access to care. Probably first among the often overlapping issues that animate ECE funders is access—how to make early childhood education available to more families with children in more places. As noted earlier, many U.S. children lack such access, either because of availability or cost, and only a small percentage of qualified children are enrolled in federally funded Head Start and Early Head Start because these programs have been consistently underfunded and there are not enough slots available. Head Start reaches only one-third of preschoolers below the poverty line, and about 10% of infants and toddlers in poverty.

Access is also determined by geography: Child care is simply not available in many areas of the country, particularly in rural areas where facilities are scarce and slots are quickly filled. According to the [Center for American Progress](#), “More than 50% of Americans and 60% of rural Americans live in child care deserts, which are defined as areas where there are either no licensed child care providers for children under the age of five or less than one slot in a licensed child care center for every three children.”

Quality of care. Is it just babysitting, or real brain-science-based educational development? Quality is a hot-button issue for ECE funders because even when children have access to safe care, often, the education element is substandard. “Quality” includes factors that are easy to measure, like student-to-teacher ratios and the safety of the

physical environment, as well as less-quantifiable factors having to do with the nature of adult/child interactions. According to a study by the [National Institute of Child Health and Human Development](#), “... the data suggest that most child care settings in the United States provide care that is ‘fair’ (between ‘poor’ and ‘good’). Fewer than 10% of arrangements were rated as providing very high-quality child care.”



“One of the things that early education funders understand—and it’s really so evident now because of the pandemic—is the biggest issue in early childhood: We have no system. We have no publicly funded system. And so while funders are doing their best to fill in gaps in their local communities, there is a widespread recognition that early education is a public good, and that we’re going to need to increase public investment. So I see more funders opening up to funding in the advocacy space, and I see more funders funding organizing.”

—Shannon Rudisill, executive director, Early Childhood Funders Collaborative

Increasing Affordability, Expanding Public Investment. Quality is directly linked to cost and affordability. The cost of child care and preschool are daunting for many families. The [State of American Children 2020](#), a report by the Children’s Defense Fund, found that “center-based infant care cost more than public college tuition in 30 states and the District of Columbia in 2018. In one study, child care costs exceeded rent for 81% of two-parent, two-child families surveyed.” Many funders support advocacy efforts to increase government investment in early care. (See below.)

Preparing and fairly compensating the ECE workforce. The high cost of care doesn’t mean that

early childhood educators are taking home posh salaries. In fact, salaries for child care workers are notoriously low. “The median pay rate for [preschool teachers](#) is \$14.67 per hour, according to data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics,” according to [EdSurge](#). “For [child care workers](#), who often serve in supporting roles such as assistant teachers, floaters or aides, it’s even lower, at \$11.65 per hour. Employer-provided benefits such as health insurance, vacation time and sick leave are scarce, due to the thin margins many programs operate on.” Many child care workers left their jobs during the pandemic, and today, the sector faces an employment crisis, which in turn creates fewer options for parents.

Shannon Rudisill of Early Childhood Funders Collaborative said, “You’ve got people working for very low wages, working long hours, potentially exposing themselves to COVID and frequently without health insurance. We can’t turn away from it anymore. It’s a fundamental social justice issue, is a gender and racial equity issue, and many funders are recognizing that we can’t continue on this way.”

Improving ECE for special needs kids and dual-language learners. For children with special needs, there is abundant evidence of the value of early intervention that happens in ECE programs, but quality programs with the resources to meet their learning needs are often far out of reach for low-income families. This hasn’t received sufficient attention from the ECE funding world. (This brief discusses ECE and special needs children at greater length in the Perspectives on Equity section).

Funder Strategies & Trends

A good place to start analyzing strategies ECE funders actually prioritize might be to consider how much goes to backstop direct services versus

how much goes to other strategies outlined in this section. Unfortunately, Candid’s data subcategories do not delineate which funds for “child care” and “child development” include activities such as conducting research or advocacy related to them, and which are for direct services. Shannon Rudisill of Early Childhood Funding Collaborative told IP that there isn’t currently good data available regarding how much private funding is aimed at direct services and how much to other strategies.

Anecdotally, a major portion of philanthropic dollars for ECE in the U.S. is spent on direct services, for example, the Buffett Early Childhood Fund’s Educare schools, and the network of preschools launched by Bezos’s Day 1 Academies Fund. But ECE funders also commit considerable resources to improving the fractured system of early care—from research on effective approaches to advocacy for state and federal policy reform. What follows are some of the strategies experts told IP ECE funders are employing to some degree and may be gaining traction:

Research, innovation models, and information dissemination. Research is a strategy that many funders employ to improve our understanding of young children and what they need to learn and thrive. The Buffett Early Childhood Fund, for example, identifies Science, Practice and Policy as the three pillars of its investment strategy. The foundation’s science investments support work by the [Harvard Center on the Developing Child](#), Nobel laureate in economics [James Heckman](#) (whose work focuses on early childhood and the lifelong advantages of ECE), and the [FPG Child Development Institute](#) at the University of North Carolina.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation conducts its own extensive research through its [Kids Count Data Center](#), which collects data in states around the country to chart the well-being of U.S. children. The data center produces regular research reports on topics including its annual Kids Count Data Book, which provides state rankings on child well-being based on factors including poverty, access to healthcare, and education.

Funder Spotlight BEZOS DAY ONE FUND

The Bezos Day One Fund has two main programs. Its Day 1 Academies Fund launches and operates tuition-free Montessori inspired preschools in underserved communities. Its Day 1 Families Fund operates more like a traditional grantmaking program. It offers leadership awards to groups providing “shelter and hunger support to address the immediate needs of young families.” The Families Fund has awarded nearly \$400 million in grants since 2018.

Research on understanding and promoting healthy brain development is supported by many ECE funders. Harvard’s Center on the Developing Child is at the forefront of this work; its research has also enhanced understanding of the impact of toxic stress and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) on child development. Research has also elevated our understanding of the key role relationships with caring, responsive adults play in child development at every stage, and today, social-emotional learning is also a priority for many ECE funders (see more in the Whole Child subsection).

Public-private partnerships. Public-private partnerships are necessary because public funding for ECE is inadequate, according to Rudisill.

“There is a widespread understanding among private funders that private philanthropy cannot make up for the lack of a public EC system,” she said. “Therefore, strategic private investors at every level (local, state, national) fund with this in mind. They do this through leveraging public funding through partnerships or by funding advocacy that might lead to more public investment.”

Inside Philanthropy

August 2020 Survey

“The child care system could be on the verge of collapse without a blended funding model/government funding. This will adversely affect low-income families. Not only will this have a huge impact on our children, but the economy as well.”

