

TOWARD A MORE EQUITABLE TOMORROW

A LANDSCAPE ANALYSIS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD LEADERSHIP



ascend
aspen institute

DEAR FRIENDS AND PARTNERS,

The need for strong leadership in the face of crisis has never been clearer than in the past year. Nowhere is this more urgent than how we strengthen the lives of our youngest children and families by reimagining early childhood development in this country.

With the knowledge that early childhood systems have been shaped by a history of structural racism and sexism, we have the opportunity to reimagine those systems with a new mandate: family- and child-centered, with an intersectional and equity lens, and with a focus not simply on closing the achievement gap but on ensuring the social-emotional development and learning of families. We are honored to share this research in service of those goals.

Families desperately need affordable, accessible, and quality care and learning for their children, yet the existing field is unable to meet that need. Meanwhile, the child care industry, undervalued and under-resourced because of historic and system inequity, is teetering. Formal and informal systems of care, learning, and support are struggling to meet the bottom line, keep children and teachers safe, and pay their teachers a living wage.

The findings outlined in *Toward a More Equitable Tomorrow: A Landscape Analysis of Early Childhood Leadership* are based on a robust landscape analysis of the early childhood field with support from the Buffett Early Childhood Fund, David and Lucile Packard Foundation, and the Bezos Family Foundation. More than 80 leaders, from research, practice, policy, philanthropy, and families with young children, informed this report. Our inquiry was grounded in appreciation and respect for the advances made; intentional focus on racial, economic, and gender equity; commitment to innovation; and an open mind to new approaches.

What was abundantly clear with every parent and partner we spoke to is that this moment demands leadership. Leadership that reflects the full talent of our country. Leadership that is courageous, collaborative,

and visionary. If we are serious about a bold new path for early childhood, we must bet on the leaders who will influence the policies and systems needed to change the trajectory of our youngest children and families.

We also recognize and were privileged to speak with many of the existing or newly developing leadership programs focused on strengthening early childhood development and family well-being. Many, like us, have a commitment to racial equity at their core. No one organization alone can create the seismic transformation our nation's children and families deserve. We must work together with a new spirit of openness and collaboration. Together we can build a legacy that honors families and paves a path for future generations.

We hope that you take the time to explore the findings and the insights they provide on what we need to catalyze bold leadership that charts a new future, grounded in equity and centered in the expertise of families. When we solve for and with families—children and parents—the rest will follow.

Sincerely, _____

JACKIE BEZOS, President and Co-Founder, Bezos Family Foundation

MIKE BEZOS, Vice President and Co-Founder, Bezos Family Foundation

MEERA MANI, Director, Children, Families, and Communities Program, The David and Lucile Packard Foundation

ANNE MOSLE, Vice President, Aspen Institute, and Executive Director, Ascend at the Aspen Institute

JESSIE RASMUSSEN, President, Buffett Early Childhood Fund

CONTENTS

Click to jump to a section

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

WHY NOW⁰¹

OUR FINDINGS⁰²

MOVING FORWARD⁰³

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

APPENDIX B

APPENDIX C

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Our country is at a moment of fundamental change in terms of how we work and learn, how we provide care and connect, and how we build community. If the events of the past two years have taught us anything, it is that to prepare for future crises, we must put the interests of children and families at the center of our rebuilding efforts. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

One of the biggest shifts we need to make is in the way we design systems and implement, scale, and center child development in the United States. Progress calls for a fundamental reckoning and a move to rebuild our systems with racial equity, intersectional approaches, and inclusion of family and parent voices at the center of our solutions. Now is the time for a comprehensive, nationwide agenda for all children and families.

Everyone working on behalf of children and families must be ready to seize this opportunity for systemic change and transform early childhood structures to enable all children and families to thrive.

To meet this charge, Ascend at the Aspen Institute — with support from the Bezos Family Foundation, Buffett Early Childhood Fund, and the David and Lucile Packard Foundation — sought a deeper perspective on the opportunities ahead and what type of leadership is needed to build a vibrant, highly equitable, effective, and diverse early childhood field.

In March 2020, we completed a robust landscape analysis of the state of the early childhood field, tapping the expertise and insights of nearly 80 diverse leaders from an array of research, practice, policy, philanthropy, and family backgrounds, who generously gave their time and wisdom to inform this report.

In addition, Ascend, together with Lake Research Partners, conducted a series of virtual focus groups of parents with low incomes and young children (under age 6) and a poll of 1,200 voters to gauge voter support of the two-generation (2Gen) approach and early childhood development and care policy options. We also explored more than 20 fellowship and other leadership efforts to capture lessons learned and identify opportunities for

collaboration. And, finally, we asked three parents to share their experiences navigating our current early childhood systems and to review a draft report. Their comments and feedback are integrated throughout our findings.

Our research found that to achieve better outcomes for young children and their families, we must expand our definition of leadership far beyond positional power and build the capacity of leaders at all levels of the early childhood development field to:

- **Advance racial equity competency and accelerate racial diversity in early childhood leadership;**
- **Think and work collaboratively across systems;**
- **Redefine the economics of early care and learning (with workforce as a priority);**
- **Authentically include parent and caregiver expertise in policy, practice, and systems;**
- **Be powerful storytellers, narrators, and advocates; and**
- **Create conditions that fuel innovation while learning from and applying research and practice.**

To transform the early childhood development field, we need bold leadership that is able to chart a new future, one that is grounded in equity and centered in the expertise of families. By investing in the people who will lead the way, we can catalyze economic prosperity, foster an ecosystem marked by radical collaboration, and create a nation that centers children and their families over the next decade. This report shares findings from our landscape assessment and offers insights for integrating these findings into a cross-sector child and family agenda for 2030.

WHY NOW



WHY NOW?

We Must Meet This Moment

Political leadership, public will, and a pipeline of solutions are aligning to create an opportunity to shift the trajectory for American families. Congress delivered key investments in relief packages, including the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act; the Coronavirus Relief and Recovery Supplemental Appropriations Act; and the American Rescue Plan Act, which included more than \$1.9 trillion to help families and the nation recover and rebuild from the economic and health crisis precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Among its provisions targeted to family well-being, the law included an expanded and refundable child care tax credit, \$39 billion in grants for child care providers, \$1 billion for the Head Start program, and increased funding to support child care services for families with low incomes. The Biden-Harris Administration, led by its commitment to racial equity, plans to build upon the law, making temporary provisions permanent and adding unprecedented investments in “human infrastructure” systems, including those on early care and learning. Its proposed Build Back Better plan invests both in families’ access to affordable child care as well as in strengthening the child care field

with support for providers and higher wages for caregivers. Additionally, House and Senate leaders from both sides of the aisle are exploring how to strengthen mental health systems and supports for children and families. Everyone who is engaged in systemic change on behalf of children and families must be ready to transform this opportunity into early childhood systems that enable our youngest children and families to thrive. The potential is great, but so is the need.

As noted in [Start with Equity](#), a report from Children’s Equity Project and the Bipartisan Policy Center, more than half of the 74 million children in the United States are children of color, and they are served by learning systems that are gravely inequitable. The COVID-19 pandemic and its effects on the health, economic well-being, and education of young children exacerbated existing inequalities.¹ By acknowledging how structural racism has shaped our early childhood systems to date, we have an opportunity to reimagine those systems with a new mandate: they must be family- and child-centered, with an intersectional and equity lens, and with a focus on closing the achievement gap and ensuring the social-emotional development and learning of all families.

FAMILIES ALREADY KNOW WHAT THEY NEED

The success of parents and the success of their children are intrinsically connected. It is imperative that we recognize what we have learned



The need for quality, affordable child care remains paramount, even as top concerns shift to safety and cleanliness in the COVID-19 context.



Daycares have closed and there is an ongoing issue of parents having difficulties finding child care that is both high-quality and affordable, which was hard before the pandemic and is even more difficult now.



Seven-in-ten voters favor making parents enrolled in college or workforce training programs eligible for state-funded childcare subsidies.



Support for equal access to quality child care crosses party lines; this reaches a majority of Trump (57 percent) and Biden voters (80 percent).

PARENT VOICES

¹<https://bipartisanpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/CEP-report-execsummary-070920-FINAL.pdf>



through 2Gen approaches and build on the resilience of families, including parents' aspirations for themselves and their children. Research shows that high-quality child care and early education have the potential to fundamentally shift the trajectory of a child's development. Concurrently, completion of postsecondary education for a parent is one of the greatest predictors of a family's overall economic mobility. With unemployment skyrocketing and technology transforming how we work, we must address these critical issues simultaneously. As one African American mother in the South told Ascend as part of our Parent Voices 2020 research, "[You've got to be] a superhero. You just got to, you got to be able to just roll with the punches and be able to do anything at any time, anywhere and for your child, and that means anything."

This is a role many parents are trying to hold right now in the face of significant challenges that have long disproportionately impacted communities of color.² Hence, we must apply solutions that specifically address inequities. High-quality early care and learning, whether public or private, when designed to advance equity, can support both parents and children. Affordable, high-quality child care and learning gives families, across family structures, support for parents to hold a job while giving children critical care and developmental and learning experiences.

Additionally, while women continue to carry the burden of providing care for children, new energy and evidence is

emerging around the importance of fathers' roles in family well-being.³ Parents in our Parent Voices 2020 research enthusiastically supported programs for fathers. One multiracial mother in Minnesota said, "I do feel like fathers should get equal support. They are parents, too. And I feel like there isn't enough support out there for them now. They definitely get overlooked a lot. It's definitely something that I feel strongly about."

THE MOMENTUM IS THERE

Our public systems are also at a major juncture. Federal initiatives—the Child Care Development Block Grant; Head Start and Early Head Start; Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting—have proven to be essential funding streams to support quality early learning and health for families with low incomes. The approach of investing in children early and aligning the systems

I do feel like fathers should get equal support. They are parents, too.

that support them is gaining traction. Early Head Start, for example, has [created partnerships](#) with child care programs, expanded services for very young children with disabilities, and enhanced services for pregnant women. Upstream, whole-family innovations in federal levers like Medicaid hold promise to close racial health disparities, especially in infant and maternal mortality. In many states, investments in pre-kindergarten for 4-year-olds (and some 3-year-olds) are growing. And the pandemic has brought the need for systemic approaches to social and emotional health for both children and their caregivers to the forefront. We have an opportunity to position the future of early childhood development and care as a

²Parent Voices 2020 focus group and public opinion survey with 1,200 likely voters in October and November 2020 by Lake Research Partners and its partner firm The Tarrance Group, commissioned by Ascend at the Aspen Institute. <https://ascend.aspeninstitute.org/parents-voices-2020-focus-group-findings/>

³<https://www.irp.wisc.edu/resource/the-role-of-fathers-in-childrens-health/>

public good and a fundamental component of our national infrastructure. Investment, shared responsibility, and political will from all sectors are at the heart of ensuring all children—especially Black, Indigenous, and Latino children—are able to thrive from the start.

A lack of affordable, quality child care is also contributing to the racial and gender wage gap,⁴ a gap that, due to COVID-19 child care closures, is widening for all, especially for families who earn low wages. Early childhood providers are facing catastrophic financial losses due to the pandemic. But, even in a strong economy, child care wages have been unsustainable and unjustly low. Child care is one of the lowest paid professions in America, with an average hourly wage of just under \$11. COVID relief measures from state and federal leaders created waivers that provided flexibility for families; provided direct cash support; and accelerated innovation on telehealth, learning, and service delivery to meet the extraordinary challenges facing parents and children with low incomes. We have witnessed how complex systems can become family centric. Now, we have a window of opportunity to build on these innovations and flexibility to cement the most effective and equitable practices and policies for young children and families.

