

Advancing Equity and Diversity in Early Childhood Education:

A Position Statement of the National Association for the Education of Young Children

All children have the right to equitable learning opportunities that help them achieve their full potential as engaged learners and valued members of society. Early childhood educators have a professional and moral obligation to advance equity and diversity. They can do this best in early learning settings that reflect fundamental principles of fairness and justice and that implement the goals of anti-bias education.

NAEYC is a professional membership association dedicated to a vision in which all young children thrive and learn in a society dedicated to ensuring they reach their full potential. Our mission is to promote high-quality early learning for all young children, birth through age 8, by connecting practice, policy, and research. We advance a diverse, dynamic early childhood profession and support all who care for, educate, and work on behalf of young children.

NAEYC has long-standing commitments to the principles of anti-discrimination and anti-racism that we have embedded in our advocacy for high-quality early education for all young children. We have proudly published resources on anti-bias education (Derman-Sparks and the ABC Task Force, 1989; Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2009) for nearly 30 years. Although equity and diversity are referenced in our core values and beliefs, we have not had a separate position statement focused solely on these issues. The time has come for a clear position statement on equity and diversity to guide our work as we define and advance the early childhood education profession and ensure high-quality early learning for all young children.

Purpose

This statement outlines the professional obligations of early childhood educators to create equitable learning opportunities for young children. Equitable learning opportunities help children thrive by building on each child's unique set of individual and family strengths, cultural background, languages, abilities, and experiences.

Creating equitable learning opportunities for all children is challenging, given the unresolved structural and institutional inequities in society. These inequities—and the social forces that reinforce them—reflect dominant social preferences and their intersection across characteristics such as race, ethnicity, culture, language, social and economic status, gender identity and expression, ability status, sexual orientation, religion, immigration status, family structure, age, and body/size. As a result, certain groups have been privileged over others.

This position statement seeks to promote broader understandings of the structural inequities in our society

and their negative impacts on children's development and learning in early childhood education.

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This statement also outlines the obligations of early childhood educators to advance equity and diversity in this inequitable context. Finally, it specifies recommendations for public policy and other groups that are part of the early childhood field, recognizing that these changes will require efforts far beyond those of early childhood educators alone. Our overall goal is to produce and maintain a society that ensures that all children reach their full potential.

Guiding principles

The following principles are gleaned from a review of the early childhood literature, NAEYC core values, and knowledge of early childhood practice. *(Note: a complete literature review will accompany the final document.)* They form the foundation for addressing critical issues affecting the current context in early childhood education.

- Early childhood is a uniquely valuable and vulnerable part of the human life cycle. Early childhood lays the foundation for all later learning and development. For example, it is a critical period for encouraging multilingualism, which carries many cognitive, social, and linguistic advantages.
- Families are the primary context for children's development and learning. Early childhood educators must work to support consistently warm and caring relationships between families and their children. This includes respecting the families' languages and cultures. It also means incorporating families' funds of knowledge into the curriculum, teaching practices, and learning environment.
- Each individual—child, family member, and early educator—is unique. Each individual has dignity and value. Each individual is equally worthy of respect.
- Each individual belongs to multiple social groups. This creates richly varied and complex social identities.
- Children begin constructing knowledge of their social identities early in life. Early childhood educators and early childhood programs in centers, homes, and schools play a critical role in fostering children's development of positive social identities.
- Children's learning is facilitated most effectively when teaching practices, curricula, and learning environments are strengths based rather than deficit focused and are developmentally, culturally, and linguistically appropriate for each child.
- Reflection, self-awareness, humility, and a willingness to learn and change are key to becoming a teacher who supports children from all cultural backgrounds.

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Current issues in context

It is not possible for early childhood educators to fully uphold the guiding principles above given the deeply embedded inequities in our society. Racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of bias are rooted in our social, political, and economic structures. Powerful messages—conveyed through the media, symbols, attitudes, and actions—continue to reflect and promote both explicit and implicit bias. These biases, with effects across generations, stem from a national history—including trauma inflicted through slavery, genocide, sexual exploitation, segregation, incarceration, exclusion, and forced relocation—too often ignored or denied. Deeply embedded biases maintain systems of privilege that grant greater access and power to people who are white, male, hetero, English speaking, thin, and/or middle-to-upper income.