—Fundraiser, Kansas City, Missouri

As funder interest in ECE has increased over the last 10 to 15 years, so has the trend toward public-private partnerships. “I’ve been a part of orienting quite a few funders who were new to early childhood,” Rudisill said. “I’ve watched quite a few go on an intellectual and funding journey starting with primarily private-sector solutions and coming to the conclusion that private solutions will be inadequate if they don’t have a stable public commitment to build on.”

The [Educare Learning Network](#) is built on a thriving public-private partnership. In 2000, the nonprofit Start Early (formerly named The Ounce) teamed up with the Irving Harris Foundation to start Educare Chicago. In 2003, the Buffett Early Childhood Fund helped Start Early form the Educare Learning Network, which today includes 21 Educare schools around the country. Buffett and other funders supplement federal Head Start and [Early Head Start](#) support for the Educare schools, which provide early education for children ages six months up to kindergarten age.

Training and diversifying the ECE workforce.

A relatively small number of ECE funders focus on the educators themselves. In one recent example, eight funders already working in the early education space teamed up to create the Early Educator Investment Collaborative “to elevate the early care and education workforce, break down systemic barriers in higher education for early educator students of color, and promote professional compensation for a workforce frequently paid unjust wages.” Collaborative partners include the [Foundation for Child Development](#), the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Buffett Early Childhood Fund, the Ballmer Group, the Bezos Family Foundation, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, the Heising-Simons Foundation and the Stranahan Foundation.

The collaborative directed a [round of grants](#) to innovative teacher preparation programs around the country, as [IP reported](#). One grantee, Georgia State University, will use the funding to underwrite its newly launched [Project SEED](#). According to Tonia Durden, Georgia State clinical associate professor and the coordinator of the college’s Birth Through Five program, many early educators want more training but can’t afford to give up their paychecks or cover tuition. Project SEED is designed to overcome such barriers.

[Jumpstart for Young Children](#) recruits college students, then trains and places them in low-income early education programs, which lowers student/teacher ratios and improves learning, while helping to build a more skilled and diverse early educator workforce, as [IP reported](#). The organization, which was created almost 30 years ago, relies on federal and state government dollars, private donors, and funders including the Stranahan and Pinkerton Foundations. Jumpstart’s

corporate funders include Franklin Templeton, TJX, and Vanguard, among other companies.

Support for innovation and evaluation.

Innovation is a somewhat vague term in the ECE space, but experts told IP it is an important strategy for certain funders. [Promise Venture Studio](#) helps ECE entrepreneurs develop their ideas and innovations and bring them to scale, and receives support from Omidyar Network, the Overdeck Foundation, Harvard’s Center on the Developing Child, Pivotal Ventures, and [other organizations](#).

Other funders focus on innovative ways to improve ECE quality and effectiveness. The Rainin Foundation, for example, supports an approach called [SEEDS of Learning](#), which it introduced to Oakland schools in 2014, with impressive results. As [IP reported](#), Rainin is now evaluating the program’s effectiveness with early learners at [Kidango](#) preschools. SEEDS teachers receive in-depth training that includes roleplay and intensive coaching.

Ola Friday, who directs the Early Educator Investment Collaborative, said, “Support for innovation broadly in all areas of the sector is really helpful and needed. Private funding can do a lot to help bring about new, bold ideas.”

Advancing the “whole child” approach. This perspective, sometimes referred to as “whole learner,” considers children’s welfare before birth, and includes the family and environmental context in which that child grows and thrives, including access to housing, healthcare and other needs.

The [BUILD Initiative](#), which was created by the [Early Childhood Funders Collaborative](#), addresses the whole child through its concept of the early

childhood system, which includes and connects all the factors that touch the lives of children, their families and communities. The BUILD Initiative tackles ECE from several directions, supporting state partners, advocating for home-based caregivers, promoting quality ECE, and helping early education leaders navigate and maximize government funding streams.

Initiative Spotlight



Launched in 2002, the BUILD Initiative describes itself as a “constortium of private foundatons” working together to “invest private funds to stimulate public investments in early learning.” The initiative promotes equitable, high-quality early childhood development and learning and cross-sector issues including physical health, mental health, nutrition, child welfare and family support and engagement.

Despite the demonstrated effectiveness of family support programs, they are badly underfunded, as the [Children’s Defense Fund](#) found: “Voluntary, evidence-based home visiting programs provide impressive short- and long-term gains for children and families who participate. However, in FY2018, the Maternal, Infant and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program (MIECHV) served only a small portion of at-risk parents and children across the country.”

Many funders are stepping in to support such programs. In Colorado, for example, Intermountain’s Healthy Kids initiative is working to combat the impact of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). Healthy Kids provides ACEs screening and evidence-based trauma therapy for children who show signs of serious stress. It

addresses risk factors by supporting the [Nurse-Family Partnership](#). Other foundations tackling ACEs include Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, St. David's Foundation, Hogg Foundation for Mental Health and Tauber Family Foundation, as IP has [previously reported](#). Buffett Early Learning, through the Educare Learning Network, and the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative (CZI), which has made it a [centerpiece](#) of its K-12 education programs, are taking whole-child approaches. [The Primary School](#), which Priscilla Chan founded, integrates the model into its early care education, including healthcare and family support.

The Einhorn Collaborative teamed up with the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, Overdeck Family Foundation, the Packard Foundation, Perigee Fund, and the J.B. and M.K. Pritzker Family Foundation to create [Pediatrics Supporting Parents](#). The group uses pediatric wellness visits to proactively promote children's social and emotional development and nurture parent-child relationships. It also screens for developmental issues that require early intervention. Packard integrated its early education and health programs. [As IP reported](#), this new team structure has allowed Packard to invest in both health and education within communities to ensure both sets of needs are met simultaneously.

Concentrating on local, under-resourced communities. Many ECE funders pursue a local or “place-based” strategy to address the needs of disadvantaged communities. The Charlotte, North Carolina-based Duke Endowment launched a 10-year program called Get Ready Guilford to disrupt the cycle of generational poverty in that county via targeted investments in early childhood. According to the foundation's [website](#), “By expanding proven programs and weaving disjointed early childhood resources into one seamless system of care, the Get

Ready Guilford Initiative aims to ensure those critical developmental needs are met.”

The Brindle Foundation, a small foundation based in New Mexico, supports early education in that state, including direct services to babies and toddlers up to age three, as [IP reported](#).

