



Early Childhood Programs That Blend and Braid Funding to Achieve Diversity

NOVEMBER 18, 2024 – HALLEY POTTER AND CASEY STOCKSTILL

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This report is part of a research project in partnership with the Trust for Learning highlighting how early childhood programs can blend and braid funding to serve diverse groups of children. This project also includes two profiles of early childhood programs: “[Mixing Early Head Start and Private-Pay Tuition at a Wisconsin Early Childhood Program](#)” and “[How a Colorado Early Learning Center Serves a Diverse Group of Families](#).” If you would like to share information about other integrated early childhood programs that blend and braid funding with TCF researchers, please fill out this [form](#).

Walk into the Warner Robins Child Development Center at Central Georgia Technical College, the early childhood program at Manny Cantor Center in Manhattan’s Lower East Side, or Laugh N Learn Academy in Monmouth, Oregon, and you will see classrooms of young children, from infants through preschool age, of different racial, ethnic, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds learning together. The classrooms are diverse. Some of these children have their enrollment funded through Head Start, some through state child care subsidies or public pre-k programs, and some pay full tuition. These programs are in a variety of locations— from college campuses, to community centers, to homes— but they all mix together different public and private funding sources (known as blending and braiding funding) as an intentional strategy for creating diverse learning environments.

Nationwide, diverse programs like these are not the norm. As a whole, early childhood education is the [most racially segregated level of education](#): 13 percent more racially segregated than elementary school and 20 percent more segregated than high school.¹ The landscape of early childhood programs has evolved as a largely fractured landscape: most public early education programs such as Head Start and state pre-K have been limited to low-income children or children with identified risk factors, and most private programs charge tuition that is too low to support a well-compensated workforce but still too much for most families to comfortably afford. Blending and braiding funding is one way to bridge this divide and give more children of all backgrounds the opportunity to learn in diverse settings alongside children with different identities and experiences.

This report identifies twenty different examples of early childhood programs that use blending and braiding funding as a tool for diverse enrollment and draws lessons from their experiences that can guide other providers as well as advocates and policymakers. The report begins with background on the importance of integration in early childhood education and blending and braiding and a tool for achieving integration. It then presents a summary of the characteristics of the programs identified and highlights recommendations for practice and policy.

This report can be found online at: tcf.org/content/report/early-childhood-programs-that-blend-and-braid-funding-to-achieve-diversity/

Why Integration in Early Childhood Education Matters

From early childhood through high school and beyond, educational spaces should be designed to support children in their growth and development and prepare them to lead fulfilling lives as productive members of society. Many different [resources](#) go into creating strong educational environments, including effective teachers and leaders, rigorous and culturally relevant curricula, student-staff ratios that grant students ample time and attention, and the facilities and supplies needed to support learning.² Access to diverse learning environments, with peers who come from varied racial, cultural, socioeconomic, and linguistic backgrounds, is also one of the key ingredients for high-quality learning spaces.

[Research](#) shows that in socioeconomically and [racially diverse early childhood programs](#), children show more growth in reading and math, their [vocabularies increase](#), and they show increased executive functioning skills.³ Integrated early childhood programs also lay an important foundation by exposing children to diverse experiences and ideas, [helping prepare them](#) to be empathetic and curious learners and future leaders in our increasingly diverse world.⁴ Because so much learning in early childhood settings happens through play, young children are especially well poised to benefit from the cognitive and social-emotional learning that comes from talking and playing with a child whose experiences, vocabulary, and even language may be different than their own. Furthermore, integrated early education spaces are also important as a means of fighting against the reality that, as the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Brown v. Board* seventy years ago, “separate education facilities are inherently unequal.”⁵

One of the authors of this report, Casey Stockstill, demonstrates what this looks like in practice by profiling two preschools, an affluent private program that is 95 percent white and a Head Start program that is 95 percent children of color, in the book [False Starts: The Segregated Lives of Preschoolers](#).⁶ While both preschools were highly rated and comparatively well-resourced, their preschool

experiences still ended up highly unequal due to social and racial segregation. Many of these differences disadvantaged the children in the Head Start program. For example, the Head Start program had much higher teacher turnover than the private program, even though their teachers’ pay was similar. However, the homogeneity of the private preschool program also limited those children’s experiences in certain ways. Teachers at the affluent private program gave children less autonomy during free play than at the Head Start program, for example. Frequent opportunities to bring toys from home for “show and tell” also created a classroom culture that celebrated private property.