The following are examples and consequences of how societal inequities affect children’s learning and development and the provision of early childhood education.

- Teachers of young children—like all people—are not immune to biases endemic to our society. Even among teachers who do not believe they hold any explicit biases, implicit biases are associated with differential judgments and treatment of children by race, gender, and social, economic, and language status—all of which limit children’s potential (citations).
- The research base regarding the impact of implicit bias is increasing. It reveals differential judgments of children’s play, aggressiveness, compliance, and abilities, especially when teachers are white and children are of color (citations). These biases are associated with lower rates of achievement and of assignment to gifted services for children of color, and higher rates of suspension and expulsions for African American children, particularly boys (citations).
- Children are more likely to live in poverty than any other age group. Children of color are disproportionately represented among those in poverty. Children of immigrants are the fastest growing segment of the young child population (citation). Nearly one-third of all children ages 0-8 are growing up speaking a language other than English in the home, and these children—known as dual language learners, DLLs—have a higher poverty rate is higher (58%) than non-DLLs (43%) (citations).
- Research makes clear the explicit link between poverty, trauma, and stress, and the long-term effects of cumulative adverse childhood experiences. A growing body of evidence also points to direct links between racism, trauma, and stress. The impact of allostatic loads (or the body’s “wear and tear” caused by stress) are, on average, greater for African-Americans (citations).
- The field of early care and education reflects the historic marginalization of women’s social and economic roles, with particular impact on women of color. As a result, much of the early childhood workforce has been characterized by low wages and is primarily women. It is also stratified, with fewer women of color and immigrant women having access to the educational qualifications needed for higher-paying roles (citations). Systemic barriers limit upward mobility even when degrees and qualifications are obtained (citations).

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Society can benefit from the untapped potential of children whose families and communities have been systematically marginalized and oppressed. Early childhood education and educators can help to address and reduce patterns of inequality while laying a new path for the future. By advancing equity and honoring diversity, we can strengthen our democracy and ensure it is more closely aligned to its fundamental principle: liberty and justice for all.

Definition of Key Terms

Bias—attitudes or stereotypes that favor one group over another. **Explicit biases** are *conscious* beliefs and stereotypes that affect one’s understanding, actions, and decisions; **implicit biases** also affect one’s understanding, actions, and decisions but in an unconscious manner. An **anti-bias** approach to education explicitly works to end all forms of bias and discrimination (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2009).

Diversity—variation across groups of individuals in terms of their backgrounds and lived experiences. These experiences are related to social identities, including race, ethnicity, language, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, social and economic status, religion, ability status, and country of origin. “Diverse” or “diversity” are sometimes used as euphemisms for “nonwhite.” NAEYC specifically rejects this usage as it implies whiteness as the norm.

Equity—fairness in ensuring that all children can achieve their individual full potential as engaged learners and valued members of society. Advancing equity requires considering whether differences in outcomes can be traced to discrimination against or marginalization of individuals because of their social identities.

Equity is not the same as *equality*. Equal treatment, laid upon unequal starting points, is inequitable. Ultimately, equity is an essential component of equality. Attempting to achieve equality of opportunity, however, without consideration of historic and present inequities is ineffective, unjust, and unfair.

Funds of knowledge—essential cultural practices and bodies of knowledge embedded in the daily practices and routines of families (Moll, 1992).

Marginalization—the process by which specific social groups are pushed to the edges or margins of society. Marginalized groups are treated as less important or inferior through policies or practices that deny their members economic, social, and political power.

Microaggressions—“everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely on their marginalized group membership. These hidden messages may invalidate the group identity or experiential reality of target persons, demean them on a personal or group level, communicate they are lesser human beings, suggest they do not belong with the majority group, threaten and intimidate, or relegate them to inferior status and treatment” (Wing Sue, 2010). Microaggressions can result from implicit or explicit biases.

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Historical trauma—“a constellation of characteristics associated with massive cumulative group trauma across generations” (Braveheart 2003). Examples of historical trauma include colonization, genocide, slavery, sexual exploitation, and forced relocation/incarceration based on race or ethnicity.