Each of these factors—historic and system inequity; science and data around the whole family return on investment in early childhood and postsecondary success; the importance of public investments at the state and federal levels; the vitality of leadership that recognizes equity; and a rapidly shifting, traditionally undervalued child care sector—demonstrate both the need and the potential for transformation.

⁴<https://www.vox.com/2018/2/19/17018380/gender-wage-gap-childcare-penalty>

OUR FINDINGS



OUR FINDINGS

National Landscaping Toward the Future of Early Childhood

TWO CRITICAL QUESTIONS SPARKED THIS LANDSCAPING EFFORT	
WHAT is required to close racial and ethnic disparities for children of color?	HOW do we accelerate racially diverse leadership in critical policy and decision-making roles to create the future of early childhood and care?

To answer these questions, Ascend at the Aspen Institute, with support from the Bezos Family Foundation, Buffett Early Childhood Fund, and the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, sought a deeper perspective on what is needed to build a vibrant, highly equitable, effective, and diverse early childhood field. We aimed to identify where leaders can make the most impact on the policies and systems needed to change the trajectory of our youngest children and families and build an ecosystem of early childhood and care leaders.

In March 2020, we completed a robust landscape analysis of the early childhood field, tapping the expertise and insights of nearly 80 diverse leaders, from an array of research, practice, policy, philanthropy, and family backgrounds, who generously gave their time and wisdom to inform this report.

We sought input from more than 20 fellowship and leadership efforts to capture lessons learned and opportunities for collaboration. Ascend reached out to leadership programs focused on early childhood and family economic mobility and well-being as well as programs focused on leaders of color. We harvested insights from the Ascend Fellowship and the Aspen Institute’s 70-year leadership track record.

We also interviewed 20 parents and caregivers with young children and low incomes to explore what they value most in early childhood development providers and the challenges they face in accessing high-quality care and learning for their children. We wanted to understand how their priorities aligned, or did not, with what we heard from field leaders.

In addition, Ascend worked with Lake Research Partners to produce [Parent Voices 2020](#), which includes insights from 12 virtual focus groups of parents with low incomes and young children (under age 6). Focus groups included parents and caregivers across race, ethnicity, gender, family structure, and geography to better understand how COVID-19 and the current racial justice landscape are affecting them and their children. Parent Voices 2020 also included a national election omnibus poll of 1,200 voters fielded October 31–November 3, 2020, by Lake Research and its partner firm The Tarrance Group to gauge voter support of the 2Gen approach and early childhood development and care policy options. This report features snapshots from that research.

Finally, we asked three parents to share their experiences and review the draft report. Their feedback is included throughout the final report.

A summary of what we learned follows. →

For Leaders in the Early Childhood Field

When asked what they seek in early care and education, the parents we interviewed prioritized safety, trust, and quality of care and learning. They also expressed a desire to have a relationship with providers. “I look for a provider who is honest and trustworthy. I need someone that I can trust to take care of my child while I am at work,” noted one parent.



Nearly every parent respondent identified these three characteristics as most important:

Safe and warm environment for their child

Friendly and caring teachers and staff

Easy access to teachers and staff

To make these priorities a reality for more families, our research identified six areas in which we must build the capacity of leaders at all levels of the child development field:

01

Advance racial equity competency and accelerate racial diversity in early childhood leadership

02

Think and work collaboratively across systems

03

Redefine the economics of early care and learning with workforce as a priority

04

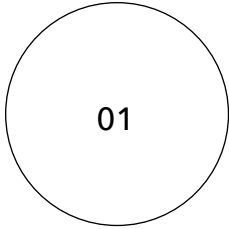
Authentically include parent and caregiver expertise in policy, practice, and systems

05

Be powerful storytellers, narrators, and advocates

06

Create conditions that fuel innovation while learning from and applying research and practice



Advance Racial Equity Competency and Accelerate Racial Diversity in Early Childhood Leadership

Diversity, equity, and inclusion were central themes in interview and survey responses. Respondents focused not only on race and ethnicity, but also on socioeconomic status, gender, language, and rural and urban communities. Our research points to a resounding call for deepening competency in racial equity and for more diversity in early childhood leadership, with the ultimate goal of eliminating disparities in outcomes for young children and families. Racial equity competency includes an understanding of structural racism and how it impacts the field, workforce, leadership, and policymaking. Racial equity competency also includes an understanding of the interactions between early childhood providers and families and how to engage with children and families with an appreciation for their

cultural backgrounds. The need is underscored by what Black, Latino, Native American, Asian American and Pacific Islander parents told us in focus groups about their growing concerns that racism impacts their children.

“[Racism] is just one of those things since I know that they are going to have to deal with it, and I am just going to try to prepare them the best I can. I am just trying to set them up in the best position to either not have to deal with it or deal with it from a better point than I had to,” shared a Black dad from the Midwest.

“When I search for child care, I look for patience and acceptance of diversity in the provider,” said another parent.



THE EARLY CHILDHOOD FIELD ECHOED THE NEED TO ADDRESS THIS CHALLENGE:



“What do we need to understand and do in recruiting and nominating [to bring in more diverse leaders]?”

Ascend Fellow Kristin Bernhard, former deputy commissioner for system reform, Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning, and senior vice president for strategy and policy, Start Early

“People of color don’t desire to just be in the classroom. We need to understand that there are systemic mechanisms that keep people of color from being in decision-making positions.”

Portia Kennel, senior advisor, Buffett Early Childhood Fund

“To build equity competency and capacity, both within an organization and more broadly for the field, is a long-term, multi-year and ongoing commitment from board to staff to the field.”

Lynette Fraga, CEO, Childcare Aware

“We might need to ask hard questions about why people of color and/or people with different backgrounds are not advancing to leadership positions.”

Steffanie Clothier, investment director, child development, Gary Community Investments

“Leaders need to understand not only what racial equity is but also critical race theory as a framework to examine race and power.”

Leah Austin, president and CEO, National Black Child Development Institute

Think and Work Collaboratively Across Systems

Our research pointed to a need to look at the field's challenges holistically, dynamically, and with a forward-thinking lens, or, as one respondent described it, "a system that works in the 21st century."

↳ **CARLA THOMPSON PAYTON**, vice president, program strategy, W.K. Kellogg Foundation, asked, **"What are the child care needs of the 21st century family? Is the child care of the past the right model for our present and future?"**

Ascend Fellow **JOE WATERS**, co-founder and CEO, Capita, similarly challenged the field to look ahead and consider **"how to ensure all children and families flourish in an age of social, cultural, and economic disruption and ensure that systems are nimble enough to respond to those disruptions."**

Ascend Fellow **DIPESH NAVSARIA**, pediatrician, and faculty, University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health, and leader, Reach Out and Read, called for a **multi- and cross-sector ecosystem of support that enables, for example, early childhood health consultants and early childhood development centers to have access to one another and improve outcomes.**

Ascend Fellow **GRETCHEN HAMMER**, former Colorado Medicaid Director, and founder, Public Leadership Consulting Group, posed the challenge as, **"What is the role of the early childhood system to stabilize families and address and mitigate social risk factors?"**

Ascend Fellow **BILL JAEGER**, vice president, Colorado Children's Campaign, said, **"I think we're actually still in systems building mode, so we could get it right from the start."**

While field leaders' perspectives support a new way of working, the voices of parents themselves reinforce these ideas. **Through our Parent Voices work, we heard:**



With the anxieties and disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, **parents are feeling overwhelmed, worried, frustrated, and stressed.**



The stimulus checks opened parents' eyes to the possibilities of the role of government, **but they feel cynical about future help.**



They are busy and stretched for time, and distance learning is difficult for those who have school-aged children.

PARENT VOICES

Many respondents emphasized the need for leaders who *understand and engage with peers whose backgrounds, approaches, and opinions may be different from their own*. They cited abilities to navigate differences, serve as conflict managers, communicate, and advocate as closely intertwined.

↳ LISA KLEIN, executive director, Alliance for Early Success, described people who possess these skills as “those who can build networks and partnerships, outside of existing leadership pipelines.”

SARAH RITTLING, executive director, First Five Years Fund, said, “We think it is critical to think about what we are doing around racial equity and how we are communicating/articulating it in a relevant and also productive way.”

PORTIA KENNEL, senior advisor, Buffett Early Childhood Fund, said there is a need for relational skills and specifically the “capacity to engage and build relationships in an increasingly diverse world.”

MEGAN WYATT, managing director, Bezos Family Foundation, emphasized the importance of a “workforce that reflects the diversity of communities, including multiple languages.”

DARA MUNSON, president and CEO, Family Focus, spoke to the “ability to learn, fail, and learn and come to the work with a commitment to unbridled collaboration.”



Parents are concerned that their kids aren't getting what they need, and at the same time, **many working families cannot stop meeting work, financial, or family obligations** which in turn exacerbates families' stress and mental health struggles.



If parents were in charge, across groups they say they would create **affordable or even no-cost child care**. Other programs they'd institute include affordable housing, distribution of baby and toddler supplies, universal health care, financial literacy classes and support, maternity and paternity leave, and mental health support.



A strong majority of voters are personally concerned that **parents of young children are struggling with a range of issues—including child care, COVID-19 complications, economic security, and mental health**.



Those most acutely concerned about the struggles of parents of young children are women who voted for Biden, Black voters, Latino voters, and Democrats.

PARENT VOICES

Respondents also spoke to the need to *work collaboratively and build a connective tissue across systems to ensure efficient and effective use of resources to support families. Parents expressed the disconnect they often experience and how getting assistance can feel unpredictable and arbitrary, noting that accessibility too often comes down to luck. As one mom from the mid-Atlantic region told us, “You try the best you can. Because there’s so much out there. It’s just, you have to know people.”*

↳ **SHERRI KILLINS STEWART**, director of systems alignment and integration, BUILD Initiative, noted the need to focus on the **“economic stability of each and every family through whole family approaches versus siloed programmatic strategies.”**

JOAN LOMBARDI, director, Early Opportunities, and senior advisor, Bernard van Leer Foundation, said, **“We have to underscore the importance of a 2Gen approach. To be successful, early childhood must focus on young children and the adults in children’s lives. We need a new generation of leaders that understand this approach.”**

PAUL DWORKIN, executive vice president for community child health, Connecticut Children’s Medical Center, described the challenge of engaging **“all critical sectors in comprehensive systems-building.”**

Ascend Fellow **SARAH WATAMURA**, professor and chair of the Department of Psychology, University of Denver, focused on the need to consider families holistically and prioritize **“wrap around family needs (parent mental health, housing, work, education).”**

JESSICA SAGER, co-founder and CEO, All Our Kin, echoed this sentiment, citing a **growing recognition in the field for what parents need comprehensively**, including the field’s recognition of meeting the myriad needs of parents, such as transportation and caring across generations, as well as needs discussed more frequently, like access.

RYNN SANGO, program director, Family Tree, and parent peer reviewer, emphasized the **focus on mental health as well as thinking broadly about collaboration**, including with faith-based organizations. She and Tameka Henry, chairperson, Clark County Board of Directors, Acelero Learning, and parent reviewer, also noted the need to **consider connections beyond early childhood and into the K-12 system.**

KRIS PERRY, deputy secretary, California Health and Human Services Agency for Early Childhood Development, spoke to the opportunity to maximize resources across systems, for example, **“What revenue is underutilized in supporting early childhood services such as Medicaid, tax credits, and Paid Family Leave?”**

MICHAELA MARTIN, student, La Verne University, and parent peer reviewer, added, **“Think collaboratively—and also flexibly. Many nonprofits and advocacy groups become siloed because small differences in approach, wording, and ideal scenarios become fracture points.”**



Redefine the Economics of Early Care and Learning with Workforce as a Priority

The parents we heard from made it clear that affordability of quality care is a major barrier. They cited cost of care as their greatest concern as well as a desire for financial support, like a voucher or subsidy, and “child care options that meet my expectations or needs.” However, resources can be limited. As one parent reported, “There is a very long wait list for financial assistance in my area. You can wait over a year before getting vouchers.”