The levels of racial segregation seen in these two examples is commonplace across daycares and preschools. According to [one national survey](#), roughly six in ten center-based early childhood programs served a student population where over 90 percent of children come from a single racial or ethnic group, and nine in ten home-based programs met the same threshold.⁷

Using Blending and Braiding Funding as a Tool for Integration

Ultimately, the best route toward creating integrated early childhood programs is to increase public investments and expand universal access. Universal access on its own is no guarantee of integration, as the high levels of segregation in K–12 public schools show, but it creates an important starting point from which intentional student assignment mechanisms (including enrollment priorities, choice policies, and attendance zones), diverse recruitment strategies, and program design elements to support diverse families (such as dual language programming, culturally affirming curricula, and access to diverse and representative educators) can create pathways to integration.

However, most states still do not have universal pre-K programs for four-year-olds, let alone programs for three-year-olds or infants and toddlers. Only eighteen states plus Washington, D.C. have any [universal pre-K](#) for four-year olds, and most [do not have enough seats](#) to enroll all children who would like a spot.⁸

For most children from birth to age 5 across the country, therefore, the best chance of access to diverse early learning programs may come from [blending and braiding funding](#).⁹ Blending funding means bringing together multiple sources of revenue, public or private, into the same pot to fund a program, whereas braiding entails more complex accounting to coordinate funding while allocating expenses separately to individual funding streams based on their restrictions. Early childhood programs can blend and braid a wide variety of different funding streams, including public funding from federal, state, and local sources, which may have universal access or have income and other eligibility criteria, and which may be allocated per student or to the program as a whole; private philanthropic support from grants and individual donors; and private tuition paid by families.

Because of the patchwork nature of our early care and learning funding landscape, blending and braiding different funding streams is a reality for many providers driven by necessity and not necessarily a concerted effort to promote integration. Data from the 2019 National Survey of Early Care and Education show that just over half of all center-based early childhood programs report accepting a mix of public and private funding, while 21 percent receive all public funding with no private dollars, and 23 percent receive exclusively private funding. But centers that balance public and private funding in relatively equal shares are much rarer: less than 9 percent of centers [report](#) that private funding and public funding are each more than a third of their total funding.¹⁰

Depending on the types and number of funding streams, blending and especially braiding funding can create a significant administrative burden for programs in order to track and allocate expenses and ensure all eligibility and reporting requirements are met. As a result, strong leadership and administrative capacity are essential for early childhood programs that choose this route. Blending and braiding funding at the state or local level is one of the best ways to ensure that more programs have the opportunity to bring together different funding streams and that the administrative burden is not overwhelming.

A number of state and local initiatives support blending and braiding early childhood funding at the system level rather than leaving individual providers largely on their own to navigate it.¹¹ [West Virginia](#) is a prime example.¹² It is one of the [leading states](#) in the nation for access and quality in pre-K,¹³ and the state law that established pre-K in 2002 included a requirement that state pre-K must partner with Head Start and state child care subsidies. As a result, a cross-agency team built out a pre-K infrastructure to support “collaborative classrooms” that bring different funding streams together. “Optimally, you place kids, and they get the services where they need to be,” explains Janet Bock-Hager, the pre-K coordinator at the West Virginia Department of Education.¹⁴ Every county is required to have a pre-K team that includes the school district, child care centers, Head Start, and a special needs coordinator. Bock-Hager and the state team work with each county to support them in creating classrooms that blend and braid funding whenever possible. Students who are eligible for Head Start enroll alongside other children, and Head Start providers ensure that these children receive all Head Start services—such as home visits and other family wraparound supports—wherever they are enrolled. The system is set up to support having 100 percent of pre-K classrooms use this collaborative model, and they are getting close to that goal: today, [82 percent](#) of West Virginia’s pre-K classrooms are also funded by Head Start and/or state child care subsidies.¹⁵ “In some instances, Head Start’s still a place rather than services for children and families based in contracts, which is not the optimal situation. We push as a state team for increased collaboration across all classrooms. Those are the things that we try to coach folks through in a blended model.”¹⁶

Integration has often not been a central driver in state and local efforts, however. State and local governments have a long way to go to facilitate more blending and braiding overall and to ensure blending and braiding increases diversity at the classroom level. The experiences of individual programs that blend and braid funding with a specific goal of increasing diversity—the focus of this report—provide proof points for the value of developing these systems at scale and lessons for expansion.