Supporting advocacy. Promoting effective policy is one of the goals of the [Early Childhood Funders Collaborative](#). ECFC also promotes grassroots organizing through its [Raising Childcare Fund](#), a pooled fund that moves private funds to grassroots organizations with the goal of bringing parent and provider voices to the policy table. “We recognize that most of our funders at ECFC are already funding advocacy, which is a critical part of what we need to make change,” said Rudisill. “But we believe that the direct voice of parents and providers is a complementary piece to a funder's advocacy investment. It is direct organizing of the people most impacted, which is an equity issue, as well.”

The Pritzker Children's Initiative's [recent grants](#) went to 10 community-based coalitions around the country, as [IP reported](#). One grantee, the [Louisiana Policy Institute for Children](#), works with other organizations and agencies to advocate for early childhood education in a state where less than 15% of children have access to quality early care. Said the institute's Libbie Sonnier, “The Pritzker funding allows us to leave our silos and see our children as a collective whole—not through the perspective of the Department of Education, or the Department of Family Services, or through the health department. This partnership is so important because no single organization has all the answers.”

The Alliance for Early Success supports efforts by state advocates to push for ECE funding and reform

through its [Child Care NEXT Initiative](#), as [IP reported](#). Elliot Haspel, who designed Child Care NEXT, believes philanthropic support for state initiatives will be essential. “We’re looking at how philanthropy can catalyze work the states are doing. Look, if the federal government really pulls something off, I’ll be shouting from the rooftops. But traditionally, states have tended to lead the way—whether it’s Romneycare in Massachusetts leading to Obamacare or ... many other examples of states acting as laboratories for new ideas.” Child Care NEXT received initial funding from [Pivotal Ventures](#), an investment and incubation company created by Melinda French Gates. Imaginable Futures, Spring Point Partners and the Richard W. Goldman Family Foundation also provided support.

Start Early sees advocacy for ECE as a key part of its mission. Its website includes an [Action Center](#) that encourages families and others to support early childhood initiatives. Start Early also launched the [Build it Back Better Initiative](#), an effort to include parents, educators, advocates, and policy experts in the work of rebuilding—and improving—the ECE system in the wake of COVID-19.

Perspectives on Equity

Equity is a major focus for ECE funders because, while high-quality early education can be cost-prohibitive even for middle-class families, the flaws in our fragmented, poorly funded ECE system do the greatest, most enduring harm to low-income children and children of color. Attending poor-quality child care programs—or none at all—sets children up for failure; as a result, many fall into the achievement gap before they get to kindergarten.

Expanding the number of programs in key communities. A 2016 study by the [Center for American Progress](#) concluded that when African

American and Hispanic children start kindergarten, they are from nine to 10 months behind their white peers in math, and seven to 12 months behind in reading. Low-income children begin school at a similar disadvantage. A report by the [Economic Policy Institute](#) shows children from low-income communities enter kindergarten 60% behind their more affluent peers. And a [Brookings](#) report concluded that just 48% of poor children are ready for school at age five, compared to 75% of children from families with moderate and high incomes. (The fact that kindergarten has become [increasingly academic](#) in recent years, a reality that many [educators decry](#), is an important issue, but one that is outside the scope of this brief. This shift has served to widen the gulf between advantaged and disadvantaged children.)



“Our whole child care system is built on the underpaid or unpaid labor of women of color. Starting with Black women who were caring for white children without any pay at all under the system of slavery, and then building through a system that exploited the labor of women in care-giving. If we are to move toward a system of equity, we have to acknowledge that we can’t run a child care system that is funded through that continued exploitation and asking Black and brown women to take less than they are worth.”

—Jessica Sager, co-founder, All Our Kin

Most major ECE funders prioritize disadvantaged children and children of color in their program priorities. The [Heising-Simons Foundation](#) states this explicitly: “The goal of the foundation’s grantmaking in education is to facilitate the creation and strengthening of early childhood systems necessary for children from low-income families and children of color to reach their full

potential by the year 2044, the year when the U.S. becomes majority-minority.”

WKKF, the largest ECE funder, includes Equitable Communities as one of its three priority areas, along with Thriving Children and Working Families. According to the foundation [website](#), “Advancing racial equity and racial healing, engaging communities in solving their own problems and developing leaders capable of guiding change on this scale is essential to creating vibrant, equitable communities.” In one example, under its Thriving Children priority area, WKKF supported the American Indian College Fund’s [Wisdom of Children](#) to increase the number of ECE teachers of color, particularly Native teachers.

Funder Spotlight



In addition to its grantmaking, the Kellogg Foundation makes mission-driven investments in the ECE space. For example, Wireless Generation received \$5 million in quasi-equity for its instruction and reading platform focused on PreK through 12th grade; Acelero Learning received \$500,000 in private equity to support its ECE and family engagement services; and Happy Family received a \$4.6 million in private equity and fixed income to grow its work providing organic food for babies, toddlers and children.

At Packard Foundation, the racial reckoning of the last several years spurred the foundation to launch an [internal review](#), and to commit to advance justice and equity in their work. The foundation also created a new senior staff role: the senior advisor for diversity, equity, inclusion and justice.

The BUILD Initiative created the [Equity Leaders Action Network](#) (ELAN) with funding from WKKF

and the Ballmer Group. ELAN is a fellowship program for multiracial and multiethnic ECE leaders who receive mentoring and other opportunities for learning and professional development during their fellowships.

Supporting a women-led, highly diverse workforce. Other funders are focusing on equity and the ECE workforce, which a report by Berkeley’s [Center for the Study of Childcare Employment](#) (CSCC) calls “one of the most underpaid workforces in the country.” The report says, “The early care and education (ECE) sector is comprised almost exclusively of women, 40% of whom are people of color.” The study was funded by the Alliance for Early Success, the W. Clement and Jessie V. Stone Foundation, and the Heising-Simons Foundation.

The Alliance for Early Success in its [2020 Child Care Policy Roadmap](#), has an explicit call for action: “For too long, early childhood educators, disproportionately Black and brown women, have worked for near poverty wages, without benefits, even as they are asked to continue to build their competencies and credentials. After tinkering around the edges on this issue for years, it is time to prioritize compensation, and give ECE professionals a more unified voice in the policymaking process—from who gets included, to how they are trained, and how much they are paid.”

The [Early Educator Investment Collaborative](#) also makes equity a priority, and states on its website, “Through grants and partnerships, the collaborative will intensify its efforts to elevate the early childhood workforce, particularly the nearly half who are educators of color who do not have equal access to higher education and ongoing professional development.”

Increasing dual-language learning programs.

Most ECE programs are not equipped to meet the needs of dual-language learners in many parts of the country. According to [Early Edge California](#), “Loss of home language in the early years due to lack of support, combined with incomplete English development, causes dual-language learners to fall behind in kindergarten, and many never catch up.” There is a large body of [research](#) showing that dual-language learners (DLLs) benefit from ECE that [supports both](#) their English language development and maintenance of their home language.