There is considerable tension between breadwinning and caregiving. Working parents need child care to be affordable and available when they need it. For many, flexibility and scheduling were also concerns.

While many home-based providers work to meet these needs by lowering rates and offering more flexible hours, the challenge of providing the care and learning families need at a cost they can afford, while also investing in workforce development and retention, remains difficult. Field leaders viewed this challenge through the lens of workforce and compensation. There is also a sense of urgency around recruiting and retaining the pipeline of workers. Additionally, respondents, including our parent expert peer reviewers, cautioned that the systemic issues are broader than workforce compensation. They acknowledged that addressing compensation may be an uphill battle that requires big policy change and a disrupter mentality as well as a change in how the system respects caregivers, a significant percentage of whom are women and people of color.

Respondents noted that broader, systemic issues at the root of the field must also be addressed. Respect for the workforce, credentialing, pipeline, and diversity in the workforce surfaced as key issues for consideration. There is also a need to look at the economic and social drivers of access to early care and learning as well as the community economic impact and context.

↳ **DAN WUORI**, director of early learning, The Hunt Institute, spoke to the need to resolve **“child care’s status as a broken economic market.”**

A **SENIOR PHILANTHROPIC PROGRAM OFFICER** explained that workforce issues require social change. She asked, **“How do we create societal change so early care and education providers are valued and highly compensated for their important roles?”**

DANIELLE GONZALES, executive director, New Mexico First, noted the need to solve evolving problems, such as **“affordability and access in a time of growing inequality.”**

Ascend Fellow **STEVEN DOW**, founder and special advisor, CAP Tulsa, said, **“We need to figure out how we significantly improve the outcomes and the workforce and fund it all.”**

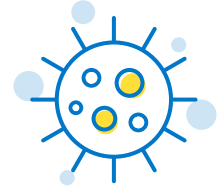
Parent Voices Survey



Parents in our Parent Voices survey report that there is an ongoing issue of it being difficult to find child care that is both high-quality and affordable.



Many parents articulated the bad choices they have—risk illness, find different babysitters instead of a longer-term arrangement, or work remotely while providing care.



Parents also say that their priority now in finding child care is safety and cleanliness, centered around preventing and spreading COVID - 19.



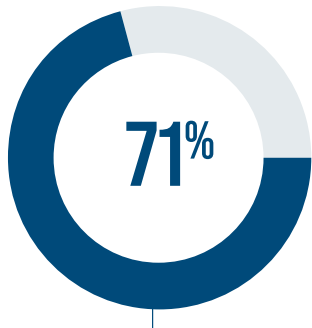
Many parents who have sent their children to child care say that they have had to scramble to meet their child care needs because their centers have been closed. They also shared other reasons such as the person who was watching their older kids was not watching the younger kids, or parents are home watching their older kids who are in virtual school and need help with their younger kids.



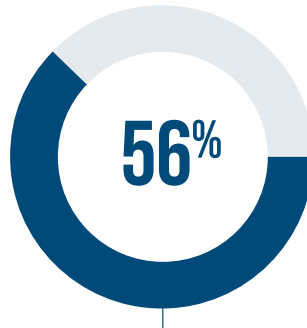
Voters also perceive child care safety as a challenge for young parents. When asked, “Here are some things that parents of young children from birth to age 5 have said they are struggling with right now. For each, how concerned are you personally—very concerned, somewhat concerned, a little concerned, not concerned at all?” 62 percent of voters mentioned the safety of child care situation.

BY THE NUMBERS

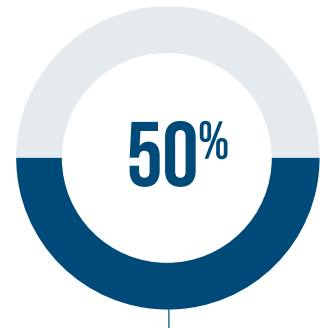
Both parents and voters believe that balancing work and family, including child care, is an issue that parents of young children from birth to 5 are struggling with:



of all voters say balancing work and family is a challenge



of voters who are fathers say it is a top concern



of voters who are mothers say it is a top concern

Authentically Include Parent and Caregiver Expertise in Policy, Practice, and Systems

The importance of incorporating family expertise and voice came up frequently with all respondents, including parents, who spoke to the importance of open communication and a willingness for early care and education leaders to listen to the families they serve. Ascend’s experience with engaging parents in an authentic way to center their perspective and lived experiences in practice and policy confirms the power of this focus. As Ascend Parent Advisor Ryan Bell so aptly put it, “We want to be a part of the process because that makes us want to be more successful.”

Respondents emphasized that parents are the experts in their own lives and know what their children and families need.

↳ **SHANNON RUDISILL**, executive director, Early Childhood Funders Collaborative, explained the challenge as, “How can we lift up parents and their voices and build their power, rather than presume that professionals need to ‘educate’ parents? ... I think we need leaders willing to put the people most affected by problems at the center of designing solutions—our ‘expert’ and evidence-driven work is an important component, but **we’ve neglected the importance of lived experience.**”

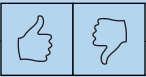
PORTIA KENNEL, senior advisor, Buffett Early Childhood Fund, called for **a need to hear parents as well as community voices**. She said that both need to be equal partners at the table and that their voices “should be incorporated into any leadership development strategy.”

CARLA THOMPSON PAYTON, vice president, program strategy, W.K. Kellogg Foundation, also noted research as an urgent issue, which she looked at through a diversity lens. She asked, “**How does policy, practice, and research support the cultural needs of our diverse families?**”

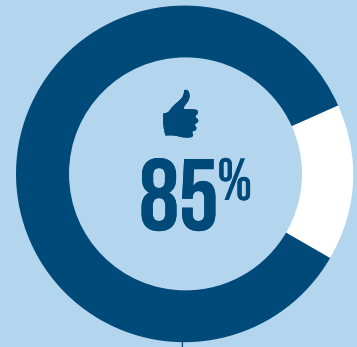
Ascend Fellow **BILL JAEGER**, vice president, Colorado Children’s Campaign, spoke to the “**ability to listen and honor lived experience instead of just academic research.**”

A PARENT we interviewed cited **ease of communication, availability of curriculum, [and] facility openness** as priorities—a sentiment echoed by other parents.

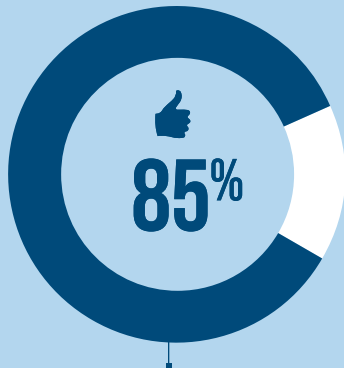




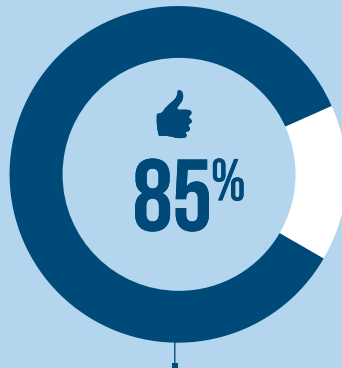
The funding issues and fragmented structures that support the early childhood development system were prevalent in our research. When parents were asked to give a thumbs up or thumbs down to the importance of specific aspects of diversity, equity, and inclusion factors in their children’s learning and care experience, they overwhelmingly gave **a thumbs up.**



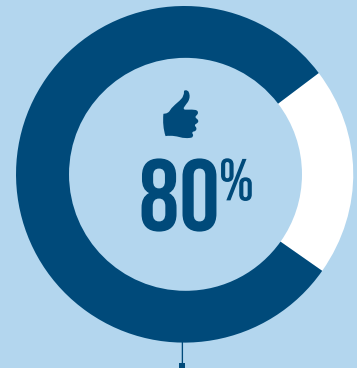
The staff accommodates different learning styles.



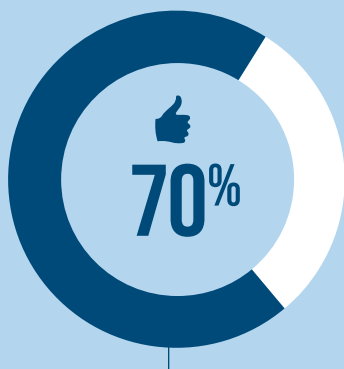
The staff seeks to understand people with different experiences.



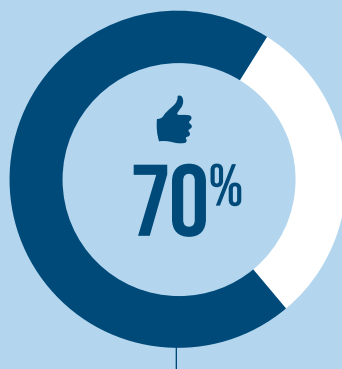
The staff aims to keep all students active and engaged.



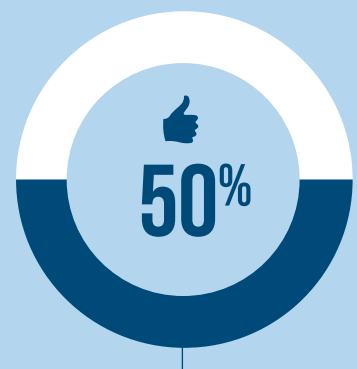
The staff involves parents and families in learning.



The staff challenges negative stereotypes about gender, race, and experiences.



The staff involves the community in learning.



The staff exposes students to diverse cultures in deep and meaningful ways.

Be Powerful Storytellers, Narrators, and Advocates

Parents and early childhood leaders alike understand that policies impact children’s learning and care experiences. While early childhood leaders have deep expertise and understand where systems could be more effective, they have a core concern that they do not always have the skills to play the role of chief narrator and advocate for the systemic shifts and funding needed to truly support young children and families. Our research pointed to a strong belief in the importance of offering leaders an opportunity to build those skills. Respondents also favor raising a collective voice that maximizes the current, national focus on early childhood for truly sustainable, comprehensive support.

STEVE BARNETT, senior co-director, National Institute for Early Education Research, outlined this issue as **“how to build public will to support funding needed for strong programs.”**

Ascend Fellow **MYRA JONES-TAYLOR**, former Connecticut early childhood commissioner, and chief policy impact officer, the Urban Institute said, “We need really clear communicators with the ability to advocate. **Advocacy is a different muscle.**”

JANET FROETSCHER, president, J.B and M.K. Pritzker Family Foundation, cited a need for leaders who can work across sectors, forge partnerships, engage new voices, and **“bring others together under a vision, inspire, and be creative.”**

Ascend Fellow **ANN SILVERBERG WILLIAMSON**, former executive director, Utah Department of Human Services, and coordinated care and crisis response lead, Casey Family Programs, asked, **“How will safe, healthy early childhood with access to high quality education be a top priority platform goal of every governor and state education superintendent?”**

MINDY BINDERMAN, founding executive director, Georgia Early Education Alliance for Ready Students, asked, **“How do we get legislators to move from talking about babies to acting for babies?”**

TAMEKA HENRY, board chair, Acelero Learning, and parent peer reviewer, said, “We’re always looking at data, but we need to remember that **stories are data with soul.**”

Ascend Fellow **BETSY DELGADO**, senior vice president and chief mission and education officer, Goodwill of Central and Southern Indiana, asked, “How do we get prepared for national thought around this? **How do we scale and fund nationally** rather than going to state legislature after state legislature?”