Examples of Programs that Blend and Braid Funding to Serve Diverse Student Populations

Because segregation is so pervasive in early childhood settings as a result of the patchwork way in which early education systems have developed, the policy conversation often lacks concrete examples of integrated early childhood programs. There is currently no central resource for identifying or tracking integrated early childhood programs across the country, and demographic data on early childhood programs also is not centrally collected. As a result, there is no easy way for policymakers or practitioners to identify integrated early childhood programs that use a particular model or that are in their geographic region.

This report aims to address some of those gaps by providing information on twenty different early childhood programs, for children from birth through age 5, from across the country that use blending and braiding funding as a strategy for serving diverse student populations. Examples of diverse settings in practice can help shift the early childhood policy conversation. These success stories show how integration is possible in some places already now, even within the constraints of current funding levels and structures. They can also motivate advocates and policymakers to find other untapped opportunities for integration as well as to push for the policy changes needed to make integration achievable in more places.

Methods of Identifying Programs

As part of the research for this report, we set out to identify examples of programs that blend or braid different funding types to serve children of different socioeconomic and racial/ethnic backgrounds in the same classrooms. Given that local contexts differ—some locations offer chances for racial and ethnic integration, while others are majority-white, for example—we began by looking for programs with mixed-income classrooms. Neither racial demographics nor economic data for children in early childhood programs are collected in a consistent manner across different program types, whether by individual programs or state and federal

agencies. But while programs may not ask families about racial demographics, individual programs that blend and braid funds tend to have some data on the economic backgrounds of the families they serve because they collect that data in order to process funding. We chose not to set thresholds for demographic diversity because of the range of local contexts, but we limited our search for programs that mix lower- and middle- or higher-income children at the classroom level. As a result, we excluded programs that blend and braid but lack this mix, such as some programs that blend private tuition and employer-sponsored child care benefits to serve a population that is all middle- or higher-income. We also excluded programs that receive different funding streams but do not integrate students in classrooms, such as those that have separate Head Start and private-pay preschool classrooms in the same building. While socioeconomic braiding was the focus, we sought examples that additionally had racial and ethnic diversity.

Because there is no national data on funding sources and demographics for every early childhood program, we identified examples for this list using a snowball sampling method. We started by contacting programs that we knew from past research as well as other researchers and advocates in the field. We followed recommendations of other programs to contact and also posted a call for ideas on listservs of early childhood advocates and providers, as well as in an [online magazine article](#).¹⁷ In addition, we conducted Internet research to identify programs that mentioned blending and braiding funding to serve diverse populations on their websites. This yielded more than seventy leads on integrated programs with blended and braided funding. We were able to conduct interviews with program leaders (directors, administrators, and board members) via video call, by email, or in person and verify information with twenty programs. (If you are interested in sharing information about other integrated early childhood programs that blend and braid funding for future research, please fill out this [form](#).)

Characteristics of Programs

The twenty examples identified in this report are in thirteen different states. They include standalone child care centers, programs housed in community centers and college campuses, employer-sponsored programs, home-based programs, and programs in district elementary schools and charter schools. The programs range in size from serving just sixteen children to several hundred. Across all of the programs, they use dozens of different funding sources, including:

- **federal funding**, such as Early Head Start and Head Start, Army Fee Assistance, and Child Care Access Means Parents in Schools (CCAMPIS) federal grant;
- **state funding**, such as state pre-K funding (both those with targeted eligibility and universal access), state child care subsidy programs funded through the federal Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG), charter school funding, state expansion grants funded through the federal Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five (PDG B-5), and other state grants;
- **local funding**, such as city-administered preschool programs and child care subsidies, and school district operating funds;
- **employer and institutional funding**, such as employer subsidies, student parent subsidies from colleges, and in-kind support for facilities and research or credentialing;
- **Tribal child care subsidies**;
- **philanthropy**, such as grants and support from individual donors; and
- **family tuition** (sometimes charged on a sliding scale).