Intersectionality—the overlapping and interdependent identities of an individual across, for example, race, gender, ability, and social status. Intersectionality encourages us to embrace and celebrate individuals’ multiple social identities. It also highlights the complex and cumulative effects of different forms of discrimination and disadvantage that can arise for members of multiple marginalized groups.

Norm, Normative—the definition of certain actions, identities, and outcomes as the standard (“the norm” or “normal”), with everything else as outside the norm. For example, the terms “white normativity” or “heteronormative” refer to instances in which whiteness and heterosexuality are considered “normal” or “preferred.” This wrongly suggests that all other races and sexual orientations are outside the norm or less preferable. Art activities focused on Father’s Day, for example, assume a two-parent, heterosexual household as the normative family structure. (While there are some research-based norms that provide guidance regarding healthy child development and appropriate educational activities and expectations, these norms have too often been derived through research that only or primarily includes unrepresentative samples of children. Additional research is needed to develop new norms that will support equitably educating all children.)

Privilege—unearned advantages that result by being a member of a socially preferred or dominant social identity group. Because it is deeply embedded, privilege is often invisible to those who experience it without ongoing self-reflection. Privilege is the opposite of marginalization or oppression that results from racism and other forms of bias (see below).

Race—a social construct that categorizes and ranks groups of human beings on the basis of skin color and other physical features. The scientific consensus is that the social construct of race as a way to divide humans into distinct and different groups has no biological basis. All people are members of one race: the human race. (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2009).

Racism, sexism, classism, ableism, heterosexism, and other forms of bias—prejudice and discrimination expressed on the basis of social identity group membership (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, social and economic status, sexual orientation, abilities). This includes both individual acts of bias and structural or institutional policies and practices in society in which biases are evident in the past and present. Individual and institutional acts of bias maintain power and privilege in the hands of some over others (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2009).

Social inclusion—the process of improving the terms on which individuals and groups take part in society by improving the ability, opportunity, and dignity of those disadvantaged based on their social identities (citation).

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Xenophobia—attitudes, prejudices, or actions that reject, exclude, or vilify individuals as foreigners or outsiders. Although often targeted at migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, and displaced persons, xenophobia is not limited to these individuals but may be applied to others on the basis of assumptions.

Position

All children have the right to equitable opportunities for learning that help them achieve their full potential as engaged learners and valued members of society. Advancing equity and diversity requires dismantling the systems of power that have resulted in privilege for some groups and not others. This means working for full social inclusion of all individuals across all social identities. It will take sustained efforts far beyond those of early childhood educators alone. Early childhood educators, however, have a unique opportunity and obligation to advance equity. With the support of the early childhood system as a whole, they can create early learning environments that reflect fundamental principles of fairness and justice and that implement the goals of anti-bias education. Early childhood education settings—including centers, family child care homes, and

FOUR CORE GOALS OF ANTI-BIAS EDUCATION (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2009)

- Each child will demonstrate self-awareness, confidence, family pride, and positive social identities.
- Each child will express comfort and joy with human diversity; accurate language for human differences; and deep, caring human connections.
- Each child will increasingly recognize unfairness, have language to describe unfairness, and understand that unfairness hurts.
- Each child will demonstrate empowerment and the skills to act, with others or alone, against prejudice and/or discriminatory actions.

schools—are often among children’s first communities beyond their families. These settings offer an important context for children’s learning. Children learn the extent to which they are—or are not—valued by others. They learn how to treat others with fairness and respect. They learn how to embrace human differences, rather than fear them.

Early childhood educators have a professional and ethical obligation to actively and consistently advance equity. They must use inclusive teaching approaches that demonstrate the value of diversity. Early childhood educators must be accountable for any negative impact of their own biases on their interactions with children and their families. They must find ways to ensure that all children have access to the learning environment, materials, and both the adult-child and child-child interactions that children need to thrive. Early childhood educators must recognize and support each child’s unique strengths without imposing cultural biases (explicitly or implicitly).

To advance equity and diversity effectively, early childhood educators need to be well supported by their work settings. They need to be well prepared in their professional knowledge and skills to teach in culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms. They also need to be well supported by public policies that advance equity and diversity. The following sections outline the

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responsibilities of early childhood educators and related professionals who shape and support educators' work.