Create Conditions that Fuel Innovation While Learning From and Applying Research and Practice

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the need for innovation as systems struggle to rebuild and to do so with equity at the center. Parents said even before the pandemic that they looked for educators and care providers who were willing to innovate. When asked how important it is that providers look for and be willing to try new ideas to improve their children's experience, 75 percent of parents we interviewed said it was very important.

"I think strategy is a big one," one parent told us. "It is nice to have balance between socializing and education at a day care or care facility. I think when child care providers have a strategy to care for children or seem confident in what they do, [it is] less likely that any issues will occur."

Whether it is game-changing, innovative, or just plain different, parents are open to it and appreciate it. "My boy has a speech problem, and they helped me try and find a speech therapist who could come to the facility and help some days of the week," said one parent.

In our interviews and surveys, field leaders spoke to the need to accelerate innovation, including rapid prototyping, while also incorporating the best of what we know about evolving brain science, trauma-informed care, two-generation approaches, and the nexus of early childhood and health.

↳ **SARAH RITTLING**, executive director, First Five Years Fund, noted a need to surface pockets of innovation, build momentum, or **intensify engagement that may be occurring at the state or community level**, and said that doing so would help to accelerate innovation and find federal support for those approaches or models.

MATT GLICKMAN, founder, Promise Venture Studio, said that **a smart system may include the "thoughtful use of technology, which the early childhood space has not embraced fully."** He suggested the use of technology to, "glean information and, where applicable, apply rapid-cycle feedback and changes to improve programs and systems."

Ascend Fellow **KATIE ALBRIGHT**, executive director, Safe & Sound, mentioned the **need to focus on intentionally creating trauma-informed systems** that recognize the impact of trauma across systems while also recognizing and addressing specific forms of trauma.

Ascend Fellow **JOE WATERS**, co-founder and CEO, Capita, looked at the evolving dynamics of trauma. In his survey response, he asked, "**How to build a trauma-smart system of early care in light of the coming wave of climate-induced trauma and displacement?**"

MARY BISSELL, founding partner, ChildFocus, noted that the field is faced with the challenge of ensuring that **policy evolves as brain science evolves.**

JANET FROETSCHER, president, J.B. and M.K. Pritzker Family Foundation, framed the challenge as, "**What does research tell us is best practice policy? How do we scale what works—policy and programs?**"

KRISTIE KAUERZ, director, National P-3 Center, University of Colorado, Denver, wrote that **a great challenge faced by the field is "misusing research to expand investments that produce only marginal effects."**

YVETTE SANCHEZ FUENTES, vice president, national policy, Start Early, advocated for a "place of honesty where we can put real stuff on the table. We're in this situation as a field because no one wants to give a little." She also noted that, "**State leaders need space for innovation to balance the urgency of getting shots into arms with leveraging the seismic federal investments to build new systems.**"

OUR FINDINGS

What Should We Look For in Early Childhood Leaders to Strengthen the Future of the Early Childhood Field?

When it comes to important leadership qualities, our research found the ability to have an impact is more important than title or experience. An overwhelming theme that surfaced is the idea that leaders do not need to have specific pedigrees or skill sets or come from traditional sectors or backgrounds. Instead, the field needs leaders who can energize conversations by bringing in new voices and thinking—particularly leaders who are representative of the young, diverse, and changing population.

ACCORDING TO OUR RESEARCH, THE TOP QUALITIES NEEDED IN EARLY CHILDHOOD LEADERS INCLUDE:

- ★ 01 Leaders of color with informal power who are reflective of the communities they serve
- ★ 02 Those who are ready for their quantum leap moment: not yet at the top of an organization, but have the passion, leadership, and capacity to step into that role
- ★ 03 Game-changing thinkers and dynamic learners with cross-systems capacity
- ★ 04 Out-of-the-box leaders from other sectors

01 | Leaders of Color with Informal Power who are Reflective of the Communities they Serve

Respondents emphasized the need for leaders who bring diverse perspectives that are inclusive and grounded in community values.

↳ Ascend Fellow **LORELEI VARGAS**, former deputy commissioner of child and family well-being, New York City Administration for Children's Services, and chief community impact officer, Trinity Church Wall Street, cited a need to look beyond the traditional cadre of leaders and focus on the right blend of existing and potential leaders, including an intentional focus on racial equity: **"Ascend does a great job of bringing family voices to the table. Now, what would it look like if you had actual community activists at the table, people who don't have degrees, but the community listens to them?"**

RYNN SANGO, program director, Family Tree, and parent peer reviewer, and **TAMEKA HENRY**, board chair, Acelero Learning, and parent peer reviewer, spoke about the importance of **valuing lived experience**. Bell wrote, "For years, all I wanted was for someone to just give me a chance, so I could show them what an asset I could be to their company, but the lack of credentials always stood in my way." Henry added how important passion is to leadership and sustained commitment.

Ascend Fellow **MICHELLE SARCHE**, principal investigator, American Indian and Alaska Native Head Start program, and associate professor, School of Public Health, University of Colorado, Denver, said, **"We need representation by those with lived experience working in or being served by early childhood programs as well as by those who have connected with early childhood programs through their research, evaluation, and data skills."**

02 | Those Who are Ready for Their Quantum Leap Moment

Another broad theme that emerged is that future early childhood development leadership must be visionary, bold, and systems thinkers.

↳ **TOBEKA GREEN**, former president and CEO, National Black Child Development Institute, emphasized, "Creating cohorts of **professionals who have the intangible skills** to influence people, address social injustices, and advocate for policy change." When considering where to target investments, many respondents noted that less intangible skills are often as, if not more, important than content knowledge or traditional, hard skills in early childhood education.

Ascend Fellow **DIPESH NAVSARIA**, pediatrician, and faculty, University of Wisconsin, wrote that leaders ought to have the, **"ability to see beyond their own home field** to embrace and nurture what others might have."

MARY BISSELL, founding partner, ChildFocus, cited the need to consider **"next generation thinkers** or other nomenclature if you want to capture innovative thought and strategy, rather than just a strong suggestion of young leaders early in their careers."

Ascend Fellow **ANN SILVERBERG WILLIAMSON**, coordinated care and crisis response lead, Casey Family Programs, described the type of person or thinking that she sees as a "next gen" leader, writing, "Do you see/experience both their grace and their fearlessness simultaneously? Are they **perpetually curious** and also confident about what is most important to them?"

Ascend Fellow **REGGIE BICHA**, former executive director, Colorado Department of Human Services, and president, Shine Early Learning, said these leaders are "on the verge of tackling systems change and, with additional preparation, will be able to tackle bigger systems change."

KRISTIE KAUERZ, director, National P-3 Center, University of Colorado, Denver, wrote, "They could be at any stage of their career. **It's more about the kinds of questions they're asking, the envelopes they're pushing, and the collaborative relationships in which they engage.**"

CARLA THOMPSON PAYTON, vice president, program strategy, W.K. Kellogg Foundation, said that they are leaders who are **“forward thinkers not bound to traditional models or ways of thinking.”**

MICHAELA MARTIN, student, La Verne University, and parent peer reviewer, explained, “I like the notion of seeking the intangible skills that are vital in looking for leaders, but I struggled with the idea that the best place to find them was rising in a system we know does not always create them, [which] seemed more like tweaking than ground-shaking change.”

Ascend Fellow ANN KALASS, CEO, Starfish Family Services, advocated for looking at “the Number Two within an organization—not yet at top but likely to get there—with at least 10–15 years left in their careers.”

03 | Game-Changing Thinkers and Dynamic Learners with Cross-Systems Capacity

When considering the types of thinkers and change-makers who can lead the field forward, respondents homed in on those able to energize conversations by bringing new voices, thinking, and perspectives to the work. They recommended investing in leaders who represent a broad range of voices, across political perspectives, race and ethnicity, and rural/urban geography.

Respondents also noted a need for leaders able to catalyze collaboration that bridges diverse experiences and backgrounds to ultimately transform the field. This requires investing in people who can make critical connections to sustain efforts and work across organizations, sectors, and levels to corral support.

↳ MARY BISSELL, founding partner, ChildFocus, described future early childhood development leadership needs as looking beyond field-focused learning in other sectors and across disciplines to learn strategies for improving systems.

MICHAELA MARTIN, student, La Verne University, and parent peer reviewer, noted, “It is possible that the type of person who can run an organization is not the same person who can change a system ... but they need to work together.”

PORTIA KENNEL, senior advisor, Buffett Early Childhood Fund, advised, **“Pick somebody who makes us uncomfortable.** Look in the unusual places. Stop rechurning and recreating the same people who have been mirror images of ourselves for 40 years. **If we can make this change, perhaps [investments] will leverage greater impact in the end.”**

SHANNON RUDISILL, executive director, Early Childhood Funders Collaborative, noted, “I think we need people who are willing to think boldly about solutions that previously seemed out of reach.”

Ascend Fellow JOE WATERS, co-founder and CEO, Capita, called for long-term thinkers. As he put it, “Early childhood leaders need to develop the habit of long-term thinking, which is a critical skill largely missing across systems that support young children, but we need to be **building systems and institutions to support the seventh generation of children from today.**”

DEBORAH DARO, senior research fellow, Chapin Hall, University of Chicago, described this leadership need as one **“requiring dynamic learners, people who are problem-solvers open to new learning and unafraid of making mistakes.”**

LISA KLEIN, executive director, Alliance for Early Success, suggested leaders **“who question the status quo and are able to inspire other people.”**

04 | Out-of-the Box Leaders from Other Sectors

Our research indicated a continuing need to look across sectors, in systems-level perspectives, and consider leaders who have a variety of experiences, whether as a local or state policymaker, a grassroots worker, or a community advocate. Specific sectors or backgrounds identified as worth consideration for recruiting and cultivating new early childhood leadership include leaders from information technology, media, and tech; county-level leaders; business leaders; community organizers; grassroots and grassroots leaders; futurists; public opinion strategists; and evaluators.

↳ Building from the notion of bringing in and applying new perspectives, one national early childhood leader suggested investments to bring effective 2Gen models into the early

childhood system. He pointed at K-12 programs that have grown to scale in parallel—like principal and teacher training organizations alongside high-performing charter management organizations—and suggested that family-serving and early childhood education providers could scale symbiotically in the same way. He advised exploration outside of the traditional early childhood ecosystem, as currently defined, including multisite, for-profit child care chains, which serve a significant share of families with low incomes.

STEFFANIE CLOTHIER, investment director, child development, Gary Community Investments, mentioned that “Gary Community Investments’ innovation effort aimed not only to unearth breakthrough ideas but also to attract new investors and talent into the space that could help us solve key challenges.”

Ascend Fellow **JOE WATERS**, co-founder and CEO, Capita, called for “outsiders who can stir up ‘good trouble.’”

KRISTIE KAUERZ, director, National P-3 Center, University of Colorado, Denver, suggested that “rather than being rooted in the core competencies of early childhood, [leadership development should be] more rooted in growing leaders and those types of capacities.”

Parents also believe that a range of experiences is beneficial for child care providers and educators. In fact, 95 percent of parents we surveyed said it was important for providers to have a range of experiences in other fields or professions. When we asked parents why they felt that way, they explained:

↳ “Because every experience is connected. Different and wide-ranging experiences will help teachers encourage and nurture our children in unexpected ways.”

“This may help them better understand social interactions and culture differences.”

“When child care experience is great, there are many more things that impact the ability to give safe and caring supervision. Personality, drive, and compassion are more important than any training.”

OUR FINDINGS

Core Leadership Competencies and Opportunities

Our research identified a need to provide opportunities for leaders in the field to build core competencies in several areas, including: organizational development, adaptive, and other leadership skills; hard skills in storytelling, fundraising, and advocacy; an understanding of the historical context and structures; opportunities to learn from other movements; and support for experiential and action-focused learning that reflect best practice.