The Early Childhood Funders Collaborative (ECFC) includes children in immigrant families and dual- and multi-language learners as priority areas. It created a resource for funders, the [Championing Equity for Children in Our Communities Toolkit](#) “to help funders understand the makeup of their communities and in turn, provide greater support for the children in immigrant families who comprise them.” The collaborative identifies funders supporting DLLs in its [ECE Funding Landscape](#) mapping project. The tool breaks out [dual language](#) specifically, and found that since 2006, funders have made 140 grants in this category, for a total of only \$17.7 million – indicating this is an area ripe for more philanthropic attention.

The BUILD Initiative prioritizes DLLs, and is working to support “state actions to better serve young bilingual learners and help them reach their full potential by supporting state efforts” through its [Emerging Bilingual Learners](#) project.

In California, which has the nation’s largest DLL population, Early Edge California is supporting expansion of ECE DLL programs, more teacher

training for teachers working with DLLs, and advocating for increased funding for effective programs throughout the state. Early Edge is a project of the New Venture Fund, and their funders include Packard, Heising-Simons, and the Ballmer Group. The Ballmer Group also supports [Sobrato Early Academic Language](#), which provides an evidence-based approach to dual-language literacy beginning in preschool.

Resourcing programs for special-needs

children. When children have access to quality ECE they are more likely to have learning issues or other disabilities identified early and addressed, and [research](#) shows that early intervention can decrease the likelihood that a child will need to participate in special education once they enter grade school. While there is some public funding for early intervention and special education preschool, these programs are underfunded, and many children do not have access.

Advocacy Spotlight



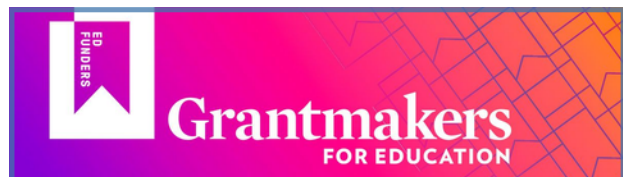
Formerly known as the Ounce, Start Early works “directly with children and families, support and train the early childhood workforce, and partner at the local, state, and federal levels to ensure policies put families first.” Through its work it has reached over 200,000 children and families; helped build more equitable early childhood policies and systems, reached nearly 2.3 million kids between the ages of 0 and 5; and has connected with more than 2,300 early childhood system learners to help accelerate system-wide progress across the country.

“There is a tremendous shortage of services for children with disabilities,” says Cynthia Jackson, executive director of the Educare Learning Network. She points out that under Head Start, 10% of slots are reserved for children with special needs. “That’s just not enough. There are thousands of children—probably more than that—that could benefit from early intervention services, but there has to be a larger investment.”

Kristin Bernhard, senior vice president of advocacy and policy for Start Early, identified several other categories of children that too often lack access to quality ECE: children in child protective services and those whose families are in the justice system, and children experiencing homelessness. “In terms of children experiencing homelessness in particular, the K-12 sector has made real advances in understanding the unique experiences and needs of kids who don’t have access to stable housing,” she said. “I think those same considerations need to be given to kids in terms of early childhood education.”

Funders looking inward. Many ECE funders are also addressing equity in their internal operations: boosting staff diversity and ensuring that they include a range of voices and interests in their decision-making processes. The Heising-Simons Foundation’s [Equity Framework](#), for example, includes a commitment to “ensure that our HR practices and policies align with our commitment to equity and opportunity.” The Chan-Zuckerberg Initiative, which employs a vice president of diversity, equity and inclusion, devotes a [page](#) on its website outlining its commitment to DEI at the organization, and features color-coded charts that illustrate the diversity of its staff. The David and Lucile Packard Foundation has made a commitment to increase trustee and staff diversity,

according to a [blog post](#) by David Orr, board president and grandson of the organization’s founder.



“One of the things that traditional K-12 funders have had to grapple with is the fact that many kids who come from marginalized backgrounds start school well behind their more affluent peers on different measures—from vocabulary to just basic self-discipline skills. So many funders are saying, ‘OK, maybe we need to start earlier.’ Also, the brain science tells us a lot about how much development happens from the zero-to-five age range. This leads a lot of funders to think about how we make sure kids get off to a good start.”

—Celine Coggins, executive director Grantmakers for Education

A Closer Look at Funder Types

Private Foundations

Most philanthropic dollars for ECE come from private foundations, including stalwart legacy institutions like WKCF, Walton and RWJF, as well as organizations built on the fortunes of local philanthropists with less prominent names, like the Irving Harris and Robert M. McCormick Foundations.

WKCF is consistently at the top of the list of major ECE funders; the foundation donated more than \$323 million to ECE work between 2014 and 2018, according to analysis of Candid data. Not just one of the largest foundations in the nation, it is also among the oldest, having celebrated its 90th anniversary in 2020. WKCF has assets of \$8.2 billion and gives away several hundred million dollars in grants every year to a portfolio that cuts across Thriving Children, Working Families and Equitable Communities programmatic objectives. Within its Thriving Children priority area, WKCF maintains a focus on early childhood education, supporting schools and community programs that “are rooted in a community’s culture and language” and that foster parent involvement in education. Thriving Children also includes grants to support maternal and infant health, oral health, nutrition, and to promote health equity by uplifting community voices, as IP has [reported](#).

RWJF, with assets endowed from a Johnson & Johnson Company fortune, has a mission “to build a culture of health” in the U.S. and has a large portfolio of interests it supports under the healthcare rubric. Healthy Children and Families is

one of its primary focuses, and [early childhood](#) is a specific priority. RWJF partners with organizations employing multiple strategies in support of early childhood. Grantee [Child Care Aware](#) provides state-by-state data on the sector, as well as information and support for parents and providers. The [State of Childcare](#) is a national partnership that advocates for increased funding for the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG), the main funding source for child care subsidies for low-income families. Grantee [Project Hope’s](#) goal is to ensure access to health services and healthy development opportunities for children under five and their families.

The [Foundation for Child Development](#) may not be a household name, but it plays an important role. At 100 years old, it’s the oldest grantmaking foundation in the nation “with a sustained focus on improving the well-being and developmental trajectory of young children,” according to its [website](#). The foundation supports research, specifically in areas of child development that have been overlooked, and provides funding to fill in those information gaps. It doesn’t support direct services, but funds transformative change in early childhood education, along with research, advocacy and strategic communications. It also has a “Young Scholars Program” that funds projects by early-career researchers working in the area of ECE. The foundation also supports the highly respected [NYC Early Childhood Research Network](#).

