

Improving Federal ECEC Policies and Programs for Immigrant-Background Children and Their Families

Recommendations for the Task Force on New Americans

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In late 2022, the Task Force on New Americans (TFNA) was launched pursuant to President Joe Biden’s Executive Order 14012.¹ Led by the White House’s Domestic Policy Council (DPC), the task force’s mission is to strengthen and coordinate federal, state, and local efforts to support the integration and inclusion of immigrants and refugees. The Migration Policy Institute’s National Center on Immigrant Integration Policy (NCIIP) has long argued for the need to create an office within the White House to analyze immigrant integration challenges and opportunities and identify ways the federal government can address them. The creation of the TFNA is a welcome development in this regard, and its efforts will hopefully model new and effective ways the federal government can build its capacities to understand and address integration issues that flow from the country’s immigration policies.

Drawing from NCIIP’s extensive record of research, policy analysis, and technical assistance for government entities, this document describes pressing issues related to federal early childhood education and care (ECEC) policies and programs and offers recommendations for how the task force can organize its work to address them. It is part of a broader set of recommendations for the TFNA that also covers topics such as K-12 education and can be found at www.migrationpolicy.org/research/task-force-new-americans.

Nearly one in four young children ages 0–5 in the United States lives in an immigrant family, and nearly one in three young children are Dual Language Learners (DLLs), meaning they live in households where a language other than English is spoken.² Immigrant and DLL families have long been underserved by early childhood systems, which continue to be slow in building capacities and skills to effectively serve their needs. With the crisis of unaffordable and unavailable child care across the country now a pervasive issue, these longstanding inequities are likely to become further entrenched in the absence of targeted action.

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- 1 White House, “Executive Order on Restoring Faith in Our Legal Immigration Systems and Strengthening Integration and Inclusion Efforts for New Americans” (executive order, February 2, 2021).
 - 2 Migration Policy Institute (MPI), National Center on Immigrant Integration Policy (NCIIP), “U.S. Young Children (ages 0 to 5) by Dual Language Learner Status: National and State Sociodemographic and Family Profiles” (data tables, MPI, Washington, DC, 2021).

The following recommendations describe five key areas for action by the TFNA to improve equitable, high-quality early childhood services for young children of immigrants and DLLs:

- ▶ **Ensure that DLLs are systematically identified in early childhood programs.** Research shows that DLLs are less likely than their peers to be enrolled in early childhood programs, raising concerns about barriers to access. State and local early childhood systems, however, do not systematically identify DLLs and their language abilities, experiences, and needs. Without proper identification processes, early childhood systems cannot adapt to effectively and equitably support this large and growing segment of the U.S. young child population, which experiences significantly higher rates of poverty, linguistic isolation, and lower levels of parental formal education than non-DLL children. Major federal early childhood capacity-building initiatives, such as the Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge and the Preschool Development Grants program, also have not required or meaningfully included equity or quality measures for DLLs. The task force should engage with the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the Department of Education to ensure that new and existing federal policies and funding measures involving early childhood services include a DLL identification requirement, appropriate assessment processes, and relevant metrics in program reporting. TFNA efforts should also engage agency teams in these departments that are involved in implementation of Biden’s Executive Order 13985 on Advancing Racial Equity³ and collaborate in exploring and making recommendations to address critical ECEC program equity, quality, and access issues these young children and their families face, via both the TFNA and Executive Order 13985 initiatives.
- ▶ **Promote equitable access to early childhood programs and child-care subsidies and resources provided by the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) and other programs by improving language access for families and providers.** With nearly half of all DLLs having at least one Limited English Proficient (LEP) parent,⁴ language plays a critical role in facilitating or impeding access to early childhood programs. Similarly, for LEP early childhood workers who are well placed to effectively serve families who speak languages other than English, adequate language services are also important to support their entry and advancement in the field. However, many early childhood programs, and in particular the CCDF, lack the necessary data and accountability measures to advance and assure equitable access to services for LEP beneficiaries. The TFNA and HHS staff implementing Executive Order 13985 should explore and recommend approaches that will build language access considerations into regular reporting and evaluation mechanisms for CCDF and other early childhood programs such that they are required to provide evidence of compliance with language access requirements.
- ▶ **Provide support for family, friend, and neighbor (FFN) care to ensure that early childhood systems are inclusive of immigrant families’ true needs and preferences.** The definition and indicators of “quality” in child care and other early learning programs are often culturally normative, which means that many program options may not reflect or meet the needs of DLL, immigrant, and other families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Many existing child-care options are also unable to meet the specific care needs created by the nontraditional and inflexible

3 White House, “Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government” (executive order, January 20, 2021).

4 MPI, NCIIP, “U.S. Young Children (ages 0 to 5) by Dual Language Learner Status.”

working hours of many immigrant and LEP parents. As a result, a large proportion of immigrant and DLL families choose to opt out of formal child-care systems and programs that are not reflective of their lived reality or their cultural values and identities, and/or are unable to effectively communicate with families with a diverse range of backgrounds to build trust. Many instead rely on FFN care, which remains largely unsupported and is not sufficiently resourced, despite providing critically important culturally and linguistically appropriate care and other valuable benefits to this community. The TFNA should examine and provide recommendations for how federal supports for child care and early learning could include mechanisms to provide financial and other resources to FFN care providers and thereby advance equity and effectiveness in federal early childhood systems.

