



“Inside-Outside” Strategies for Integrating Home-Based Child Care Into Public Preschool: The Role of Unions

May 2025



Home Grown is a national collaborative of philanthropic leaders committed to improving the quality of and access to home-based child care. We use numerous strategies to better understand and support various forms of home-based child care including regulated family child care, regulation-exempt care, and family, friend and neighbor care. Learn more on our [website](#).

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Introduction

State spending on pre-K has more than doubled in 20 years, reaching nearly \$9 billion in 2021, with localities adding funds through taxes and general city budgets. While 24 states allow home-based child care (HBCC) providers to receive public pre-K funding, participation remains low due to system designs that create barriers to participation. Many parents prefer having their child in a home-based setting because of the smaller, and often more culturally responsive approach. There is also a growing body of research about how to adapt preschool policies to meaningfully include home-based care providers, however, many administrators may become stuck during the planning process.

Ensuring HBCC participation in pre-K requires an “inside-outside strategy”— combining external pressure with internal policy work is key to making systemic changes. This resource broadly supports leaders and administrators of pre-K systems and other early care and education programs to plan to incorporate home-based child care into publicly funded systems. The findings and best practices shared in these briefs can be utilized to help policymakers and those leading implementations of early care and education programs inform strategies for this work. To access the full introduction and additional briefs, [click here](#).

Unions as a structure to represent the interests of home-based providers

To work toward effective and equitable systems that include home-based child care (HBCC) providers as essential partners, administrators and policymakers must attend to both design strategies and political strategies. Forming a partnership with a labor union may be a critical political strategy — whether that is an overt partnership or inside-outside work.

In many states and regions, HBCCs are members of unions, sometimes the same unions that are advocating for increased public preschool funding in the existing school system. As the NYC case shows, without careful planning, this can cause serious negative impacts to the child care system.

How can unions be a lever to better represent the interests of HBCCs? And how can public administrators harness the political power of unions to ensure that the entire child care ecosystem, including HBCC, benefits from the increased availability of preschool funding?

From the perspective of ECE on the Move, a provider-led movement in New York City, family child care in residential settings must be recognized, valued, and protected. These providers are doing essential work under increasingly challenging conditions, and their voices must be at the center of any policy decisions. ECE on the Move fully supports the formation of a child care union. Providers deserve the right to collectively advocate for fair pay, stable funding, improved working conditions, and respect as early childhood professionals. A union would give family child care providers the structure and support they need to stand together and fight for long-overdue change. This is not just about sustainability—it’s about justice, equity, and ensuring that providers are no longer left out of critical conversations.

In Alameda County, California, and Chicago, Illinois, labor unions have played essential roles in winning salary increases and other benefits for home-based providers. Providers in each city affirm that, without the political power of the union, progress would have been much more difficult.

In Chicago, which has incorporated relatively few home-based child care providers into its strong pre-K programs, the city has been home to one of the largest and most successful efforts to organize home-based child care providers to fight for child care for all throughout Illinois through the Service Employees International Union (SEIU).

In Alameda County, Nancy Harvey, the Director of Lil’ Nancy’s Primary Schoolhouse, worked for 17 years to unionize home-based child care providers in Oakland with SEIU, and credits the progress providers in Oakland have made to that effort. Because Gov. Gavin Newsom recognized the union, Nancy and her colleagues have political power to advance their interests. They have succeeded in winning both full health care and a retirement plan for home-based providers, and are the first organization in the country to win that. She argues that despite some persisting disparities between

home-based and center-based providers, they have made progress and will continue to do so.

In NYC, however, the picture has been more complicated. The union representing home-based workers played an important role negotiating the funding rates with New York state, but providers had a range of views about how effectively they represented them.

ECE on the Move formed, in part, to provide an alternative to this structure. It was founded by Gladys Jones and Doris Irizarry, two veteran educators who were tired of the lack of respect and representation they were seeing in politics and policies that affected their industry. They believed that providers could represent their own interests more effectively than any other organization. After more than 11 years of organizing providers, they formally established ECE on the Move in 2019. Through work before and since their formal founding, they have built a thriving community of early childhood educators who support one another. The group is widely credited with playing a major role in winning the first major increase in rates for home-based care in many years.¹

Additional Briefs

- [“Inside-Outside” Strategies for Integrating Home-Based Child Care Into Public Preschool: the NYC Story](#)
- [“Inside-Outside” Strategies for Integrating Home-Based Child Care Into Public Preschool: Nuts-and-Bolts Tactics](#)

These cases suggest three steps to enlisting labor unions in the effort to create a high-quality early childhood system that includes HBCCs — and a fourth to consider in cases where the union is not positioned to drive this work:

- I.** Assess the union’s approach. Here there are three main questions: First, are the providers’ and union’s views of what needs to happen aligned, or at least overlapping enough to work together? Second, do most providers consider the union to be a legitimate representative? If not, why not? And third, how committed is the union to the issue? Is it a priority for the leadership? How much political capital will they spend on the issue, and will they stay with it for the long haul?
- II.** Assess the union’s ability to impact the process. In some cities and counties, labor unions are an undeniable force; they have significant impact on decision-makers and can therefore be powerful allies. In other cases, they are more marginal. Their impact is also dynamic; it depends on the particular political moment and their priorities and relationships at that time. Will their influence and relevance be at a peak when you need them, will it be waning?
- III.** Consider inside-outside approaches. Many labor unions operate this way by default: They both bargain as an adversarial counterparty with an administration, and work as allies on political and governmental issues, often at the same time! Find people in your organization who you trust and who have worked with labor unions over time, and ask their advice about how they maximize their role both as outside advocates and inside operators to help HBCCs.
- IV.** Build power with other organizations. In communities where child care workers are not unionized, the union is not willing to advocate on pre-K issues, or the union is not aligned with the priorities of home-based care providers, there may be coalitions of organized providers who have influence with policymakers and politicians and can operate in a similar function as a union. If that group does not yet exist, there may be an opportunity to support the creation of one.

¹ Governor Hochul Announces Historic \$2 Billion in Child Care Subsidies to Support Low-Income and Working Families and Child Care Providers, May 20, 2022, at <https://www.governor.ny.gov/news/governor-hochul-announces-historic-2-billion-child-care-subsidies-support-low-income-and>

Acknowledgments

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- Shanita Bowen, Gladys Jones, and Doris Irizarry, leaders of ECE on the Move

Thank you to the policymakers, program administrators, advocates, and child care providers who were interviewed for this work. In addition to the authors' insights from New York City, this work is informed by perspectives from Alameda County, CA; Allegheny County, PA; Chicago, Louisiana, and Multnomah County, OR.

Alexandra Patterson, Director of Policy and Strategy at Home Grown, was instrumental in the development of these briefs.