Since its founding in 1946, the [Irving Harris Foundation](#), whose founder’s businesses included the Toni Home Permanent Company and the Pittway Corporation, has supported programs for high-school-aged children. But the foundation followed the latest brain science, and gradually shifted the foundation’s focus to brain

development before and in the first years after birth. “Our focus is on the youngest children, and our approach to early childhood incorporates the full constellation of care that surrounds and supports their families and communities to nurture them, from prior to conception forward,” its website says. “We are particularly focused on the infant and early childhood mental health field, which we help to advance through innovative programs, leadership training, research, public policy, and grassroots movement building.”

As noted in the “Who’s Giving” section, a large portion of ECE funders direct their money locally, including the [William Penn Foundation](#), which supports a range of causes in Philadelphia. Early childhood is one of its priorities through its [Strong Start, Strong Readers](#) funding areas. The foundation supports organizations that promote early literacy, preparation for early childhood educators, and direct services through quality early childhood education centers.

Funder Spotlight



Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) is the largest philanthropy in the U.S. dedicated solely to improving health and healthcare. Early childhood related interests are largely addressed through its Healthy Children and Families program. The Health Federation of Philadelphia is a recent grantee. It received a \$3 million grant to support its Home Grown funder collaborative. The program strengthens practices and policies impacting home-based child care. RWJF also supported early childhood related work at Johns Hopkins, Boston University, and the National Partnership for Women and Families.

The Toledo, Ohio-based [Stranahan Foundation](#), built on proceeds from the Champion Spark Plug Company, has also tended to fund ECE locally, but supports the national Alliance for Early Success. The [Robert R. McCormick Foundation](#), another local funder, is the legacy of the editor and publisher of the Chicago Tribune. It funds many causes locally, including journalism, education, social services, civic engagement, and veterans’ programs, and its early childhood funding [emphasizes](#) kindergarten readiness, with programs for Outstanding Leaders, Quality Teachers, and Engaged Families.

Corporate Funders

Corporate leaders were growing increasingly aware of the early childhood crisis before the pandemic, and COVID-19 made it considerably harder to ignore. There are indications that some in the corporate world are stepping up with [more child care support](#) for their own employees.

“I can tell you that years ago, business was not a partner in the push for high-quality early education,” Felicia DeHaney, director of program and strategy at the Kellogg Foundation, [told IP](#).

“But after years of advocacy and tying early childhood to workforce, the business community has come on board and they now understand that they play a very important role in early education – not only in investment, but also in partnership and thought leadership.”

Corporate leaders may now be aware of the importance of early education, but so far, this doesn’t seem to have translated into substantial dollars. Corporate funding for ECE fell far below that of private funders between 2014 and 2018, according to Candid calculations. And unlike STEM and a few other areas of education where corporate

America has become an estimable force, funding from corporations is a small portion of the revenue mix for ECE nonprofits.

Kaiser Permanente's Southern California Region Corporate Giving Program made it the largest corporate ECE funder between 2014 and 2018, with gifts totaling \$497,500. Total giving from the top six corporate funders was less than \$1.2 million, according to analysis of Candid data.

Nonetheless, there are some corporations focused on ECE. For example, Vanguard, the mammoth investment management company, created its [Start Strong for Kids](#) program in 2015 and touts grants totaling \$48 million associated with it. The program focuses specifically on kindergarten readiness for low-income children in Arizona, North Carolina and Pennsylvania, where most of the company's employees live and work. Grantees include the [Maternity Care Coalition](#) in Pennsylvania, which provides home visiting and early care services to pregnant women and mothers of children zero to three. During the pandemic, Vanguard teamed up with the William Penn Foundation to create the Philadelphia Emergency Fund for Stabilization of Early Education to support the early learning sector in that city.

The TJX Companies operates TJ Maxx and Marshalls stores and supports a number of community causes, including education for low-income and at-risk young people. TJX supports Jumpstart for Early Education, which trains early educators, as [IP reported](#). It also supports Save the Children and other education programs in the U.S. and abroad.

[Pitney Bowes](#) supports education and early literacy programs. One of its grantees, [Reading is](#)

[Fundamental](#), is the largest children's literacy program in the U.S. The company is also a [Read to a Child](#) national partner. Scholastic, the world's largest publisher of children's books, sticks close to its corporate mission in its [giving priorities](#). It partners with organizations, including Save the Children, to distribute books to children around the world. Through its Scholastic Possible Fund, it also provides books to children in disadvantaged communities and in areas hit by national disasters.

Grantee Spotlight

Reading Is Fundamental

Reading is Fundamental (RIF) is the largest literacy non-profit in the U.S. and is "committed to a literate America by inspiring a passion for reading among all children." It has distributed over 420 million books and impacted more than 72 million children across the country. RIF has a number of corporate funding partners, including Amazon, Dollar General Literacy Foundation, McDonald's, Macy's, and Nestle.

Many corporate funders support early childhood education programs in their local communities. Boston-based [Liberty Mutual](#), for example, funds Nurtury, which operates 130 child care sites and six early education centers in the Greater Boston area. During the pandemic, with support from Liberty Mutual, Nurtury prepared and delivered early learning resources to families, and opened a child care center for emergency workers and vulnerable children. Liberty Mutual also provided emergency funds and financial information to help [Nurtury](#) managers navigate COVID-related business challenges.

[Spirit Mountain Community Fund](#), the philanthropic arm of the Confederated Tribes of

Grand Ronde, distributes Spirit Mountain Casino profits and supports early literacy and school readiness, among other priorities, giving \$314,081 for early education between 2014 and 2018.

According to the fund's [website](#): "We support programs that improve early childhood learning to create, inspire and equip young learners with the knowledge to be proficient readers and the readiness to arrive to school ready to learn and be successful."

Community Foundations

Many community foundations around the country are working to support early childhood education in their local areas by providing valuable support to local nonprofits.

The Silicon Valley Community Foundation (SVCF), the largest community foundation in the country, highlighted early childhood development and education as one of its key [public policy](#) areas in 2021, along with housing, immigration, and civic engagement. SVCF's [Early Childhood Development](#) program works to expand philanthropic and political support for ECE, provides grants to organizations working to improve ECE, and provides leadership for [The Big Lift](#), an effort to transform ECE in San Mateo county.

On the other side of the country, in Massachusetts, the Greater Worcester Community Foundation boosted its funding for ECE in recent years, as IP

reported. [Edward Street](#), one of its grantees, provides support for early educators and caregivers, and advocates for systemic ECE reforms.

In 2021, the Oregon Community Foundation (OCF) launched a new opportunity called "[GO Kids](#)," and is seeking to fund organizations tackling the state's opportunity gap. OCF also supports [early educators](#) by offering scholarships for ECE education and training, and is backing a pilot to diversify the early educator workforce.