Responsibilities of early childhood educators

These responsibilities are organized around the five components of developmentally appropriate practice (NAEYC 2009). They begin with a section on reflecting and learning, and they end with advocacy. These responsibilities do not fully describe developmentally appropriate practice; instead, they highlight specific issues directly related to equity and diversity. They also elevate the importance of relationships that mediate how children experience and engage with adults, peers, and the learning environment. These responsibilities represent a starting point for reflection, dialogue, and action. Each individual should consider them and, based on the context of their work and community, craft additional responsibilities.

Reflecting and learning

This section calls for a commitment to continuous learning and a willingness to consider your own beliefs and actions as well as others' perspectives. As noted by Hardy (date), the tasks vary depending on your perspective. It is important to consider and recognize the often-unintended consequences of your ignorance, action, and inaction that perpetuate the systems of privilege from which you benefit. Conversely, you must be willing to overcome the learned voicelessness and internalized negative messages associated with marginalization.

1. Seek to build awareness and understanding of your culture, personal beliefs, values, and biases. Reflect on the impact of racism, sexism, classism, ableism, homophobia, xenophobia, and other systems of oppression on your own life. Identify where your varied identities have provided deep strengths and understandings, based on experiences of both injustice and privilege.
2. Acknowledge and seek to understand structural inequities and their impact over time. When outcomes vary significantly for those with different social identities (for example, on achievement test scores, number of suspensions or expulsions, or engagement with certain materials and activities), be willing to look deeper at how policies or practices may contribute (perhaps unwittingly) to inequitable results.
3. Recognize the power of diversity and inclusion. Seek to learn, through careful listening, others' (children's, families', colleagues') points of view. Seek opportunities to expand your knowledge by considering diverse experiences and perspectives.
4. View the commitment to cultural responsiveness as an ongoing process. It is not a one-time matter of mastering knowledge of customs and practices, but rather an enduring responsibility to learn and reflect.
5. Recognize that the professional knowledge base is changing, with a greater awareness of the limitations of child development theories and research based primarily on a normative perspective of white, middle-class children in families educated in predominantly Anglo-American schools. Maintain

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professional currency as more strengths-based approaches to research and practice are articulated, and be willing to seek non-dominant sources of information to supplement your knowledge.

Creating a caring, equitable community of engaged learners

6. Uphold the unique value and dignity of each child and family by ensuring that all children see themselves and their daily experiences, as well as the daily lives of others within and beyond their community, positively reflected in the design and implementation of pedagogy, curriculum, learning environment, and materials.
7. Seek out and recognize each child's unique strengths. Help children recognize and support each other as valued members of the community.
8. Develop trusting relationships with children that honor the cultural contexts and customs that shape their social skills and interactions. Treat each child with respect. Take care to avoid and not perpetuate language that is stereotypical, demeaning, or judgmental.
9. Recognize the potential for microaggressions and actively work to avoid and eliminate them. Be ready and willing to be held accountable when you commit a microaggression or other expression of bias. Acknowledge the impact, regardless of your intentions, take an active role in repairing the harm, and commit to continued and ongoing work.
10. Consider the developmental, cultural, and linguistic appropriateness of the learning environment and your teaching practices for each child. This is especially important when children appear to be inattentive, uncompliant, or not engaged.
11. Recognize and be prepared to provide different levels of support to different children depending on what they need. For example, some children may need more attention at certain times than others. This approach is equitable when each child's needs are met.
12. Consider how your own biases (implicit and explicit) may be contributing to your interactions and relationships with particular children. Also reflect on whether biases may contribute to your understanding of a situation. How might they be affecting a child's behavior, especially when the behavior presents challenges?
13. Be willing to constructively share feedback and discuss alternative approaches when observing potential microaggressions by others, especially toward a member of your own social groups.
14. Employ multi-tiered systems of support, collaborating with early childhood special educators and other allied professionals as needed, based on establishing a close relationship with each child.