Table 1 provides a short description of each program. More detailed information about each program’s enrollment, demographics, funding sources, history, quality indicators, as well as contact information for leaders when available, is included in this [spreadsheet](#). This report is also accompanied by narrative profiles of two of these programs: [The Playing](#)

[Field](#) in Madison, Wisconsin, and [Auraria Early Learning Center](#) in Denver, Colorado.

Benefits of a Blended and Braided Integration Model

The program staff we interviewed named many benefits of using a blended and braided funding model to promote integration.

Diversity creates a rich learning environment for children.

Nearly all of the program staff we spoke to listed the benefits of a diverse learning environment for the children they serve as a top reason for using this enrollment model. They described a more well-rounded education that encourages cultural exchange, understanding, critical thinking, and compassion. These benefits for children also translate into benefits for society. “I still wholeheartedly believe that having integrated schools is a key part of how long term we will end racism in this country,” Christie Huck, CEO and executive director of City Garden Montessori School in St. Louis shared. “Because normalizing being in community with people across difference, and learning how to navigate difference, and having deep respect for self and others, and learning how to be in community is how we will actually fundamentally change our society. So, of course, the earlier we start, the more successful we’ll be, and the more impactful that will be for our kids and our whole world.”¹⁸

At All Five, a child care center in Menlo Park, California, founder Carol Thomsen sees the mixed-income model as essential for ensuring that low-income children get access to the same high-quality, child-centered learning that more affluent children experience; across her thirty-year career in early childhood education, every effort she had seen to achieve this in segregated settings has fallen short.¹⁹ But program staff also described many benefits for middle-class and affluent families of their children being in a diverse setting. Janet Stocks, senior program officer at Rosemount Center in Washington, D.C., which has been in operation for over fifty years, noted that many tuition-paying (typically middle- or high-income) families like the program so

TABLE 1

EXAMPLES OF INTEGRATED EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS THAT BLEND AND BRAID FUNDING. FOR MORE INFORMATION, SEE THIS SPREADSHEET.			
Program Name	City	State	Program Highlights
A. Sophie Rogers School for Early Learning, Ohio State University	Columbus	OH	This hundred-year-old program housed at Ohio State University currently uses seven different public funding streams plus private tuition and donations in order to serve families with a wide range of backgrounds, striving to create an environment for children that is reflective of the diversity of their broader central Ohio community.
ACCA Child Development Center	Annandale	VA	This fifty-seven-year-old program serves a racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse population, with roughly 90 percent of children coming from immigrant families, across a wide socioeconomic spectrum.
All Five	Menlo Park	CA	All Five was founded with diversity as part of its mission, bringing high-quality child-centered learning to children of all backgrounds. Their programming includes monthly “family cafes” where families stay late at pick-up time with dinner and child care provided to discuss parenting topics identified from a family interest survey and build community.
Arlington Public Schools Primary Montessori Program	Arlington	VA	Arlington Public Schools uses sliding-scale tuition and reserves seats based on income tiers in its Primary Montessori Program. The flagship school for the program, Montessori Public School of Arlington, is the only public Montessori school in the state.
Auraria Early Learning Center	Denver	CO	Auraria Early Learning Center (AELC) is an on-campus child care provider at a higher education center in Denver that serves a diverse mix of parenting students and other families from the community.
Capitol Child Development Center	Hartford	CT	Capitol Child Development Center was founded by the Connecticut General Assembly as an employer-sponsored child care program and serves state employees as well as other families from a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds.