The [Cleveland Foundation](#), the first community foundation in the world when it was founded in 1914, supports [PRE4CLE](#), a plan to increase the number of quality preschool slots in the city, boost preschool providers' quality ratings, and help families find quality programs.

The Los Angeles-based [California Community Foundation](#) (CCF) is also committed to early education. Since 2000, CCF has supported programs like the Los Angeles Preschool Advocacy Initiative in partnership with the Packard Foundation, which brings parents and nonprofit organizations together to advocate for increased access to high-quality preschool.

Major Donors

A handful of living donor billionaires in the U.S. include early childhood education in their giving priorities. As discussed earlier, funder

Community Foundation Spotlight



The Oregon Community Foundation's [GO Kids](#) program aims to overcome Oregon's opportunity gap and "disparities experienced by children because of where they live, their race or family circumstance." OCF recently awarded \$1 million in [GO Kids](#) grants to multiple organizations including [Listo](#), [Black Parent Initiative](#), and [Pendelton Children's Center](#).

heavyweights like Bill and Melinda Gates have provided considerable ECE funding through their foundation.

Some of Amazon's eye-popping profits are underwriting ECE causes through gifts from Jeff Bezos, MacKenzie Scott and other family members. The [Bezos Day One Fund](#) provides annual leadership awards to organizations supporting families facing homelessness through its Day 1 Families Fund. Its Day 1 Academies Fund is a nonprofit that operates a network of free preschools in underserved communities.

MacKenzie Scott's giving ranges across myriad social justice causes, and includes some ECE. In 2020, Scott joined many other funders in support of the [Centering Health Care Institute](#), a Boston-based program that provides parenting support and care from prenatal through early childhood. Scott and her new husband, Dan Jewett, also gave the [Children's Defense Fund](#) an unrestricted gift of \$20 million, the largest single contribution in the organization's history.

The [Bezos Family Foundation](#), run by Jeff Bezos' parents, provides ECE grants and its two programs, Mind in the Making and Vroom. Both share research on brain development and learning with early educators, parents and others in the field.

The [Buffett Early Childhood Fund](#), one of philanthropy's most prolific ECE funders, was started by Susan Buffett, Warren Buffett's daughter. Her foundation is ubiquitous in the world of ECE philanthropy and often collaborates with other funders to support ECE research, policy and direct services through its Educare Learning Network. It also supports early childhood programs locally in its home state of Nebraska.

Heising-Simons Foundation is led by Liz Simons, an educator who started Stretch to Kindergarten, and husband Mark Heising. Simons' father, billionaire James Simons, is the founder of the hedge fund Renaissance Technologies and is worth over \$24 billion. The Heising-Simons Foundation supports environmental causes, scientific research and human rights, as well as early childhood education. Its early childhood work collaborates with other organizations on initiatives like the [Early Educator Investment Collaborative](#) and the [Care Fund](#).

Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg and his wife Priscilla Chan donate and invest through an LLC, the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, which supports a number of funding priorities, including education. Chan helped create [The Primary School](#), which provides an integrative approach to early learning, addressing psychological, physical and social needs of children as part of the education process. According to the [website](#), "This multidisciplinary approach helps close the achievement gap, ensuring that children and families living in underserved communities receive the support they need to be well, learn and thrive." The first Primary School site opened in East Palo Alto; other sites are opening in Hayward and San Francisco.

EBay founder Pierre Omidyar's [Omidyar Network](#) provides tech-based and financial support for both formal and informal caregivers (parents or other family members). The network invested in Wonderschool, a tech platform for home-based child care providers, which is also available to parents. Omidyar has also funded training in business practices for child care centers through its partner, [All Our Kin](#). On the informal side, Omidyar partnered with ParentPowered (Ready4K), which delivers evidence-based curriculum to parents each week via text message, as [IP reported](#).

J.B. Pritzker, the governor of Illinois, and his wife M.K., have long championed quality early childhood education. The Pritker family earned its fortune from Hyatt Hotels Corporation, and has been active in philanthropy for decades. Their foundation's Pritzker Children's Initiative, which supports research on early learning and child development, works at the state and community level to build ECE access and capacity, funds organizations that advocate for early education, and helps develop innovative programs and bring them to scale.

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"Funders talk a lot about systems change, but fail to see how direct service providers are addressing the inequities in the systems and therefore are shifting funding away. There is a lot of ambiguity as well around what systems change actually means."

— Fundraiser, Falls Church, Virginia

Former Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer supports ECE and other causes through the Ballmer Group, the foundation he started with his wife, Connie. In its Early Childhood & Families program, the foundation invests in nonprofits including the Alliance for Early Success, The Build Initiative, the First Five Years Fund, and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation's efforts to make the [business case for ECE](#). The foundation also funds locally, supporting the Los Angeles Unified School District Early Childhood Education Division, funding its summer preschool and expanded transitional kindergarten program, and Washington State's Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program, which provides free early learning and preschool.

George Kaiser, CEO of GBK Corporation and Kaiser-Francis Oil Company, created a family

foundation that focuses on early childhood in Oklahoma through a range of initiatives, including Tulsa Educare, a pioneering initiative established in 2006 that now serves over 500 low-income children in year-round care, and its Birth Through Eight Strategy for Tulsa (BEST). BEST provides support for families of infants and young children through a comprehensive network of services "to help break the cycle of intergenerational poverty."

Some major donors work locally, then broaden their sights. The [Rees Jones Foundation](#), for example, works to prevent child abuse and supports children with disabilities in North Texas, but in recent years, has supported children's causes and human rights in other countries. Fracking entrepreneur Trevor Rees Jones and his wife, Jan, started the foundation with a religion-inspired mission.

Intermediaries & Associations

[Grantmakers for Education](#) (GFE) is the largest association of education funders in the U.S. and is over 20 years old, with a membership of close to 300 organizations. The majority of GFE members focus primarily on K-12 education, but Celine Coggins, who heads the organization, estimates that about one-third of its members also give to ECE causes. Its report, "[Trends in Education Philanthropy: Benchmarking 2018 - 2019](#)," highlights early learning as a growing priority for funders. GFE provides information, networking and educational opportunities for its members, but does not engage in grantmaking of its own or manage collaborative funds.

The Early Childhood Funders Collaborative works to increase the effectiveness of ECE philanthropic dollars, and also promotes policies to improve early education at the local, state and federal levels. Its [members](#) include well-known ECE national

funders, as well as local and community foundations. ECFC produces resources, including its ECE Funding Landscape tool and comprehensive reports on early childhood and funding strategies. In 2018, ECFC launched the [Raising Child Care Fund](#), pooling investments from member organizations to support grassroots organizations supporting families and caregivers.