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Establishing reciprocal relationships with families

15. Embrace the primary role of families in children’s development and learning. Recognize and acknowledge family members based on the composition the family defines. Seek to learn about and honor each family’s child-rearing values, language (including dialects), and culture. As much as possible, uphold families’ right to make decisions for and with their children. If a family’s desire conflicts with your professional knowledge, seek to identify common goals and mutually acceptable strategies.
16. Avoid stereotypes, and instead take time to learn about the families with whom you work, including their cultures, languages, customs, and beliefs, to strive to provide a culturally and linguistically responsive learning environment. This requires intentionally reaching out to families who, for a range of reasons, may not seek out or respond to formal or informal invitations or opportunities to interact with educators.
17. Maintain consistently high expectations for family involvement, with consistent, conscious, and responsive supports for involvement, being careful to avoid creating hardship for families or singling children out as not belonging. Recognize that different families may define their goals for involvement differently from others. Families may face challenges (such as less flexibility during the workday or transportation issues) that may require creative approaches to building engagement.
18. Reach out and work collaboratively with families and allied professionals to provide the most culturally and linguistically responsive learning environment for each child.

Teaching to promote development and learning, and planning curriculum to meet meaningful goals

19. Involve children and families in the design and implementation of learning activities, recognizing the funds of knowledge children and families bring as members of their cultures and communities.
20. Set challenging and achievable goals for all children. Provide all children opportunities for rich, engaging learning experiences, including play, that are meaningful to each child and that promote their sense of agency. Scaffold children’s learning and communicate—both verbally and nonverbally—with authentic confidence in the child’s ability to achieve learning goals.
21. Communicate the value of multilingualism. Design and implement learning activities in a language that children understand. Support the development and maintenance of their first language while also helping children gain proficiency in English. Design and implement learning activities that recognize that bilingual children differ from monolinguals in various ways across developmental domains.
22. Recognize and support dialectic differences while helping children gain proficiency in the dialect they are expected to use in school.

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Assessing children's learning and development

23. Recognize the potential of your own preferences, culture, and biases to affect your judgment when observing, documenting, and assessing children's behavior, learning, or development. If your expectations (based on your professional knowledge) are not in accord with a family's expectations, seek to establish mutually acceptable expectations. For dual language learners, conduct assessments in both of the child's languages.
24. Use authentic assessments that seek to identify children's strengths and provide a well-rounded picture of development.
25. Take care to assure that assessment results differentiate competence within a specific domain and not differences by race, ethnicity, language, gender, or other similar factors.
26. Focus on strengths. Recognize that it is often easier to focus on what a child *isn't* doing compared with peers than it is to see what that child *can* do in a given context.

Advocating on behalf of young children, families, and the early childhood profession

27. Speak out regarding unfair policies or practices and challenge biased perspectives. Work to embed anti-bias approaches in all aspects of early childhood program delivery, including standards, assessments, and curriculum.
28. Work collaboratively with social justice allies to challenge and change policies, laws, systems, and institutional practices that keep social inequities in place.

Recommendations for schools, centers, family child care homes, and other early childhood education settings

1. Provide high-quality early learning services that demonstrate a commitment to equitable outcomes for all children by reflecting on and arranging budgets to equitably meet the needs of children and staff.
2. Take proactive steps with measurable goals to recruit and retain educators and leaders that meet professional expectations and reflect the diversity of children and families served (especially regarding race, ethnicity, gender, and home language).
3. Employ staff who speak the languages of the children and families served. When many languages are spoken by the families served, establish relationships with translators (not the children themselves) who can assist in communicating with families.
4. Ensure, as much as possible, that any formal assessment tools are designed and validated for use with the children being assessed. Key characteristics to consider include age, culture, language, social and economic status, and abilities and disabilities. If appropriate assessment tools are not available for particular children, be aware of the limitations of those assessments.

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5. Recognize the value of serving a diverse group of children and strive to strengthen the range of diversity among those served, especially regarding race, ethnicity, language, and social and economic status, which are dimensions on which early childhood education settings have historically been segregated.
6. Provide regular time and space to foster a learning community among administrators and staff that includes opportunities for reflection and learning regarding cultural respect and responsiveness, including potential instances of implicit bias and microaggressions toward children and/or families.
7. Establish collaborative relationships with other agencies and institutions within the community that empower and give voice to diverse perspectives to strengthen the web of support available to all children and families.
8. Establish clear protocols for dealing with challenging behaviors and provide consultation and support as needed. Regularly monitor data to consider differential impact of policies and procedures to ensure that implicit bias is not contributing to differential treatment of children. Set a goal of immediately limiting and ultimately eliminating suspensions and expulsions by ensuring appropriate supports for teachers, children, and families.
9. Create durable opportunities for multiple voices to engage in leadership and decision-making.