TO SUCCESSFULLY BUILD THESE CORE COMPETENCIES ACROSS THE FIELD, EFFECTIVE FELLOWSHIP AND OTHER LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS SHOULD FOCUS IN THESE FIVE AREAS:

- ★ 01 Racial equity commitment and competency
- ★ 02 Executive leadership skills and targeted skills building
- ★ 03 Values-based leadership and long-term commitment
- ★ 04 Building an ecosystem and culture to accelerate impact
- ★ 05 Transfer of knowledge

01 | Racial Equity Commitment and Competency

Recognizing and ensuring that racial equity is a fundamental component of leadership is critical for all leaders, including white leaders. In our research, 74 percent of respondents rated racial equity as one of three top competencies early childhood leaders need. The Aspen Institute Ascend Fellowship was founded on this principle and continues to learn and grow on its journey.

Today, in the wake of increasing police violence and the demand for racial justice, we must deepen racial equity competency in the field and translate commitment to action. This is an opportunity for future leaders as well as the field of leadership development.

LOLA ADEDOKUN, former program director for child and family well-being, Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, and executive director, Aspen Global Leaders Program, said, “As the federal landscape undergoes a momentous shift in its prioritization of the needs of children and families who have long been ignored and made to feel invisible, **we must support leaders who can offer vision, transformation, equity, and justice.**”

Ascend Fellow **LAURIE MILLER BROTMAN**, Bezos Family Foundation professor of early childhood development, NYU Langone Health, said, “I would love to see a heavy focus on people of color and on **disrupting the childhood field in terms of racial equity** and possibly science, policy, and practice.”

PORTIA KENNEL, senior advisor, Buffett Early Childhood Fund, explained, “**Leadership programs should plug the next generation of leaders into networks** and places of power and decision-making in a very visible way.”

LAURA BORNFREUND, director of early and elementary education policy, New America, noted, “**Equity is central to quality.** So, how can early childhood policy leaders help make sure that the children who need it the most get the highest level of quality while also providing a base of quality for all infants, toddlers, preschoolers, and early grade students?”

Through the Aspen Institute Ascend Fellowship, we invest in a diverse cadre of leaders, who are well connected, well prepared, and powerfully positioned to build political will, change systems, and drive the policy agenda needed for the well-being and prosperity of all children and families.

02 | Executive Leadership Skills and Targeted Skills Building

Respondents noted that in the early childhood development field, leadership is often composed of people who have moved up the ranks (from classroom to center director to further leadership, and from practice to policy circles). Their expertise in the field is rich, but they may not have been in positions to develop leadership skills and cultivate a background in policy, systems change, advocacy, entrepreneurship, or communications. Many also spoke to the importance of being critical consumers of research and policy proposals. Importantly, there is a strong sense that these skills and content knowledge can be developed with appropriate training.

↳ Ascend Fellow [MICHAEL NIYOMPONG](#), vice president of strategic community partnerships, Mental Health Center of Denver, said, “We often find early childhood leaders who have grown up in the organization but haven’t learned the **necessary organizational development skills to lead well.**”

The executive director of an early childhood nonprofit organization said, “I find there is this home-grown way that leaders in early childhood become leaders in this space. Many leaders whom I’ve met have ‘grown up’ in the field—from classroom to center director to further leadership roles. These leaders don’t always have experience with other systems, other sources of funding, etc.”

Ascend Fellow [MICHELLE SARCHE](#), principal investigator, American Indian and Alaska Native Head Start program, and associate professor, School of Public Health, University of Colorado, Denver, said, “You want to tap into people’s passions, but if you can give them some really targeted skills around policy, you could tap into a whole new resource for the field.”

[MINDY BINDERMAN](#), founding executive director, Georgia Early Education Alliance for Ready Students, said, “When I have open positions, I would love to hire center directors who want to go into policy and advocacy, but most who apply have no experience in those areas at all.”

[REBECCA GRAVES](#), executive director, The Perigee Fund, emphasized the importance of, “understanding **institutional racism in the history of the system**—how systems have been built to date—social security benefits, domestic work, formal versus informal care, quality changes.”

03 | Values-Based Leadership and Long-Term Commitment

Ascend Fellows participating in this research noted the importance of the space and accountability that the Ascend Fellowship gave them to make their vision a reality. They suggest this approach would also be useful across early childhood leadership programs. They also spoke to the depth of the networks created through intentional trust-building that significantly enhanced their leadership.

↳ Ascend Fellow [LORELEI VARGAS](#), former deputy commissioner of child and family well-being, New York City Administration for Children’s Services, and chief community impact officer, Trinity Church Wall Street, said, “Once you reach a certain point in your career, to develop this deep and meaningful network across the country is highly unusual and very valuable ... helped me accelerate the success I had in my role ... The opportunities to do the readings and reflect really helped me as a leader. I can get lost in my own thoughts.”

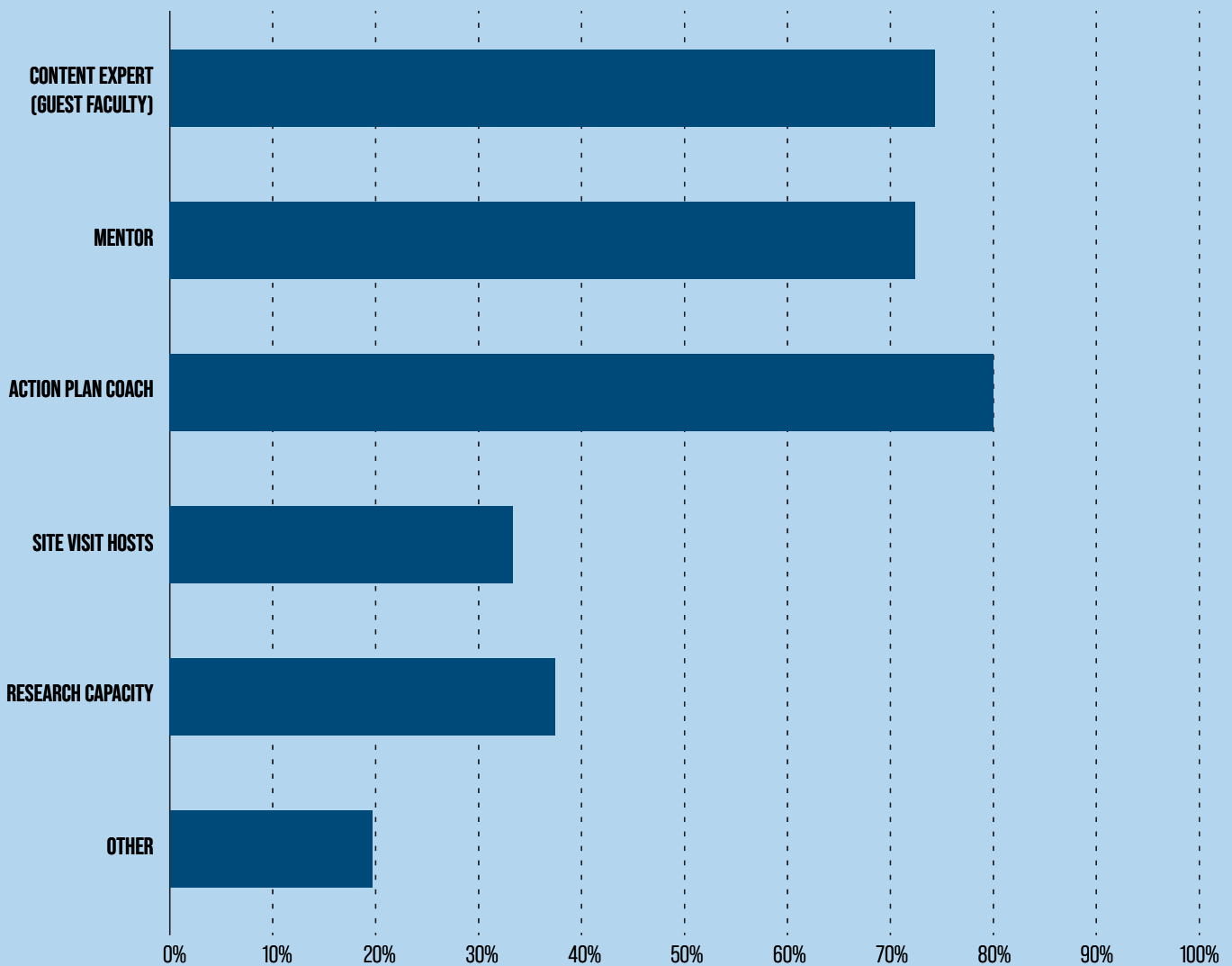
Ascend Fellow [ANN KALASS](#), CEO, Starfish Family Services, agreed, explaining, “**It gave me space to think and dream and be more strategic ...** And the texts got me back into a reflective space of thinking about my leadership and values.”

Ascend Fellow [KRISTIN BERNHARD](#), former deputy commissioner for system reform, Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning, and senior vice president for strategy and policy, Start Early, noted the “intentional use of space and place and how text-based readings opened up conversations.”

Ascend Fellow [BILL JAEGER](#), vice president, Colorado Children’s Campaign, referenced the importance of focusing on all aspects of leadership, noting “the personal strand, organizational strand, external strand—**can’t do any without starting at personal.**”

When we asked survey respondents what types of supports would be most valuable to help build a strong pipeline of leaders, they identified the top supports as:

- 1 | Action plan coach
- 2 | Mentor
- 3 | Content expert (guest faculty)



04 | Building an Ecosystem and Culture to Accelerate Impact

Given the depth of leadership and other investments in the field to date and the need to work collaboratively across systems, there is both a tremendous need and an opportunity to leverage networks for collective impact. In many of our conversations, respondents also spoke to the need to support leaders in securing a deep institutional commitment when they return from participating in leadership development or accelerator programs. They need a conducive operating context that is supportive and allows them to move their vision forward; bring additional organizational allies on board, especially organizational leadership; and create the necessary ripples of impact beyond the individual.

↳ **TOBEKA GREEN**, former president and CEO, National Black Child Development Institute, said, “Fellowship programs have the unique opportunity to support diverse leaders who will be **change-agents in their organizations** primed to advance equity in early childhood education.”

Ascend Fellow **KATIE ALBRIGHT**, executive director, Safe and Sound, spoke to her Ascend Fellowship experience and being part of the larger Ascend Network, noting, “We were able to be focused on a common goal, and the nature of Ascend being the backbone organization to think together and work together made the sum greater than the whole of our individual parts ... **helped frame my work in a larger context** and get the kind of visibility and connections at a national level.”

Ascend Fellow **LORELEI VARGAS**, former deputy commissioner of child and family well-being, New York City Administration for Children’s Services, and chief community impact officer, Trinity Church Wall Street, also spoke to the importance of the “**broader network** I had access to as a Fellow ... being able to go back for support, thoughts, and ideas when I felt stuck.”

Ascend Fellow **DIPESH NAVSARIA**, pediatrician, and faculty, University of Wisconsin, was among several respondents who suggested **building an organizational commitment** into the program approach, suggesting it is important for organizations to be willing to assist their leader in the pursuit of change within their organization and in the greater field.

