



TRACING PRE-K'S RACIST ROOTS TO PRESENT-DAY POLICIES



In the 1920s, states avoided providing funding to Black mothers. By refusing to establish programs in communities with large Black populations, and by claiming Black mothers had failed to establish “suitable homes” for their children, these mothers were denied newly approved pensions supporting early education and other needs.

In the 1940s, states conducted “man in the house” searches—often in the middle of the night—that sought to deny the support to mothers already receiving financial support from a man. These searches disproportionately targeted Black families, leading them to be more likely to lose early childhood education (ECE) supports.

In the decades that followed, White policymakers demonized Black mothers who did gain access to early childhood education benefits, labeling them “lazy and immortal” and “welfare queens,” even as White mothers continued to benefit more than Black mothers from these programs. This history is explained as part of the research published in a recent [article in *Education Policy Analysis Archives*](#), a peer-reviewed journal, authored by [Karen Babbs Hollett](#) and NEPC Fellow [Erica Frankenberg](#) of Pennsylvania State University.

“In summary, racial disparities and racial exclusion have been a part of ECE funding policy since its beginning,” the authors state. “Racialized class ideologies that painted Black and Latinx families with low incomes as undeserving, or even as hoarders or frauds, were used to justify harsh and paternalistic policies that made funding difficult or impossible to obtain.”

Hollett and Frankenberg go on to describe multiple ways in which race-based discrimina-

tion in preschool program funding persists to this day under the main federal source of early education funding, Child Care and Development Fund block grants administered by states.

Applications can be “long and complex, and documentation requirements may be especially difficult for parents who work nontraditional hours, hold multiple jobs, or lack a relationship with a financial institution that can provide records,” they write. They add that most states conduct parent interviews, “a procedural barrier that not only may be difficult to meet but may also allow for greater racial bias in eligibility determination.” Additionally, some states’ applications require parents’ social security numbers, an intimidating administrative hurdle for Latinx parents who may fear revealing family members’ immigration or citizenship status.

The article focuses on one particular type of funding disparity that currently disproportionately impacts Black and Latinx families, implicating the federal Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS). The federal program uses a tiered reimbursement policy that sets relatively low base rates of funding, then pays programs more if they increase their scores on the QRIS. Hollett and Frankenberg explain how the scoring mechanism takes into account potentially discriminatory factors that are unrelated to quality while also awarding lower ratings to so-called friend, family and neighbor services that are more common in many communities of color.

The result is that QRIS scores vary by race, with programs that serve larger numbers of Black and Latinx families receiving lower scores. This means that programs serving children of color receive less money than programs that mainly serve White children. Consequently, they have fewer resources available to make the very improvements that, ironically, would help them attain more funding—leading funding disparities to widen over time.

“For example, in 2014, White infants’ providers received, on average, \$0.54 more per day than Black infants’ providers,” Hollett and Frankenberg write, based on an analysis of Pennsylvania data. “By 2019, that difference grew to \$2.85.” Moving from infants to toddlers, they found that the White-Black provider funding gaps grew by \$1.49, with the corresponding gap for preschoolers’ providers growing by \$0.77.

Although these disparities may sound small, they add up:

In 2019, ECE providers in Pennsylvania enrolled seven preschoolers with subsidies, on average. If those preschoolers were Black, the provider would have been reimbursed \$4,704.00 in tiered funding over the course of the year, per our estimates. If those preschoolers were White, the provider would have been reimbursed \$6,921.60, and for a classroom with seven Latinx preschoolers with subsidies, the additional reimbursement would have been \$5,544.00.

The end result is that Black and Latinx children from lower-income families end up attending lower-quality early childhood programs than their White counterparts, placing them at a disadvantage before they even step foot in kindergarten. This makes them less likely to benefit from the advantages of high-quality preschool, which include better long-term non-cognitive outcomes, such as reduced rates of unemployment and incarceration.

Racial disparities in access to funding have been a part of ECE policy from its beginnings, adapting over time through the creation and perpetuation of racial biases, racialized class ideologies, and systems of White privilege that were codified in law, policy, and practice,

Hollett and Frankenberg conclude.

Equity-oriented and anti-racist policy alternatives, such as replacing tiered funding with substantial increases in base subsidy rates and establishing progressive funding formulas, could disrupt the intergenerational cycle of adaptive discrimination and help to re-envision a national ECE system that gives all children access to the life-changing promises of quality early learning.

NEPC Resources on Early Childhood Education

This newsletter is made possible in part by support provided by the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice: <http://www.greatlakescenter.org>

The National Education Policy Center (NEPC), a university research center housed at the University of Colorado Boulder School of Education, produces high-quality information in support of democratic deliberation about education policy. We publish original research, policy briefs, and expert third-party reviews of think tank reports. NEPC publications are written in accessible language and are intended for a broad audience that includes academic experts, policymakers, the media, and the general public. Visit us at: <http://nepc.colorado.edu>