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Program Name	City	State	Program Highlights
Central Georgia Technical College Child Development Centers	Warner Robins	GA	Central Georgia Technical College Child Development Centers (CGTC CDC) are lab schools on a college campus that serve a diverse group of children and families, including the children of parenting students and center employees as well as members of the community.
City Garden Montessori School Preschool (Primary) Program	St. Louis	MO	City Garden Montessori School operates a private preschool as well as a public K–8 charter school. The preschool uses sliding scale tuition supported by a mix of state funding and private philanthropy to welcome a diverse group of children.
Early Childhood at Manny Cantor Center	New York	NY	After many years of operating separate tuition and federally funded programs, Manny Cantor Center now braids funding to enroll children with funding from Early Head Start, Head Start, universal pre-K, and private tuition together in the same classrooms.
Friends Center for Children	New Haven	CT	This center, founded by members of the New Haven Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), leads with equity as a core value and part of its mission. Friends Center uses an anti-bias antiracist, play-based emergent curriculum.
Las Cruces Public Schools Early Childhood Education	Las Cruces	NM	Las Cruces Public Schools enrolls Head Start children alongside children in the state’s universal-eligibility pre-K program in eight of its classrooms.
Laugh N Learn Academy	Monmouth	OR	Laugh N Learn is a home-based preschool and child care program that accepts state child care subsidies and pre-school funding alongside private tuition.
Morris Jeff Community School Pre-Kindergarten	New Orleans	LA	Morris Jeff Community School is an intentionally diverse charter school with a pre-K program that combines state funding for low-income children with private tuition for families above the income threshold.
Roaring Fork Schools Early Childhood Centers	Basalt, Glenwood Springs, and Carbondale	CO	The early childhood centers at Roaring Fork Schools serve a diverse mix of children, from infants through preschool, with children funded by tuition and public funding sources in the same classrooms.

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Program Name	City	State	Program Highlights
Rosemount Center	Washington	DC	The Rosemont Center is an intentionally socioeconomically diverse dual language center, which provides wraparound services to family members in the Washington, D.C. area (such as home visits, social services, nutrition supports, hearing, vision, dental, and so on).
Sprout School	Richmond	VA	Owned and operated by the YWCA Richmond, these five intentionally diverse mixed-income centers offer full-day, full-year, Reggio Emilia programming (with diapers and meals included).
The New E3 School	Norfolk	VA	The New E3 School in Norfolk, VA, grew out of the statewide organization E3: Elevate Early Education to create a high quality implementation model that is a catalyst for policy change and increased state investment. The STREAMin3 model developed by UVA in the school and funded by E3 was created to be replicated and scaled to impact more children, families, teachers and programs.
The Playing Field	Madison	WI	The Playing Field was founded with diversity as part of its mission, supporting kids experiencing housing insecurity alongside middle-class and affluent peers.
Trinity College Community Child Center	Hartford	CT	Trinity College Community Child Center serves a diverse group of children from the city of Hartford, the Greater Hartford area, and the Trinity College community.
University of Oregon Moss Street Children's Center	Eugene	OR	University of Oregon Moss Street Children's Center serves a diverse mix of student parents and university faculty and staff families.

much that they “are sending children for a second or third generation.” (There are children at the center whose parents or even grandparents also attended Rosemount.) “These deep ties breed loyalty.”²⁰

Families and staff members benefit from interacting with a wide range of people as well.

Many programs shared about the ways that the parents and guardians they serve have built connections across demographic divides. Miriam Johnson Sutton, program director at Friends Center for Children in New Haven, Connecticut, explained how serving a diverse group of children, and having a diverse staff, creates an environment where parents of all backgrounds feel welcomed: “We’re able to create an environment where everyone can find someone to relate to. When you’re accessing care, you’re building a community around your child.” For the staff, Miriam also sees “an opportunity to learn more about who’s in our world. It gives us a job and a challenge as a staff to really think about people who come new to our community... We’ve had the opportunity to meet some amazing families, people we would not have crossed paths with, probably, if we didn’t have a variety of ways for people to access.”²¹

Utilizing multiple funding streams creates diversified funding and opens access to different resources for support.

With the complexity of navigating different funding streams’ requirements comes the upside of sometimes having access to different networks, resources, partnerships, and training opportunities. For example, Friends Center for Children has access to a range of staff trainings, technical assistance, and resources for families through Early Head Start. They are also a founding member of the [Ideal Learning Head Start Network](#), a group of Head Start grantees and partners convened by Trust for Learning.²² In addition, they participate in a [group](#) for New Haven early childhood providers that receive Connecticut Office of Early Childhood’s School Readiness grants.²³ Having diversified funding also means that when one funding source dips or disappears, programs may be better poised to adapt.