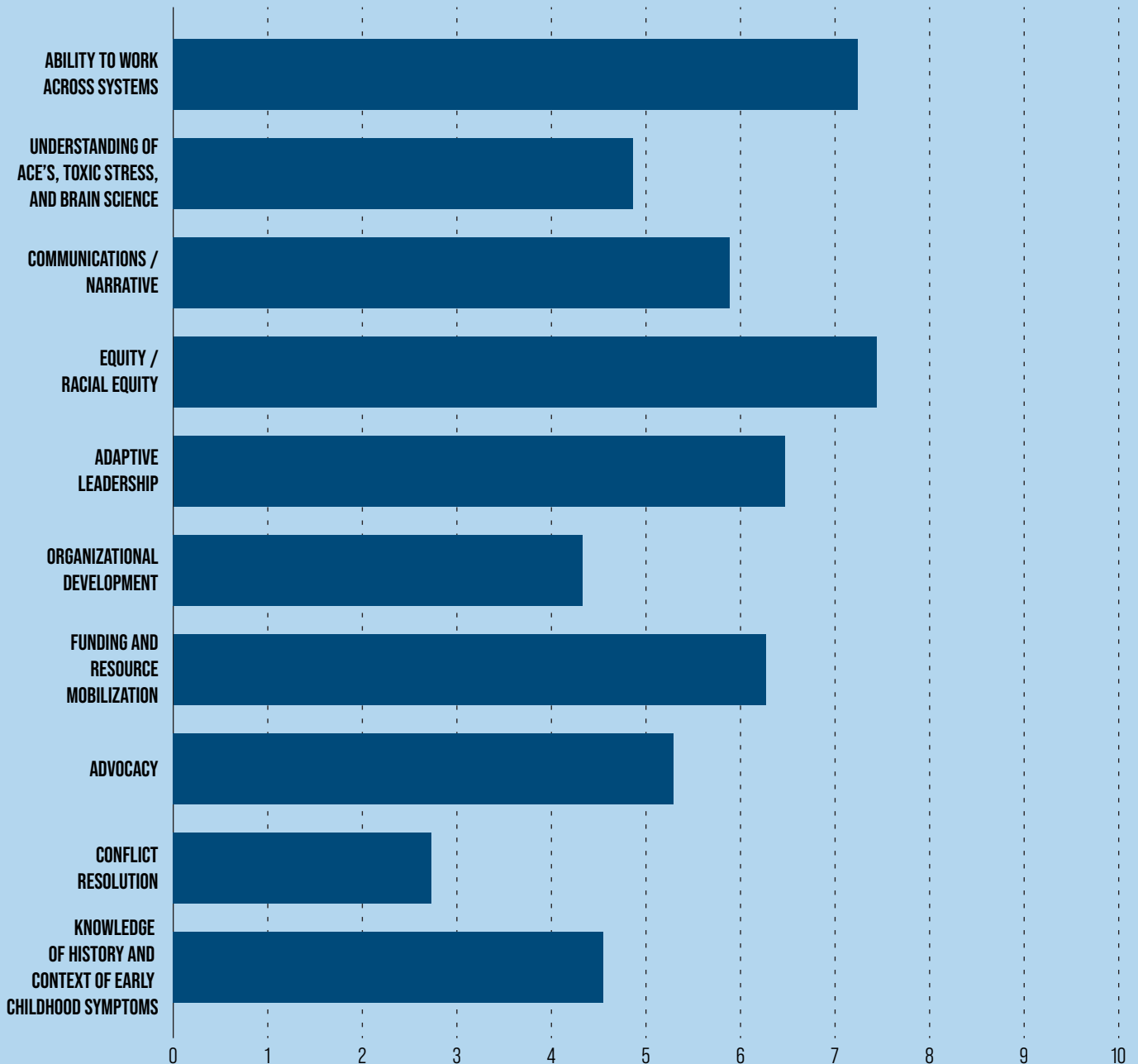
Ascend Fellow **ANN KALASS**, CEO, Starfish Family Services, also said it was important for the [leadership development programs] to provide ways for leaders to “bring the work back to their teams. In [her] cohort, some Fellows did it better than others ... **really thinking about culture change.**”

05 | Transfer of Knowledge

A generation of early childhood leaders have or soon will be leaving positions of leadership. Now is the time to capture their lessons and wealth of expertise on what have been barriers and opportunities in the past that may serve as guideposts for the future. As we recognize the importance of new leadership and vision, we would be remiss not to learn from history to understand the context for new leaders who are ready to advance their own visions on how to eliminate disparities in outcomes for children and their families. Respondents shared a variety of ways to support new leaders (see chart below), and many offered their own time and expertise.

In the survey, experts ranked the following as top competencies needed for early childhood leaders to make an impact:

- 1 | Ability to work across systems
- 2 | Equity/racial equity
- 3 | Adaptive leadership
- 4 | Funding and resource mobilization



Building from a Position of Strength: Landscape of Early Childhood Leadership Programs

We share the recommendations and research in this report with the recognition of the decades of investments in early childhood leaders and in child and family well-being that have created a solid foundation from which to build a new generation of early childhood leadership across the field. Alongside the surveys and interviews we undertook to develop this report, we also conducted a scan of a range of early childhood and equity leadership development programs. We sought to gain a deeper understanding of current and historic investments to define where additional efforts and collaboration would be most valuable. Transforming the field will require all of us working together.

TO DATE, PROGRAMS HAVE HELPED BUILD:

- A conducive operating environment by equipping potential allies (legislators, business leaders, and others) with the foundational knowledge of why early childhood matters
- Investments in core practical skills for emerging leaders
- Topical seminars and conferences
- Targeted regional investments and networks
- Broader leadership programs aimed at the well-being of children and families
- Newer efforts focused on advancing equity across the field

HOWEVER, REMAINING GAPS THAT MUST BE ADDRESSED TO OPTIMIZE THE CHILD DEVELOPMENT FIELD AND MEET THE NEEDS OF CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES INCLUDE:

- Strategic ecosystems approach that creates system-wide coherence and maximizes networks, reach, and knowledge
- Collective and collaborative early childhood development leadership platform
- Narrative power and platform to leverage the growing public and political awareness of the importance of early childhood investments into sustainable, non-fragmented, and adequate resources at scale
- Focus on leaders who are ready for a quantum leap forward
- Political will and policy savvy that is rooted in best practices and research and connected to family and community expertise and voice

THERE ARE ALSO IMPORTANT ALIGNMENT AND PARTNERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES WITH NEW AND ONGOING PROGRAMS:

- Targeted investments in leaders in research and policy to advance equity (e.g., Doris Duke, BUILD's Equity Leaders Action Network, National Black Child Development Institute)
- Rapid-cycle prototyping and scale (Promise Ventures)
- Deepening academic base and proof points around relational health, biology of resilience, and whole family investments



Following is a list of the 20 current and historic leadership programs we reviewed for this analysis.

Annie E. Casey Children and Families Fellowship
Ashoka
Bank Street Early Childhood Fellowship
Barbara Bowman Leadership Fellows (Erikson Institute)
Buell Early Childhood Fellowship
CDF Child Defender Fellowship
Children's Defense Fund Emerging Leader Fellowships
Doris Duke Fellowships for the Promotion of Child Well-Being
Encore Gen2Gen Innovation Fellowship
Equity Leaders Action Network (BUILD)
Foster America Fellowship
McCormick Foundation Executive Fellowship (Erikson Institute)
National Black Child Development Institute Policy Fellowship
National Conference of State Legislatures Early Learning Fellows
National League of Cities Early Childhood Municipal Leaders Fellowship
NDN Changemaker Fellowship
Project Evident Talent Accelerator
Promising Ventures Fellowship Program
Schusterman Fellowship
Start with Equity Fellowship
ZERO TO THREE Fellowship



MOVING FORWARD



MOVING FORWARD

10 Insights to Guide Our Collective Leadership Efforts

Anne Mosle

Vice President and Executive Director, Ascend at the Aspen Institute

We continue learning and strengthening our understanding of why leadership is so powerful in the quest for systemic opportunity and disrupting the patterns of deeply ingrained oppression that has held back so many leaders and our society. This is especially true for Black, Indigenous, Latino, Asian American and Pacific Islander leaders. As we consider what we heard from input and interviews with 80 diverse early childhood development leaders from research, practice, policy, and philanthropy, and draw on the lived experience of 20 parents and caregivers as well as the work of more than 20 longstanding and newer leadership initiatives, we have a generational window of opportunity to invest in leadership with increased intention and insight. This research builds on more than 70 years of the Aspen Institute's track record and 10 years of the Ascend Fellowship, which has invested deeply in 100 cross-sector leaders, across race, ethnicity, gender, geography, experiences, and perspectives. Inclusion and identity are central to the next chapter of leadership investment to ensure equity is at the center and that it continues to inform our leadership efforts at Aspen moving forward.

Here, we share 10 actionable insights to prepare the talent we need by 2030 to chart bold new paths for our children and families.

1. DYNAMIC TIMES CALL FOR DYNAMIC LEADERS WHO SEAMLESSLY WORK ACROSS SECTORS AND SEGMENTS.

Cohorts based on similar expertise and affinities are valuable. However, the systems work that is needed requires leaders to work effectively across existing silos. Building the competency of leaders at scale who can bridge and build trust and partnership across agencies, such as child care and workforce programs, or translating brain science research for young parents into programs

such as home visiting or child well-being visits, are just two examples.

2. HONOR LEADERSHIP, DON'T DISCOUNT IT.

Some programs call leaders "emerging" or "early" or use other qualifying descriptions. Whether their leadership comes from lived experience, professional skill development, or both, it is all valuable, and we approach leaders we work with that way. There are many models of leadership, not a one-size-fits-all approach.

3. ENCOURAGE LEADERS TO FOCUS ON TRANSFORMATIONS, NOT TWEAKING.

While incremental change is part of the work, leadership development needs to create the environment, springboards, and encouragement to get fellows to think big and gain the courage of conviction to transform systems. We need to strip away constraint thinking and create the conditions for breakthroughs that break ground.

4. CREATE A LIFELONG WE-ARE-BEHIND-YOU-100% NETWORK OF SUPPORT.

For leadership to flourish, leaders need both peer and institutional support. They need to build and tap the power of trusted relationships. For fellows, peer learning is essential, and so is having the institution's they return to support their leadership. We design leadership experiences to offer both. For peer learning, we create trusted, close-knit groups that stay in touch throughout their careers. When leaders end up in powerful positions, their first calls for advice are to those they met as fellows who are piloting innovative work. We also design programs so an institution's board chair is ready to work with leaders returning from peer gatherings with transformative ideas rather than create roadblocks.

5. SEE RISK AS A BIG REWARD.

We work with fellows to develop a growth mindset that welcomes the chance to work on the challenges before them rather than avoiding them and see failure as the source of valuable lessons that will set them up for future success.

6. TREAT THOSE WE WORK ON BEHALF OF AS THE VALUABLE PEERS AND PARTNERS THEY ARE.

A way we deliver on our commitment to equity is by seeing expertise where it lives. Rather than consider parents and caregivers as beneficiaries, we lean on them as partners and teachers from whom we have much to learn. We collaborate with leaders to see those closest to the systems we want to work well for children and families as having tremendous expertise to ensure those systems have the necessary impact.

7. DESIGN A PERSONALIZED LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCE.

Many leadership programs, including ours, put racial justice and diversity at the center. This is essential. And part of that is acknowledging that leadership development is a personal journey. Leaders need space to consider what values they live and lead by, what they need to explore to be visionary and ambitious, how they take risks and learn from the results, what their source of courage is, and what mark they want to leave as a person and as part of a collective. They will learn from leaders of the past but must chart their own unique path forward.

8. MOVE AWAY FROM “TEACHING” TO OFFERING SPRINGBOARDS.

Create the conditions and a high-trust circle for diverse leaders to embark on the brave, vulnerable, and unsettling self-examination and system interrogation that is at the heart of purposeful leadership. Carefully curating the often-missing conditions to explore and express what-ifs and fears, and opening up to new perspectives, partnerships, and possibilities with trusted peers and support, can lead to breakthrough possibilities as well as support the health and well-being of leaders. Growth happens between discomfort and crisis.