ECFC nurtures and supports partnerships between [state and local collaboratives](#) by providing a directory and a platform for organizations to share information and expertise. ECFC is a strong [advocate](#) for a fully funded system of high-quality early care and education in the U.S., and to that end, “commits to promoting coordinated philanthropic investments in support of early care and education as a public good and securing the public will and policymaker support for the full financing of early care and education.”

As this brief noted earlier, the early childhood education funding landscape has a number of important collaborations, and close to 48% of respondents to IP’s 2020 survey of funders and fundraisers working in ECE said that collaboration among ECE funders is on the rise.

Rudisill of the Early Childhood Funders Collaborative attributes the high rate of collaboration to the nature of the sector itself. “In early childhood, we really have to work together across lines because there isn’t a system,” she said. “And I think that carries over to funders. Early childhood people think about the whole child and the whole family, and we know no one group can do it alone. I can’t fund everything that we need to fund on the effects of maternal depression on child development, for example. And I can’t fund everything that needs to happen to make child tax

credits permanent and getting people out of poverty. We are always thinking of the whole child and the whole family, and so everybody has to work together.”

We highlighted other high-profile funder partnerships earlier in this brief, including the Alliance for Early Success, which supports advocates promoting transformative ECE initiatives at the state level, and the Early Educator Investment Collaborative, which works to improve preparation and compensation for early educators.

Grantee Spotlight



The Primary School model was established when Priscilla Chan and Meredith Liu teamed up to develop an education model that focuses on how the health care and education systems could work together to better help children learn and thrive. The first Primary School opened in East Palo Alto in 2016 and has grown to serve more than 300 families in the area. Its main financial supporters have been the Silicon Valley Community Foundation, which has (according to Candid data) awarded the organization \$39.5 million in grants since 2015; and the Chan-Zuckerberg Initiative, which awarded a \$15.6 million grant to the Primary School in 2019. The long-term goal is to build a replicable model that can be sustained on public funding.

Rebecca Gomez, a program officer at Heising-Simons, who also co-chairs the Early Educator Investment Collaborative, explains that in the case of that partnership, the collaboration is more than the sum of its parts, “As funders, we came to the realization that we needed durable policy change,

and that impacting revenue and finance issues over time was not something any one foundation could do,” Gomez [told IP](#). “We realized we needed to make a collective investment to leverage funds and develop a broad national view on how to support the field going forward. We also thought it was important from a symbolic point of view to focus as a group on the issues impacting the ECE workforce: Compensation is unjust and access to education is insufficient. We wanted to show that we are united in this, we are stronger together, and we are in this for the long term.”

[Project Hope](#) (Harnessing Opportunity for Positive, Equitable Child Development) is a consortium that includes [Nemours Children’s Health System](#), [BMC Vital Village Network](#), and the [BUILD Initiative](#), and is supported by the [Robert Wood Johnson Foundation](#). The partnership’s goal is to promote healthcare access and child development opportunities for children under five and their families “by partnering with states and local organizations on policies and programs that result in systems change,” according to a [Project Hope brochure](#). It grants funds for capacity-building in measurement, evaluation, communication and mobilization.

In some cases, ECE funders combine funds to advance policy. In 2021, for example, the Robin Hood Foundation joined the Century Foundation and Next100 on a report, “[From Crisis to Opportunity: A Policy Agenda for An Equitable NYC](#).” “Building a high-quality child care and early learning infrastructure for New York City” was the first item in the agenda’s list of priorities.

[Blue Meridian Partners](#), a funders’ collaborative with [partners](#) including the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Ballmer Group, the Duke

Endowment, and MacKenzie Scott, works to combat poverty. With that goal as its north star, it doesn’t focus exclusively on ECE, but it does support organizations that promote the health and well-being of infants and young children, including [Healthy Steps](#) and [Nurse-Family Partnership](#).

Pooled Fund Spotlight



The Early Childhood Funders Collaborative established the Raising Child Care Fund to pool and shift private funding dollars to support child care systems promoting racial, gender, and economic equality. Fund grantees include the Alabama Institute for Social Justice, Colorado Children’s Campaign, and Mothering Justice. Fund members include the Heising-Simons Foundation, the Heinz Endowments, Pritzker Child Initiative and the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

Fundraising Now

In the COVID era, “People now understand the importance of child care, that we back up the economy, that we are the workforce behind the workforce. Investment in early childhood is perceived as worthy now,” says Jennifer Gioia, communications director for North Carolina’s Childcare Services Association (CCSA).

That has some fundraisers feeling optimistic—new opportunities are opening up, particularly from foundations recognizing the many intersecting benefits and consequences associated with early child care. Meanwhile, a similar recognition at the federal government level has policymakers, providers and parents all waiting to see if the elements of Biden’s Build Back Better legislation, which had ambitions to create an actual child care and pre-kindergarten system for the nation, eventually become part of stand-alone legislation.

Meanwhile, fundraisers continue working hard to cover the unmet needs of children and families today, doing what they can to seize upon this heightened awareness and cobble together a sufficient budget from a mix of sources. Funds for today’s providers are coming primarily from the federal government and from private foundations and donors, with volunteers, staff and board members alike still hustling to cover the gaps left by public dollars.

Muffy Grant, executive director for the North Carolina Early Childhood Foundation, a policy and communications shop, explains that the organization receives federal pass-through funding awarded to the state in the form of a Centers for Disease Control Essentials for Childhood grant, and a Preschool Development grant from the

Department of Health and Human Services. They total 30% of her budget.

At the Arlington, Virginia-based Child Care Aware of America (CCAA), an umbrella organization of child care resource and referral agencies, deputy executive officer Michelle McCready says that some of its revenue is from the Department of Defense to serve military families, and of the rest, 80% is philanthropic and mostly from private foundations and donors, including executive staff, all of whom donate, and the board, 80% of whom give.

In comparison, Mike Lubbe, president and CEO of the Las Vegas, Nevada, YMCA, which runs eight classrooms serving a total of 250 children, gets dollars funneled through the local United Way. The Y won a grant to expand its pre-K education through the state-funded Nevada Ready! Program. Children in the four classrooms covered by this grant pay no tuition because they met the financial qualifications of the program. In the other four classes, costs are covered by a combination of sliding-scale tuition and donations to scholarships from private funders. Overall, the Las Vegas Y preschool gets 50% of its funding from government (federal pass-through, state, and county), 30% from philanthropy and 20% from fees for service.