Recommendations for higher education and systems providing professional development

1. Prepare current and prospective early childhood educators to commit to an anti-bias approach to teaching. Ensure that prospective educators' preparation and field experiences provide opportunities to work effectively with diverse populations in all their responsibilities as early childhood educators.
2. Prepare prospective early childhood educators to meet the "Professional Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Educators" (formerly NAEYC's Professional Preparation Standards), particularly ensuring that the curriculum and field experiences reflect a focus on diversity, inclusion, and equity within each of the competencies to cultivate culturally and linguistically responsive practices.
4. Take proactive steps to ensure access to and promote success in higher education. This includes understanding the student populations (attending to multiple social identities and contexts, such as culture, language, race, ethnicity, prior educational experience, employment status, social and economic status, etc.) and designing programs responsive to this diversity. Programs should consider their course delivery modes and the times of the day and week when courses are offered; connect students to financial aid, academic advising, and tutoring; invest in cohort models that support students and build community; and connect students to resources on campus to help with needs related to transportation, food, housing, and child care.

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5. Implement transfer and articulation policies that recognize and award credits for students' previous early childhood courses and degrees. This will support a wide-range of students in advancing their postsecondary credentials.
6. Work actively to foster a sense of belonging and growth mindset among first-generation college students.
7. Set and achieve measurable goals to recruit and retain a representative faculty across multiple dimensions, including but not limited to race, ethnicity, language, ability, gender, and sexual orientation.
8. Provide regular time and space to foster a learning community among administrators, faculty, and staff that includes opportunities for reflection and learning regarding cultural respect and responsiveness, including potential instances of implicit bias and microaggressions toward children and/or families.
9. Ensure that all professional standards, career pathways, articulation, advisory structures, data collection, and financing systems in state professional development systems are subjected to a review of whether each embedded policy supports workforce diversity by aiming to reflect the children and families served and offer equitable access to professional development. These systems should also be reviewed to determine whether they serve to increase compensation parity across early childhood education settings and sectors, birth through age 8.

Recommendations for public policy

A large and well-established body of knowledge demonstrates that high-quality early childhood programs promote children's opportunities for lifelong success and that public investments in such programs generate savings that surpass returns for the stock market over time (citations). As a result, addressing the current systemic inequities within early childhood education is not only a moral imperative, but also a wise and critical investment in our nation's future.

1. Create and advance policy solutions that support child well-being and strengthen the bonds between all children and their families.
2. Increase financing for expanded high-quality early learning services to a level sufficient to both meet demand and eliminate current inequities. This includes additional financing to address all elements necessary to support a high-quality early learning system, as well as equitable access to quality higher education and compensation for a qualified workforce.
3. Revise early learning standards and indicators in quality rating and improvement systems to actively reflect the principles of cultural and linguistic responsiveness and anti-bias. Require ongoing, in-depth staff development on these issues.

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4. Increase the opportunities for families to choose early childhood programs that serve diverse populations of children, thereby reducing the segregation (primarily by race, language, and class) that fuels persistent discrimination and inequities.
5. Include mixed delivery systems that elevate community-based programs, inclusive of family child care homes, in state funding systems for early childhood education. Ensure that this system equitably supports community-based programs to meet high-quality standards and allows families to choose the setting that best meets their needs.
6. Ensure funding and supports for children, teachers, and administrators regarding effective tools and resources that provide alternatives to the use of suspensions and expulsions across early childhood settings.
7. *Placeholder for compensation (pending Power to the Profession recommendations.)*
8. Incorporate the science of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and trauma into federal and state policies and programs.
9. Establish a national child poverty target that sets the goal of cutting the US child poverty rate by half within a decade, creating an impetus to drive policy that reduces child poverty by such means as supporting a family's financial well-being and stability, ensuring universal child health insurance, and providing universal access to early care and education.

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