9. CARE FOR OUR WHOLE SELVES IN OUR LEADERSHIP PRACTICE.

We have witnessed unprecedented exhaustion among leaders and their teams. Tending to body is part of leadership. That means we must pay attention to our bodies and whole lives. Inviting leaders to step out of the daily routine and tap the magic of nature or creativity of art offers new ways for renewal, reimagination, and hearing what the world is calling us to do.

10. UNLOCK NEW POSSIBILITIES IN LEADERSHIP FOR THE FIELD OF EARLY CHILDHOOD.

The importance of investing in our youngest children, from pre-natal to age three, is now widely understood. We have a shared opportunity ahead to build on the field’s progress with increased commitment to addressing, deepening, and operationalizing racial equity competencies in leaders and organizations, which include practices, systems, and policies. Part of living out our shared commitment to equity and inclusion calls us to look at children and families holistically, while we address the impact of poverty as well as COVID.

Over the last 10 years, Ascend at the Aspen Institute has invested deeply in mission-driven and values-driven leadership. We believe leadership lies within us all. But far too often, the challenge is this bigger question: Do the right conditions exist that allow the full vision, creativity, and potential for greater impact, improvement, and ultimately transformation to be realized?

We are entering a new chapter in the field of leadership and practice of leadership development, activation, and amplification. The best ideas in the world will go nowhere without committed individuals, closely connected to and inspired by other leaders, setting their sights on audacious aspirations and with the skills and support to succeed. And they will go nowhere if we fall into the trap of competition instead of collaboration. We have a powerful opportunity to build an ecosystem of leaders that is centered in equity, generosity, and justice for children and families. Leadership is an evolving practice, one that must stay ahead of the times and meet the world in the current moment. At Ascend, we look forward to continuing to create space and experiences with and for the leaders our children and families need to have a world where every family thrives.

APPENDICES



APPENDIX A

Trends, Breakthroughs, and Partnerships to Honor and Build Upon

In 2011, we launched Ascend at the Aspen Institute with a vision of an America in which a legacy of educational success and economic security is passed from one generation to the next. At the time, following the Great Recession, parents in focus groups told us that for one of the first times in history, they did not believe their children would be better off than they were.⁵ Ascend embarked on an ambitious 2Gen agenda focused on leveraging the research on early childhood, postsecondary success, economic asset-building, health, and social capital to inform a portfolio of solutions, initiatives, and collaborations that have sparked a national movement for better outcomes for families. The 2Gen framework draws on a history of efforts to address the needs of both children and parents while capitalizing on the implications of science: The development of children and parents is inextricably linked. Parents gain motivation to succeed from their children and vice versa—their efforts are mutually reinforcing.⁶

Importantly, new methodologies of understanding how we approach best practices in early childhood development have emerged, thereby influencing what results we can achieve. For example, implementation science now offers research supporting the fact that effective practice + effective implementation + enabling contexts leads to improved child and family outcomes. However, without a racial equity lens—and with one or more of these variables missing—the positive outcomes are unlikely to be achieved or sustained.

In the last decade, major breakthroughs have emerged in key areas that, when blended with early childhood, present significant opportunities to deepen the field and improve outcomes for families. These innovations inform policy and

systems changes primed for early childhood development funding and organizations, as well as represent a mosaic of evidence that leadership is critical when promoting innovation and evidence together. Following are illustrative examples of these breakthrough areas and innovations.

MENTAL HEALTH URGENCY OF NEED AND BREAKTHROUGHS

According to ongoing research by Dr. Jack Shonkoff and his team at the Harvard Center on the Developing Child, the emotional well-being of young children is directly tied to the well-being of their caregivers and the families in which they live. When these relationships are chronically neglectful, or otherwise psychologically harmful, they are a potent risk factor for children developing early mental health problems. In contrast, when relationships are reliably responsive and supportive, they can actually buffer young children from the adverse effects of other stressors. As we look at ways early childhood systems can play a role in addressing stressors on the whole family, programs are emerging with important lessons for systems.

- **ParentCorps:** Created by Ascend Fellow Dr. Laurie Brotman, ParentCorps partners with school districts and pre-K leaders to deliver an evidence-informed curricula for families with a racial equity lens. It centers the voices of families of color throughout all aspects of strategic planning, resource allocation, implementation, evidence building, and evaluation. Beginning with a pilot program in one public school in Harlem in 2000, ParentCorps now reaches more than 3,000 children and families in partnership with New York City's Department of Education as part of Pre-K for All, an initiative of the Division of Early Childhood Education. The NYC Department of Education is

⁵Lake Research Partners and American Viewpoint. (2011). "Toward a Two-Generation Strategy: Voices of American Families."

⁶https://ascend.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Gateways_paper_May2014.pdf

scaling ParentCorps' professional learning, practices, and tools across the Pre-K for All system, serving 70,000 four-year-olds annually.

- **Bright Beginnings:** For nearly 30 years, Bright Beginnings, led by Dr. Marla Dean, has helped thousands of children experiencing homelessness by providing them and their families with quality care and support during times of hardship and transition. In 2014, Bright Beginnings pioneered the first home-based program in the country for those experiencing homelessness. Their Head Start and Early Head Start programming integrates trauma-informed care with a special focus on creating stability within and beyond the center-based approach for families frequently in transitional housing.

UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT AND INEQUITY OF MASS INCARCERATION ON CHILDREN AND EARLY CHILDHOOD AND CARE: BREAKTHROUGHS FOR JUSTICE-INVOLVED FAMILIES

Currently, 1.8 million children have an incarcerated parent, and 5 million children have had an incarcerated parent at some point in their lives. Parental incarceration is more common among children of color, among children of parents with low educational attainment, and among children living in disadvantaged neighborhoods.⁷ The justice system serving these families reflects significant structural inequities, including the dearth of advocacy around supporting families affected by the justice system as well as ways to capture and leverage data that demonstrates the strengths of these families. Given that parental incarceration is an adverse childhood experience, we must design early childhood systems to both support the child while addressing the inequities that lead to unjust and higher rates of incarceration in communities of color. Programs already leading the way in this area include:

- **College & Community Fellowship:** Previously led by Ascend Fellow Dr. Vivian Nixon, who was instrumental in [lifting the 26-year ban on access to Pell grants](#) for those in prison, CCF helps women with criminal justice involvement earn college degrees. In addition, it helps justice-involved women build their networks, resources,

and social capital. CCF also works to educate early childhood systems on ways to support both children and mothers impacted by the justice system.

- **Center for Urban Families:** Led by Ascend Fellow Joe Jones, CFUF addresses the key challenges of Baltimore's urban families by working to connect fathers to their children, creating opportunities for economic and financial security through work, and providing access to other supportive services. The organization serves 1,400 men and women each year, many affected by the criminal justice system.

BRAIN SCIENCE BREAKTHROUGHS

Twenty years ago, "From Neurons to Neighborhoods" (Shonkoff and Phillips) provided a breakthrough overview of the critical ways in which brain science informs, shapes, and accelerates development in young children. In the two decades since that seminal work, the field of early childhood development has worked to operationalize evolving research in brain science, recognizing the powerful impact of structural racism and inequities on families; the importance of educating and supporting systems and policy leaders in implementing the lessons of brain science in funding initiatives; and ways to leverage and tap parent voices and perspectives that both reinforce data and challenge assumptions about how kids learn and the role parents and caregivers play. Two bodies of research are proving powerful levers that systems and policy leaders can pull to support families:

- **Two Open Windows ([parts I and II](#))** (Dr. Sarah Watamura and Dr. Pilyoung Kim, University of Denver): Through their study of neurobiologic shifts in new parenthood, Ascend Fellow Dr. Sarah Watamura and Dr. Pilyoung Kim have highlighted the neurobiologic shifts that take place, not just in babies' brains but in the brains of parents and all primary caregivers, regardless of biological connection. The research has profound implications for strengths-based program and policy interventions during this critical period of opportunity for families.

⁷<https://www.aft.org/ae/summer2019/turney>

- **Early Language** (Dr. Patricia Kuhl and Dr. Andrew Meltzoff, *University of Washington*): Dr. Patricia Kuhl’s research, alongside Dr. Andrew Meltzoff, focuses on early language and brain development, notably how young children learn. Dr. Kuhl has played a significant role in showing how early exposure to language can alter a young brain, which then has implications for this key period of development, as well as bilingual education, reading readiness, research on screen time, and for how we understand developmental delays involving language.

HOME-BASED CARE BREAKTHROUGHS

Nearly 30 percent of all infants and toddlers are in some form of home-based child care.⁸ These include what is known as “family, friend, and neighbor care” as well as paid providers who do not have a prior relationship with the family. While policy leaders are focused on increasing quality across the early childhood field, it is critical that we identify pathways to support, scale, and strengthen home-based care, which provides flexibility, trust, and convenience to families, in addition to being important small businesses in communities. With center-based and home-based providers facing unprecedented losses as a result of COVID-19 closures, there is an opportunity to provide historic federal resources to a range of child care options, thereby valuing the field as a public good while recognizing the role home-based providers play in the lives of working families. Models of this approach include:

- **All Our Kin**: Led by Jessica Sager and Janna Wagner, All Our Kin trains, supports, and sustains family child care educators, aiming to address structural inequities while building career pathways and high-quality early childhood centers in communities where they are most needed. All Our Kin’s Tool Kit Licensing Program creates about \$12.5 million in annual tax revenue and generates an average of \$7.4 million per year in macroeconomic benefit to the New Haven region.
- Philanthropic efforts like the collaborative **Home Grown** are emerging as important resources in the effort to elevate the role home-based providers play in advancing equitable outcomes for children and supporting largely women and women-of-color business owners.

2GEN BREAKTHROUGHS

- In Ascend’s 2014 brief “Gateways to Two Generations,” we noted that early childhood programs are important gateways for 2Gen approaches that support children and the adults in their lives. Those programs need a responsive infrastructure of support to provide quality services to children while partnering with adult-serving agencies. Partnerships can be encouraged through incentives at the federal, state, and local levels, including the promotion of statewide community planning efforts. Ascend has worked closely with leaders in the public sector, partnering with 12 states on 2Gen approaches, including eight states with an explicit focus on aligning early childhood and health systems. Many 2Gen breakthroughs reflect the work of our 98 national Ascend Fellows, 46 Ascend Network partners, and the philanthropic community:
- Over the course of three Aspen Early Childhood and Health Forums, eight states mobilized early childhood networks to develop ways to blend resources with offices of Medicaid; identified mechanisms through which to track early childhood and health outcomes for families more effectively; and elevated ways to engage parents in decision-making, policy development, and evaluation. Crucially, these state efforts have informed strategies to support and educate career and political leaders at the Maternal Child Health Bureau, Administration for Children and Families, and Centers for Medicaid and Medicare Services.
- Federal guidance passed in 2016 made it possible for parents to be screened for maternal depression during their child’s well-being visits and have the screening paid for by Medicaid. That was a huge step toward recognizing the centrality of parents’ mental health on their children. The guidance was the result of a conversation between federal policy makers and Ascend Fellows at an Aspen Early Childhood and Health Forum and follow-up work from Ascend and the Ascend Fellows to provide examples and support for the development of the new guidance.

⁸<https://www.childtrends.org/blog/nearly-30-percent-of-infants-and-toddlers-attend-home-based-child-care-as-their-primary-arrangement>

- [CAP Tulsa](#): Previously led by Ascend Fellow Steven Dow, CAP Tulsa—one of the country’s leading early childhood 2Gen organizations—pioneered pairing Head Start for children with workforce and career pathways for their parents. Leveraging a Health Professions Opportunities Grant, CAP Tulsa’s 2Gen program, CareerAdvance®, promotes parents’ career certificate attainment, employment in the health care sector, and overall well-being. The CareerAdvance® program resulted in greater improvements in certification and employment than comparable career pathway training programs, while children whose parents were enrolled in the program demonstrated increased attendance rates compared to those who were not.