Lubbe says he is proud of the engagement of his volunteers in fundraising. “It is our 32-member board that is primarily responsible for fundraising and ensuring we can fulfill our mission,” he says. “Staff provides the tools, in terms of speaking points, data and hand-outs, as well as training, but the fundraising is totally relationship-based. Pre-COVID it was all in-person; now, it is all personal phone calls.” The organization also has a community development director who focuses on grant applications from federal, United Way and

private foundation resources, and runs three direct mail campaigns a year, targeting past customers to contribute to specific programs. The program campaigns even include billboards urging donations for swimming classes and summer camp. However, this direct-donor revenue generates less than 5% of its \$1.1 million fundraising goal, out of a total budget of \$8 million.

For the YMCA, DAFs are currently a small revenue stream, but increasing slowly. Individual and corporate giving is steady throughout, and foundation giving has increased consistently every year since 2019 at a rate of 7% to 10%. Lubbe adds that the biggest loss of donors was from local small businesses, but the increase in foundation giving made up for it on the bottom line.



“Early childhood philanthropy started out funding primarily direct services and early childhood programs, and I think that’s still very relevant. But right now, there’s a role for funders to think about investing at the systems level — so whether it is funding policy advocacy in organizing to push for higher workforce compensation, or actually working with states to implement federal funds, I think philanthropy can play an increasing and important role.”

— Rebecca Gomez, education program officer, Heising-Simons Foundation

As the new development director at CCSA, Kara Schultz is rebuilding its philanthropic portfolio from 16% to 25% of the organization’s budget over the course of two years. In 2020, CCSA conducted a grassroots fundraising campaign asking for relief for child care programs across North Carolina, raising \$260,000. The organization was able to award grants to 1,000 programs out of 6,000 in the

state. However, application requests from 3,500 programs totaled \$1.5 million.

Marsha Basloe, CCSA president, says their top priority is seeking funding to bolster the workforce. CCSA is developing a program to fund apprenticeships and mentorship while prospective teachers are still in school. In addition to targeting current donations to this effort, she adds, “this could be a great investment for a small endowment to make, to donate to support a teacher.”

NCECF’s Grant says fundraising from small and medium-sized donors is more of a struggle than ever. On the plus side, she says, several foundations have come on board recently, shifting her revenue balance to 63% private foundation grants and 30% government contracts. The Duke Endowment has been a longtime supporter; she has wooed Blue Cross Blue Shield of North Carolina Foundation, the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation, and more recently, the Winer Family Foundation, and ChildTrust Foundation, all of which have interest in supporting equity, resilience and systems building. There is growing interest in pooled funding for that work.

NCECF links its advocacy work to its fundraising success. “While we remain nonpartisan, we are not neutral about the importance of and benefits of early childhood education,” Grant says. “We made a couple of bolder, more progressive public statements—one after the death of George Floyd and one after January 6. Each time, we saw a flurry of donations in response. So continuing to do that will become part of our strategy.”

At Child Care Aware of America, McCready also reports a big uptick in interest and an expanded pool of new foundations and funders from adjacent issues. Institutions with a traditional focus on

disaster relief, economic security, women’s issues and K-12 education now all see common cause with ECE and are responding positively to requests for support.

Private companies are responding in a different way, wanting to engage at an even more impactful level than donations or sponsorships, she says. “The driver is community interest and voice. We engage with our partners in social media and are proactive in building support and awareness with a wide range of funders together.”

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“I think there is a growing realization that philanthropic money and social action don't align. A new fundraising model for supporting social action institutions must be found.”

— Fundraiser, Little Neck, New York

An Analysis of Opportunities & Challenges

Everyone IP spoke to for this brief agreed that the pandemic revealed what was hiding in plain sight: A crisis in early childhood education. The country was forced to acknowledge what experts in the field have long testified: that quality early childhood education is essential – not only for children’s futures, but for the successful functioning of society. Substantially addressing the crisis will require a shift in public perception. As a country, the U.S. continues to consider early care a private family matter, not an essential public good benefiting everyone.

That may be changing. If there is a shift in perception, philanthropy will deserve some of the credit. ECE is an area that has gained increasing attention from funders in recent years, and the events of the last few years have seen many donors boost their commitments, working hard to raise the visibility of an issue that impacts everyone.

Philanthropies cited in this brief (and many more not included due to space limitations) have helped lift and advance early care issues. Philanthropies fund research that demonstrates the critical role quality early education plays in brain development. Funders also provide resources to organizations working to increase access to early childhood education. They support programs to boost educator preparation and compensation, to foster innovation, and to advocate for reform at the local, state and federal levels.

But the need far outweighs the philanthropic resources currently being directed toward ECE. Whatever happens on the federal level, there will be a critical role for philanthropy going forward. If the Biden Administration’s plan for ambitious child

care funding survives the political process, philanthropy can support implementation of sweeping and complicated changes. If the administration’s child care provisions are scrapped, philanthropy will need to recommit and enhance its support for ECE, including advocacy efforts to continue the push for reform, especially at the state level.

The bulk of philanthropic resources continues to be directed toward backstopping local direct services rather than the strategies named in this brief. As with so many issues of concern to philanthropy, the sector struggles to balance efforts aimed at stitching together a disintegrating social safety net through essential grantmaking for direct services and dedicating the levels of grantmaking necessary to move policy changes that could truly solve the ECE systems challenge.

The U.S. could be poised to overhaul its system of early care in a deep and fundamental way: to create an actual early childhood education system that children and families can rely on. Of course, there’s a long way to go, and the outcome is uncertain – but forces have aligned to make the present a time of tremendous opportunity.

As Jessie Rasmussen, president of the Buffett Early Childhood Fund, said, “Many of us have been using the phrase ‘moment in time,’” she said. “This is a moment in time, and we can’t blow it. We don’t want to miss this opportunity to create the kind of lasting, durable early interventions that are going to make such a difference in the lives of so many children and so many communities.”

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Scott Moore, Executive Director, Kidango

Jessie Rasmussen, President, Buffett Early Childhood Fund

Rip Rapson, Executive Director, Kresge Foundation

Shannon Rudisill, Executive Director, Early Childhood Funders Collaborative

Jessica Sager, co-founder and CEO, All Our Kin

Helene Stebbins, Executive Director, Alliance for Early Success

Sara Vecchiotti, Vice President for Research and Program Innovation, Foundation for Child Development; Co-Chair, Early Educator Investment Collaborative

¹Based on available grantmaker data from Candid. Excludes federal funding and funding by higher education institutions

Feedback?

The State of American Philanthropy is an ongoing project. Each SAP brief will be updated periodically to integrate new information, additional data and evolving perspectives. This brief was originally posted to Inside Philanthropy in March 2022. It has not yet been updated. If you have comments or information you'd like to share with us, please email us at managingeditor@insidephilanthropy.com.