Challenges of Blending and Braiding to Achieve Integration

The challenges that programs identified were largely around funding and administrative burdens, but programs also noted some of the challenges around serving and engaging families from many different backgrounds.

Insufficient funding.

The biggest complaint shared by providers was that even after bringing multiple funding sources together, they [struggled to get enough funding](#) to cover their costs and pay early educators strong wages.²⁴ This is, of course, a [sector-wide problem](#) for child care and early learning providers.²⁵ It is telling that the programs that we identified in district or charter schools typically used general operating budgets for the district or charter more generally to help fill in the deficits created by their early childhood programs, seeing the programs as investments in families and foundations for success in K–12 education.

Some public funding streams don’t cover a full work day or full calendar year, leaving programs to either offer a program that does not meet the needs of working families or try to fill in the gaps. State child care subsidy rates are often significantly below high-quality programs’ true costs. Laugh N Learn Academy, a home-based child care and preschool program in Oregon, has struggled to find and afford insurance for their program, as a number of insurance providers have left the state. ACCA Child Development Center in Annandale, Virginia, also noted the challenge of supporting a program that is not only racially and socioeconomically diverse but also inclusive for students with disabilities: while funding is directed to the site where they receive early intervention services, ACCA does not receive extra funding to support these children during before- and after-school and school break programming. Fluctuations in public funding can also make it challenging for programs to plan their budgets year to year.

Onerous reporting requirements and complex accounting.

With many funding streams can come many reporting requirements, often involving lots of back-and-forth between parents and providers. For example, one program director recalled a state grant that required asking each family five different questions about languages spoken at home, different from the other data that the program already collected about families' home languages, and entering the data in a specific spreadsheet format—a task that took a full day to complete. Providers felt that the value of the information they were providing to state and local agencies or the decisions that it was informing were rarely communicated back to them. Managing the administrative and accounting burden of a braided program can be especially complex. Rupa Murthy, CEO of YWCA Richmond in Virginia, which owns and operates the Sprout School, described how “baking a model that really serves the student and draws down every dollar” requires complex “mental gymnastics.”²⁶

Supporting families living in poverty with wraparound services.

Early childhood providers described the ways that they often ended up serving as a key point of contact to connect low-income families with a wide range of social services, including health care, housing, rent and utilities assistance, and counseling. In integrated settings, programs need to meet these needs as well as supporting middle- and higher-income families. This means that “teachers and schools really have to turn on a dime,” Anneliese Johnson, principal of A. Sophie Rogers School for Early Learning at Ohio State University, explained. She described the challenge of pivoting from a conversation with a parent about “the problems of nonorganic bananas” to supporting a family experiencing domestic violence.²⁷

Promoting engagement with multilingual families.

Many of the programs where we interviewed staff serve linguistically diverse families, and they described accessing translation services and developing programming to serve

all families as particular challenges. Language access is a requirement of federal civil rights law for any early childhood provider receiving federal funding, but many early childhood providers receive little support in providing these services.²⁸ Technological tools can provide useful supports for communicating with families who speak non-English languages at home, but these tools should not be considered as adequate translation and interpretation resources for meeting providers' civil rights obligations.²⁹

Advice for Early Childhood Programs

The program staff we interviewed had lots of advice for other providers interested in implementing blended and braiding funding models to serve diverse groups of children.

Approach blending and braiding funding like a puzzle.

A number of programs noted that it was helpful to have someone on their team who could approach the challenge of blending and braiding funding like a puzzle or problem-solving exercise. This includes having a plan to backfill funding streams when funding levels change.

Take advantage of the different resources and networks available, and build in reflective time to improve your practice.

Program staff appreciated the networks and resources that are associated with different public streams, such as professional development and curricular supports available to grantees of certain state programs, supports for programs in creating improvement plans, resources to pass on to families, and locally organized networks of grantees of particular programs. They also recommended that programs find ways to create time for reflective practice for program administrators and teachers.

Have the right staff in place to promote family engagement.

“It is not easy,” Martha Lee, senior director of early childhood at the Manny Cantor, shared. “Make sure you have enough staff to make it work.”³⁰ Programs emphasized the

importance of hiring teachers and staff with the cultural competence and experience to interact with families from diverse backgrounds. If programs have the capacity, having a family director and/or a navigator to connect families with social services can be especially helpful.