APPENDIX B

List of Respondents to Field Survey, Interviews, and Focus Groups

PARENT REVIEWERS

Rynn Sango

Program Director, Family Tree
Ascend Parent Advisor
Colorado

Tameka Henry

Chairperson, Board of Directors
for Clark County, Acelero Learning
Ascend Parent Advisor
Nevada

Michaela Martin

Student, La Verne University
Ascend Parent Advisor
California

FIELD SURVEY RESPONDENTS

Katie Albright*

Executive Director, Safe & Sound
California

Leah Austin

President and CEO, National Black
Child Development Institute
Georgia

Steve Barnett

Senior Co-director and Founder,
National Institute for Early
Education Research
New Jersey

Reggie Bicha*

President, Shine Early Learning
Colorado

Mary Bissell

Founding Partner, ChildFocus
Maryland

Helen Blank

Former Director of Child Care
and Early Learning, National
Women's Law Center
District of Columbia

Laura Bornfreund

Director, Early and
Elementary Education,
New America
District of Columbia

Rahil Briggs

National Director, HealthySteps
(a program of ZERO TO THREE)
Connecticut

Jeanne Brooks-Gunn

Co-director, National Center for
Children & Families, Teachers
College, Columbia University
New York

Laurie Brotman*

Bezos Family Foundation Professor
of Early Childhood Development,
Department of Population Health,
NYU Langone Health
New York

Lindsay Chase-Lansdale*

Frances Willard Professor of
Human Development and Social
Policy, Northwestern University
Illinois

Lori Connors-Tadros

Senior Research Fellow, National
Institute for Early Education Research
New Jersey

Deborah Daro

Senior Research Fellow, Chapin Hall
at the University of Chicago
Illinois

Paul Dworkin

Executive Vice President for
Community Child Health,
Connecticut Children's
Medical Center
Connecticut

Janet Froetscher

President, J.B. & M.K. Pritzker
Family Foundation
Illinois

*Ascend Fellows

Tista Ghosh*

Vice President, Employee Health,
Edwards Life Sciences
Colorado

Danielle Gonzales

Executive Director,
New Mexico First
New Mexico

Gretchen Hammer*

Founder, Public Leadership
Consulting Group
Colorado

Elsa Holguin

President and CEO, Denver
Preschool Program
Colorado

Deidre Johnson*

CEO and Executive Director,
Center for African American Health
Colorado

Kristie Kauerz

Director, National P-3 Center,
University of Colorado, Denver
Colorado

Portia Kennel

Senior Advisor, The Buffett
Early Childhood Fund
Nebraska

Woodie Kessel

Fellow, Koop Institute at Dartmouth
New Hampshire

Sherri Killins Stewart

Director of Systems Alignment
and Integration, BUILD Initiative
New York

Joan Lombardi

Director, Early Opportunities, LLC
District of Columbia

Dipesh Navsaria*

Faculty, University of Wisconsin
School of Medicine and Public
Health; Pediatrician
Wisconsin

Jim Perrin

Professor of Pediatrics, Harvard
Medical School
Massachusetts

Kris Perry

Deputy Secretary, California Health
and Human Services Agency for
Early Childhood Development
California

Sarah Rittling

Executive Director, First Five
Years Fund
District of Columbia

Shannon Rudisill

Executive Director, Early Childhood
Funders Collaborative
Virginia

Rachel Schumacher

Early Childhood Policy Consultant,
R. Schumacher Consulting
District of Columbia

Helene Stebbins

Deputy Director, Alliance for Early
Success
Kansas

Kandace Thomas

Senior Program Officer,
Irving Harris Foundation
Illinois

Carla Thompson Payton

Vice President, Program Strategy,
W.K. Kellogg Foundation
Michigan

Sarah Watamura*

Professor and Chair, Department
of Psychology, University of Denver
Colorado

Joe Waters*

Co-founder and CEO, Capita
North Carolina

Ann Silverberg Williamson*

Coordinated Care and Crisis
Response Lead, Casey
Family Programs
Utah

Dan Wuori

Director of Early Learning,
The Hunt Institute
North Carolina

**EARLY CHILDHOOD
DEVELOPMENT EXPERT
INTERVIEWS**

Swati Adarkar

President and CEO, Children's Institute
Oregon

Katie Albright*

Executive Director, Safe & Sound
California

*Ascend Fellows

Mindy Binderman

Founding Executive Director,
Georgia Early Education Alliance
for Ready Students
Georgia

Cemere James

Former Senior Vice President
of Policy, National Black Child
Development Institute
Maryland

Steffanie Clothier

Investment Director,
Child Development, Gary
Community Investments
Colorado

Lynette Fraga

CEO, Childcare Aware
Virginia

Matt Glickman

Founder, Promise Venture Studio
California

Tobeka Green

Former President and Chief
Executive Officer, National Black
Child Development Institute
Maryland

Ann Kalass*

CEO, Starfish Family Services
Michigan

Blythe Keeler Robinson

President and Chief Executive
Officer, Sheltering Arms Early
Education and Family Centers
Georgia

Portia Kennel

Senior Advisor, The Buffett Early
Childhood Fund
Nebraska

Lisa Klein

Executive Director, Alliance for
Early Success
Kansas

Joan Lombardi

Director, Early Opportunities, LLC
District of Columbia

Dipesh Navsaria*

Faculty, University of Wisconsin
School of Medicine and Public
Health; Pediatrician
Wisconsin

Janet Oh

Director of Innovation
Fellowships, Encore
California

Cynthia Osborne

Director, Center for Health and
Social Policy; Child and Family
Research Partnership; Prenatal-to-
Three Policy Impact Center at
The University of Texas at Austin
Texas

Sarah Rittling

Executive Director, First Five
Years Fund
District of Columbia

Jessica Sager

Co-founder and Chief
Executive Officer, All Our Kin
Connecticut

Michelle Sarche*

Associate Professor, Centers
for American Indian and Alaska
Native Health, University of Colorado
Colorado

Darius Tandon*

Co-director, Center for Community
Health, Northwestern Feinberg
School of Medicine
Illinois

Lorelei Vargas*

Chief Community Impact Officer,
Trinity Church Wall Street
New York

Sarah Watamura*

Professor and Chair, Department
of Psychology, University of Denver
Colorado

Henry Wilde*

Chief Executive Officer,
Acelero Learning
Wisconsin

Megan Wyatt

Managing Director of Programs and
Strategy, Bezos Family Foundation
Washington

**ASPEN THINKXCHANGE ECD
LEADERS FOCUS GROUP ONE
PARTICIPANTS****Kristin Bernhard***

Senior Vice President, Advocacy and
Policy, Start Early
Illinois

*Ascend Fellows

Betsy Delgado*

Vice President, Mission and Education, Goodwill of Central and Southern Indiana
Indiana

Steven Dow*

Founder and Special Advisor, CAP Tulsa
Oklahoma

William Jaeger*

Vice President, Colorado Children's Campaign
Colorado

Myra Jones-Taylor*

Former Senior Policy Advisor, ZERO TO THREE, Chief Policy Impact Officer, Urban Institute
District of Columbia

Ann Kalass*

Chief Executive Officer, Starfish Family Services
Michigan

Mark Kling*

Executive Director, Family Resource Center Association
Colorado

Jeff Kuhr*

Executive Director, Mesa County Public Health
Colorado

Michael Niyompong*

Vice President, Strategic Community Partnerships, Mental Health Center of Denver
Colorado

ASPEN THINKXCHANGE ECD LEADERS FOCUS GROUP TWO PARTICIPANTS

Gina Adams

Senior Fellow, Urban Institute
District of Columbia

Brittany Birken

Principal Adviser, Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta
Georgia

Marla Dean

Executive Director and CEO, Bright Beginnings, Inc.
District of Columbia

Teresa Eckrich Sommer

Research Associate Professor, Northwestern University
Illinois

Melanie Garrett

Chief Program Officer, New Moms
Illinois

Rebecca Graves

Director of Strategic Investments, Perigee Fund
Washington

Moe Hickey

Chief Executive Officer, Voices for Utah Children
Utah

Caroline Hood

President and CEO, RS EDEN
Minnesota

Cody Kornack

Policy and Research Associate, National Head Start Association
Virginia

Charley Martin-Berry

Director, Community Caring Collaborative
Maine

Lisa Mennet

Founder, Perigee Fund
Washington

Dara Munson

President and CEO, Family Focus
Illinois

Yvette Sanchez Fuentes

Vice President of National Policy, Start Early
District of Columbia

APPENDIX C

Research Methodology

To inform this report, Ascend, with the support of Spitfire Strategies, gathered insights and feedback from 80 practice, policy, philanthropic, and research experts⁹ in the field and conducted a scan of current and recent leadership investments. We are grateful for the generosity of these outstanding leaders for their contributions. The research methodology is outlined below.

FIELD SURVEY

The survey asked early childhood experts to provide their insights into the opportunities and challenges in the field and the competencies that would be needed to address those opportunities and challenges. It also offered respondents the opportunity to define the types of leaders most likely to benefit and make an impact on the early child development field. Thirty-eight experts responded.

EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT EXPERT INTERVIEWS

In-depth conversations among 24 leaders and experts explored the biggest questions, challenges, and opportunities in the field; the critical competencies of an effective leader for the future of the early childhood field; and who the next generation of leaders should be.

EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT LEADERS FOCUS GROUPS

We engaged 23 cross-sector early childhood field leaders, including Ascend Fellows, in focus groups at the 2019 Aspen ThinkXChange convening.

LANDSCAPE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD LEADERSHIP PROGRAMS

This scan of 20 fellowship, training, and other leadership investments in early childhood development and child and family well-being provided further grounding in the current state of the field and opportunities for alignment.

PARENT INTERVIEWS

We conducted online focus interviews with parents that incorporated a survey, short answers, and optional video responses with 20 parents between September 30 and October 14, 2020. The questions were designed to identify alignment and gaps in what early childhood experts identified as priorities for the field and families.

PARENT VOICES 2020

We also conducted a broader series of virtual focus groups with 10 sets of parents with low incomes across race, ethnicity, gender, and geography to better understand how COVID-19 and the momentum around racial justice are impacting the lives of parents, particularly young parents with young children. We probed their priorities, including for child care. To complement these focus groups, Ascend supported a bipartisan election omnibus poll of 1,200 voters fielded October 31 to November 3, 2020, by Lake Research and its partner firm The Tarrance Group to gauge voter support on the two-generation approach and policy options.

PARENT EXPERT PEER REVIEW

Three parents with expertise in early childhood and family economic stability reviewed the initial draft of this report and provided feedback that was incorporated throughout the final landscaping report.

⁹In total, we received feedback from 78 different field leaders. Some responded via the survey and participated in interviews and/or focus groups, so the number of survey responses, interviews, and focus group responses adds up to more than 78.



Ascend at the Aspen Institute's mission is to create a society where every family passes a legacy of prosperity and well-being from one generation to the next.

In 2010 our Founder, Executive Director and Aspen Institute Vice President Anne Mosle, set out to spark and spread breakthroughs in the ways we think about and invest in leadership to foster the well-being of children and the adults in their lives, together. In the dozen years since, Ascend has propelled a national movement to shift the odds back in favor of families. At the forefront are 98 Ascend Fellows creating far reaching results through innovations in health and human services systems and policy, postsecondary and employment pathways for parents, early childhood development and brain science advances, trauma-informed care, equitable access to capital, and the impact of mass incarceration on parents and children. Through the 460 partner-strong Ascend Network, two-generation (2Gen) approaches are now being implemented and advanced in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. Together, the leaders in this growing 2Gen movement are transforming systems that serve more than 10 million families.

2300 N Street, NW, Suite 700 Washington, DC 20037

<https://ascend.aspeninstitute.org>

f | @AspenAscend