

Early care and education is in crisis: Biden can intervene ^[1]

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Excerpted from introduction

President Joe Biden's plan for a 21st-century caregiving and education workforce is ambitious, particularly as it applies to its early care and education component (Biden For President, 2021). As proposed, the plan would represent an advance for America's early care and education (ECE) system, which has long been characterized by severe underfunding, inequitable access for children and families, and the abhorrent treatment of the workers (mostly women) who care for and educate the nation's children. Yet, these efforts must be even bolder.

The plan draws upon a pre-pandemic assessment of the ECE system and its limitations. Those times are past. Even with growing recognition that ECE is a critical component of the nation's infrastructure, we are witnessing the near collapse of the system in the wake of COVID-19. More than 150,000 early childhood jobs have been lost (BLS Data Viewer, 2020), and those who continue to work are often doing so without the protective equipment they need (Doocy et al., 2020). As many as 4.5 million child care spaces may be permanently lost (Jessen-Howard & Workman, 2020), and the cost to provide services has only increased (Workman & Jessen-Howard, 2020). As a result, the inequities experienced by children, parents, and early educators who are Black, Latinx, immigrants, and other people of color have deepened and become more visible.

In a post-pandemic world, which seems within reach, there is no going back to mend the ECE system we once had. That system was built on the backs of millions of women providing the services and the poverty-level wages paid to them: it requires a complete dismantling. To achieve his stated goals of treating the underpaid, undervalued, and too often unseen workforce with dignity and enabling the workforce to secure fundamental rights and protections, President Biden's plan will need to build the system anew.

COVID-19 and the racial reckoning led by Black Lives Matter compel us to confront the systemic racism and misogyny woven throughout our institutions. And early care and education is no exception. As a system that relies primarily on a market-based structure, by definition it disadvantages those with the least means to purchase services. As services are tied to buying power, the wages of early educators, primarily women, are directly tied to the ability of families to pay (CSCCE, 2020b). Across different types of settings and job roles in the sector, we see that the wages of Black women, in particular, are systematically lower than those of their peers undertaking the same work (Austin, et al., 2020). Additionally, throughout the sector we have documented the poor working conditions that too many early educators experience (Schlieber & McLean, 2020). Any new model of early care and education in this country must be driven by rectifying the stress on families with little-to-no access to high-quality ECE and the ongoing exploitation of early educators' hard work and dedication.

Region: United States ^[4]

Tags: COVID-19 ^[5]

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