- ▶ **Develop realistic pathways to entry and advancement in the early childhood field for immigrant workers who bring valuable skills.** A culturally and linguistically competent workforce is foundational to providing equitable, high-quality services in early childhood programs. However, the existing cultural and linguistic skills in the formal early childhood workforce, most of which are provided by immigrant workers, risk being lost as efforts to professionalize and further credential the profession move forward. In comparison to K-12 teaching, the early childhood workforce is fairly racially and ethnically diverse, and this profession has historically been accessible to immigrant workers and benefitted from their skills. Yet many of those who work in early childhood systems also have lower levels of English proficiency and educational attainment, making traditional degrees and credentials challenging to obtain. As a result, foreign-born and LEP workers in the field are concentrated in lower-paid and lower-qualified tiers of the workforce. Amid a severe workforce shortage, efforts to create effective training and career ladders must take into account the existing workforce—both the value these workers bring as well as the substantial barriers they face to moving up traditional career ladders. In partnership with HHS, the TFNA should explore and provide recommendations for how accessible community-based pathways, apprenticeships, competency recognition, instruction in languages other than English, and other alternative opportunities for advancement can be meaningfully incorporated into career ladders for the early childhood workforce. Recognizing and rewarding the valuable skills and experience that these workers have long brought to the field is a critical issue on its own, and is doubly important given the urgent need to build the linguistic and cultural competencies of the ECEC workforce.
- ▶ **Make immigrant and DLL families visible in program data and ensure that Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) funds and programs equitably serve these populations.** Home visiting programs are an important vehicle to promote improved outcomes for DLLs and children of immigrants for several reasons. They can be especially effective in reaching hard-to-reach families who may otherwise be isolated, and can encourage parents who speak languages other than English to support their children’s home-language development, maximizing their important role as their children’s first teachers. However, research shows that DLLs and parents who speak languages other than English are underserved by the MIECHV program. Moreover, due to the scarcity of data collected by home visiting programs on immigrant or DLL specific indicators, administrators have no way to determine the extent to which immigrant families are being served by MIECHV funds. The HHS Home Visiting Evidence of Effectiveness (HomVEE) initiative also largely relies on studies that do not specifically address program models’ efficacy for DLL or immigrant families (or

other minority populations). As a result, the extent to which these models are successfully reaching or supporting these populations cannot be determined. The TFNA should develop strategies for the equitable inclusion of immigrant- and DLL-relevant indicators in MIECHV statewide needs assessments to ensure equitable access for families of all backgrounds. The TFNA should also prioritize HomVEE efforts and calls for research that examine the efficacy and relevance of home visiting models for specific DLL and immigrant populations to promote culturally relevant services. To the extent that HHS officials may have identified and developed solutions for these needs as part of efforts to implement Executive Order 13985, a collaborative exploration of these issues and joined-up approaches for addressing them should take place.

Immigrant and DLL families have long been underserved by early childhood systems, which continue to be slow in building capacities and skills to effectively serve their needs. With the crisis of unaffordable and unavailable child care across the country now a pervasive issue, these longstanding inequities are likely to become further entrenched in the absence of targeted action.

Related Resources

The Migration Policy Institute's *Dual Language Learners: Key Characteristics and Considerations for Early Childhood Programs*. This series of state-level fact sheets shares important characteristics of DLLs' families that should be considered in ECEC program and policy design and implementation, and particularly in efforts to address barriers that have led DLLs to enroll in such programs at lower rates than non-DLL children. Among other things, the fact sheets look at languages spoken, household income, parental education, and access to the internet and computers.

The Migration Policy Institute's *Overlooked but Essential: Language Access in Early Childhood Programs*. This policy brief explores federal and state efforts to implement language access policies in major ECEC programs: the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG), the MIECHV program, Head Start, and state pre-kindergarten programs. It also discusses evidence of disparities in access to these programs and highlights opportunities to improve language access across early childhood services.

The Migration Policy Institute's *The Invisible Work of Family, Friend, and Neighbor Caregivers and Its Importance for Immigrant and Dual Language Learner Families*. This policy brief discusses the importance of FFN care for immigrant and DLL families and the barriers FFN caregivers face in accessing public subsidies and other resources. It also highlights promising practices that can be expanded and replicated to effectively support immigrant FFN caregivers and the many families they serve.

The Migration Policy Institute's *Ending the Invisibility of Dual Language Learners in Early Childhood Systems: A Framework for DLL Identification*. This issue brief sets out a framework of the most critical elements that should ideally be included in standardized, comprehensive DLL identification and tracking processes for early childhood systems. It also identifies foundational system components that would need to be in place to support the development and implementation of the framework.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Education's *Joint Policy Statement on Supporting the Development of Children who are Dual Language Learners in Early Childhood Programs*. This statement provides an overview of federal laws that apply to serving DLLs in early childhood programs as well as a review of the research on strategies that are effective in supporting their learning and development.

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