



Principles for a Universal Child Care System, Built from Home

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How well a society cares for its children is a measure of how seriously it takes its own future.

When children are well cared for, they thrive. When children thrive, families can dream. When families can dream, communities are strong.

Today in America, families are struggling to find affordable, accessible child care. And child care providers are struggling to afford to do the work they love. The current system is not working well for anyone.

Home-based child care has long filled the gap between what families need and what the system provides. These family members, friends, neighbors, registered, and/or licensed home-based providers have sustained children and families across generations. But their work has also been chronically overlooked,

undervalued, and underpaid. This injustice is rooted in a dark history of exploitation for Black and Brown women in particular.

As the promise of universal child care begins to take shape across the country, we have an opportunity and a responsibility to finally give this work the value it has always deserved. Every family should have the right to choose care they trust for their children.

Child care is not an industry to be regulated or a commodity to be rationed. It is a human necessity to be honored, supported, and fully funded.

These principles describe the inclusive system that families and caregivers deserve: one built around what is best for children, that is responsive to family realities, and that adequately compensates the love and labor that providers bring to this work every day.

PRINCIPLE 1

Everybody wins when child care is a right, not a privilege.

Child care should be universal and guaranteed because no family should have to struggle to find care they trust, no child care provider should struggle to offer it, and no society can flourish without it.

Every family deserves affordable, reliable, nurturing child care in the setting that works for them: a school setting, a child care center, a family child care home, their own home, or the home of a family member, friend or neighbor.

That care should be accessible regardless of income, language, schedule, employment, immigration status, disability status, or where you live.

When every family can count on child care, the whole community is stronger.



What this would mean

- ✓ The system is fully, publicly funded.
- ✓ No caps on the number of families that can participate. No means testing or activities requirements (work or school) that limit family eligibility.
- ✓ The system serves all children from birth to age 13 (and older for children with special needs).
- ✓ Families can use public funding to arrange child care with their choice of provider and setting.
- ✓ It includes child care arrangements that work for children with special needs and families that need non-traditional hours care or full-year full-care options.
- ✓ It is free for most or all.

PRINCIPLE 2

Children grow and thrive when they are safe, healthy, and nurtured.



Every child deserves early learning experiences rooted in relationships, culture, and consistency to meet their unique needs.

The care that shapes a child's earliest years grows from truly knowing them: their language, their background, their strengths, and their challenges. Children who feel seen, comforted, and supported learn early that the world is safe and that they belong in it. Whatever support and resources a child needs should be available to them regardless of their care setting.

Confusing administrative requirements and unfair penalties take valuable time and attention away from children. Parents and providers must have a central role in defining what best supports inclusive child development and safety across different settings.

What this would mean

- ✓ Child care settings are supported to offer care that nurtures child development and is safe for all children and families.
- ✓ The voices of families and providers are prioritized in defining what quality looks like and how it's measured, with the support of researchers and early childhood pedagogical leaders.
- ✓ There are multiple pathways for child care settings to demonstrate quality: no one-size-fits-all quality definitions or processes.
- ✓ Monitoring systems are simple, clear and fair. They do not focus on policing and punishment. Demonstrating that a child care setting is safe and nurturing does not take away from the time that child care providers spend with children.
- ✓ Providers experience a continuum of resources and accountability structures that recognize their contribution and support their retention.
- ✓ Any needed resources or support from other systems (such as special education and mental health) reach the child in their care setting.

PRINCIPLE 3

Caring for children is a labor of love that must be well-compensated.

All child care providers deserve respect and recognition for their essential work. They also deserve stable and timely living wages that cover the full cost of care, as well as family-sustaining benefits.

For many child care providers, this work is a calling, sustained by the belief that caring for children is among the most important things a person can do. That this work is priceless is no excuse for underpaying it.

A strong system credits the wisdom and experience of providers. It offers opportunities for building community with peers and receiving coaching and training aligned with their interests and goals.



What this would mean

- ✓ Payments for child care services offered are based on enrollment, not attendance; are delivered on time; and are paid prospectively using a low-burden payment approach (simple invoicing process with automated payment options).
- ✓ Rates are set based on the true cost of care and ensure a living wage for all providers.
- ✓ All child care providers have access to comprehensive benefits (retirement plan, health care, paid time off). Years of experience, training obtained, and demonstrated competencies are used to establish paths for advancement that all child care providers can access.
- ✓ Child care providers are supported to meet their professional goals. The system has a fully funded structure of professional development, coaching, technical assistance, and credential opportunities.
- ✓ Making adequate system investments in facilities, administration, technology, and training to ensure providers do not subsidize these essential system needs with their labor.
- ✓ Child care providers have the right to organize and enter into collective bargaining agreements with the system.

PRINCIPLE 4

Families and caregivers must have real power in shaping all levels of the system.



Systems often work on paper, but not in real life. The child care system must be radically reimagined to be more transparent, responsive, and accountable to parents and providers.

A strong system assumes good intent on the part of parents and providers, and seeks to give children all they need to thrive. Red tape should never interfere with providing care.

Accountability structures should be attuned to the realities of child care, and focus on supporting providers, strengthening systems, and promoting retention—not punishment and restrictions. The primary measures of system success should be family satisfaction, child well-being, and provider stability.

What this would mean

- ✓ The measurement of system success is not dependent solely on the evaluation of providers, but rather on system markers of holistic child well-being, family satisfaction, and provider well-being.
- ✓ System leaders use proactive, transparent, and plain speech communication to partner with families and child care providers in solving problems and making decisions.
- ✓ Data collection is used to support system improvement and drive shared governance between system leaders, child care providers, and families.
- ✓ The system is built to evolve and adapt with the needs of children, families, and providers, and system leaders are willing and prepared to be flexible and pivot.
- ✓ Governance engagement opportunities happen at times that families and providers are able to participate, and they are compensated for their participation.

PRINCIPLE 5

An effective system is welcoming and easy to navigate.

The system should treat everyone with dignity. It should be accessible across all languages and types of care, with supportive entry points, low-barrier requirements, and flexible participation.

Families and child care providers should never have to fight the system to be a part of it. A strong system meets people where they are rather than wearing them down with confusing processes, frustrating interactions, or unreasonable expectations. Personal data should only be collected for the purpose of improving care and access.

The system should be seamlessly connected to other programs and resources that families may want and need, such as early intervention, food programs, and other comprehensive services.



What this would mean

- ✓ There is no wrong door for families to access support in the child care system.
- ✓ The child care system is connected to other system resources that families and children may need (housing, food, transitioning to kindergarten, early intervention, behavioral health, etc.), and system staff support families in accessing the support they want for their family.
- ✓ The fully funded child care system is integrated with other child-serving programs like Head Start, public pre-K, K-12 schools, and before and after care. Families can access resources for all of their care needs.
- ✓ Data collection is ethical. The data of families, children and providers is protected and used exclusively to administer system support and resources, and not exploited for other purposes. Data systems are accessible for families and providers.