Start small, and capture data and stories to make your case.

Brett Copeland, director of the Central Georgia Technical College Child Development Centers, recommended that programs interested in transitioning to a blended and braided funding model to support diversity should start small, identify their allies and champions, and capture data and stories—both “figures and faces”—to help tell the story of the type of high-quality, diverse early learning setting they are trying to create.³¹

Policy Recommendations

The experiences and insights of the providers we interviewed point to several key policy recommendations.

Government at all levels should increase public funding for early care and education, including better pay for early educators.

The sector-wide crisis of underfunding in child care and early education came up for every provider we talked to, and their expression of frustration echoes [polling data](#) that shows Americans support increasing public investments for young children.³² “Our administrators and teaching staff have college degrees (associates, bachelor’s, and master’s degrees), multiple years of experience and are professionals within the field,” Kyla Siegmann, executive director of Trinity College Community Child Center in Hartford, Connecticut, explained. “Unlike public school teachers, we work throughout the year and longer hours throughout the day. We are all overworked and underpaid. We cannot charge families more money to pay our administrators/teachers, especially when many of our families are below the state median income and can barely afford what they are paying now.”³³ Kathleen Eastman, senior director of early childhood education for the YWCA Richmond, which runs

the Sprout School, highlighted the economic challenges and vulnerability of families with young children, even those in the middle class: “We provide thirteen years of free education to every single child in America if they want it. And yet we struggle with these five years, when the families are at the beginning of their earning power.”³⁴

The Office of Head Start and state or local agencies should create communities of practice for providers that blend and braid funding as well as prospective providers.

The program staff we interviewed described how helpful it was to talk to other providers with similar enrollment models. Sometimes they had access to networks of grantees for a particular program, but they did not always have this access before they opened or started blending and braiding funding, when it might be particularly useful. These groups can be used to provide peer support as well as to solicit provider input to uncover and address particular policy challenges that agencies could try to address. Many of the rules and requirements that make blending and braiding funding challenging are specific to certain funding streams and their combinations—such as the challenges of coordinating Early Head Start funding and Wisconsin state child care subsidies, which are described in the [profile of The Playing Field](#) that accompanies this report. Hearing directly from early childhood providers is the best way for policymakers to surface these challenges in order to address them.

States and localities should move blending and braiding to the system level.

The program staff we interviewed were used to regular problem-solving and “mental gymnastics” to make their blended funding models work. While one was a home-based provider, many were programs sited in larger community centers, service organizations, or universities, giving them access to additional administrative support to help make a blended and braided funding model possible. Many smaller providers cannot manage this administrative burden. And even for those providers that can, it is not the best use of their time; as Karen Pace, strategic projects manager at All Five put it, “Every minute that somebody in the organization

has spent on reporting is a minute that they're not in front of a child."⁵⁵ Blending and braiding should happen at the system level—combining funding streams at the state, county, city, or school district, or creating provider networks that have this capacity⁵⁶—so that individual providers can focus on delivering high-quality services to diverse groups of families.

Growing the Work

Blending and braiding funding is a stopgap solution for the segregation and inequity that exists for our youngest learners and their families. The United States needs a comprehensive system to fund access to early care and education for children starting from birth. This big vision may seem pie in the sky, but more robust early care and education policies are already the reality in many other countries, including Iceland and Sweden, and the United States even had a universal child care policy briefly available during World War II.⁵⁷ More recently, the federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) child care stabilization funds released during the pandemic showed that large federal investments, which also inspire states to step up support, can make the difference in allowing more families to access early care and learning.⁵⁸ Big increases in public investments in young children are possible.

While advocates and progressive policymakers push to move the country in this direction, it is important at the same time to look at questions of quality, including access to diverse learning environments; otherwise, we risk building new investments on a flawed foundation of siloed, segregated, and unequal structures. In addition to serving as an important bridge to span the gaps in our current early childhood landscape, blending and braiding funding for diversity in the ways that the programs highlighted in this report are doing is also important insofar as it highlights helpful practices and identifies challenges that must be addressed in the future in order to expand access, quality, and equity in early care and education at the same time.

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