

# Childcare hasn't gained much traction with funders. Who's trying to change that? <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

Childcare is out of reach for working families, but few funders have stepped in to fill the gap.

In 2015, the Economic Policy Institute, a progressive-leaning think tank, found that in 33 states and the District of Columbia, infant care costs more on average than in-state tuition at a public university. Access to affordable childcare would put struggling families on surer financial footing. Childcare seems like a natural interest for funders that care either about early childhood education or the struggles of working parents, but so far, it hasn't emerged as a major priority for grantmakers.

The Ms. Foundation wants to change that. "We know that because of systemic issues around racism and sexism, sectors like the childcare sector have been both underfunded and undervalued," said Aleyamma Mathew, director of the women's economic justice program at the foundation. This intermediary funding group focuses on reaching women of color and low-income women through investment in grassroots organizations. It got serious about childcare about five years ago, and has released a study on what it's learned.

Childcare is seen as a woman's responsibility within families, Mathew said. "So the foundation wanted to really lift up this issue and encourage philanthropic allies to invest in this and see it as a key component in advancing women's economic security."

Mathew sees child-focused education funders and parent-focused worker and economic equality funders as allies. Early education advocates may be natural partners, but a look at the community- and state-level organizations with which Ms. partnered leaned heavily toward worker and parent advocate groups, like the Olé Education Fund in New Mexico and Parent Voices Oakland in California. Both focus on organizing working parents to push for childcare legislation for things like more generous subsidies.

The foundation, which also focused on childcare workers, worked alongside labor unions, Mathew said. This makes sense, since many of the foundation's arguments for childcare are based in economics. Mathew sees childcare as a key way to address the pervasive insecurity of many working parents, especially single mothers, and expand their access to opportunity.

"Toggling between working in a low-wage job or staying home so that you can take care of your child leaves you in a place of poverty and struggle," Mathew said, "Having childcare actually enables you to participate in the labor force and be able to stay and grow your income."

One goal of the Ms. Foundation is to push the conversation around early childhood education to be more holistic.

"In the early childhood education community, the focus is primarily on the children and the optimal growth of children, and it doesn't always take into account the conditions and situations that parents are in," Mathew said. "A child's life is not just governed by their own biological evolution and learning, but it also matters and is connected to the situations their parents are in."

The W.K. Kellogg Foundation, one of the few major funders involved in childcare, gets this. Kellogg also funds early childhood education, but frames childcare as an issue that affects the whole family, not just kids.

"Of course, we want children to be well educated, but we also want families to be well cared for, and when families are well cared for, their children thrive," said Felicia DeHaney, Kellogg's director of education and learning.

Childcare is a form of early intervention that gets kids ready for school, which aligns with the traditional goals of early childhood education, DeHaney said, but it's also a safety net for families. Focusing on the family as a whole can sometimes lead the foundation off the beaten path for an education funder.

For example, the funder relies on local partners to advocate for workplace policies that ease parents' transition back to work, like time to vet and get to know childcare providers, she said. "We know that workers are more productive in the workplace when they know their children are safe."

As to why more K-12 funders haven't gotten involved in childcare, momentum plays a big role, DeHaney says. In the late '90s, the push for publicly funded pre-K in public schools got a lot of traction. Through research and investment, advocates were able to show that children

should start school earlier and pinpointed five as a good age to target, she said.

For the most part, that's where the focus has stayed.

-reprinted from Inside Philanthropy

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