

September 16, 2021

Submitted via <https://www.regulations.gov/>

Institute of Education Sciences
U.S Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue, SW
Room 4160, Potomac Center Plaza
Washington, DC 20202–7240

Re: Request for Information on the Department of Education’s Fiscal Year (FY) 2022-2026 Learning Agenda [Docket ID ED-2021-IES-0118]

Dear Commissioner Soldner:

The undersigned 45 local, state, and national early childhood organizations appreciate the opportunity to offer information in support of the U.S. Department of Education’s (ED’s) FY 2022-2026 Learning Agenda. Below, we outline principles that we encourage the Department to use to create a learning agenda that helps to establish a continuum of high-quality education services from birth through grade 12. In addition, it is our aim that research questions incorporating the ideas below will help to advance comprehensive services for children ages birth to five, and honor the expertise, goals, and desires of their families and early learning providers to set the stage for children’s success in school and in life.

We collectively recognize that advancing equity in educational access, use, participation, and outcomes for young children and their families is inextricably tied to advancing equity and justice for people of color and communities that have been under-resourced and divested from. We encourage the Department to view its learning agenda as a critical tool for advancing equity in early learning, and to consider the following:

- **Promote early learning as foundational to K-12.** We recommend that the Department anchor its learning agenda grounded in research findings that early learning is foundational to healthy child development and early school success and reducing disparities before kindergarten entry. Though research has repeatedly demonstrated the impact of the early grades on later school success, there is still much work to be done to elevate and identify the necessary steps and partnerships that could facilitate the effective alignment of birth-to-five services – including infant-toddler programming – with K-12.
- **Prioritize research on early childhood to K-12 transitions,** particularly for children with disabilities and developmental delays, dual-language learners, and other priority populations. Successful transitions are critical for children’s academic progress and social emotional well-being. Planning successful transitions for children with disabilities and developmental delays requires very intentional planning, and early childhood and K-12 providers across the country could benefit from

new best practices and innovations in this critical area. A focus on dual-language learners is particularly important to plan for in the years ahead given the changing demographics of our country. Research-based best practice shows that support for the home language and English as a Second Language is critical for these students in pre-K and transitioning into kindergarten.

- **Integrate the needs of priority and historically under-resourced populations throughout the learning agenda and collect data disaggregated by race/ethnicity, language, and income level for child- and family-facing services.** This includes children with disabilities and developmental delays, children experiencing homelessness, children experiencing the child welfare system, dual-language learners, rural populations, children in poverty, student parents, and others. While we support the use of targeted research questions that address the unique needs of these and other groups that have historically been under-resourced, it is our hope that the Department will also weave equity in educational access, use, participation, and outcomes into each and every question that is selected for its learning agenda. One important way to do this is to ensure that whenever possible, data collected by the Department pursuant to its learning agenda is disaggregated by race/ethnicity to help highlight and address disparities.
- **Integrate early childhood providers into studies on workforce needs and development.** As the Department explores social emotional needs, career pathways, and professional development improvements for educators, we urge you to include school- and community-based early childhood providers. Despite clear linkages between quality and workforce preparation and support, this segment of the workforce has often been under-resourced and excluded from the technical assistance, professional development, and compensation structures typically available to K-12 educators. With the FY2022-2026 learning agenda, the Department of Education has an opportunity to learn more about the needs of the early childhood workforce and integrate them into field-wide solutions.
- **Value lived experience and family expertise.** As the Department begins conducting studies that rely on stakeholder engagement, we encourage staff and researchers to take a strengths-based, equity-centered approach to authentically partnering with families of young children and early childhood providers by valuing their lived experiences and embedding their expertise in research, program, and policy design and implementation. We recommend the Department:
 - Prioritize family voice to understand and respond to the needs of parents and children amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.
 - Regard families as experts in their own lived experiences and leaders in their communities and states by providing meaningful opportunities for involvement.
 - Remove barriers that may prevent families from contributing to ED’s learning agenda processes (e.g., compensation, translation services, childcare, transportation, inclusive meeting times, and availability of information to make informed decisions or recommendations).

- Ensure that parent leadership and engagement is at the center of all policy and program design that follows from the learning agenda. Ensure that there is leadership and participation of Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and people of color in the design of policies and implementation decisions.
- **Value community collaborations and systems.** As ED generates research findings and begins translating them into policies and guidance, we urge staff and researchers to consider communities as rich sources of innovation and providers and families as partners rather than recipients of information. Seek out feedback from diverse stakeholders who are part of systems planning and visioning that is taking place in communities across the country. These efforts to use community asset-mapping and needs assessments to build and strengthen connections across services will ultimately enhance guidance crafted by ED.
- **Disseminate data and research findings in ways that promote equity and continuous quality improvement for programs.** Whenever feasible, we encourage ED to create feedback loops that provide study results to all stakeholders who contributed data, including families, early childhood providers, and community leaders. Early childhood program contributors should be supported in using the data in the context of research-program partnerships and continuous quality improvement cycles to uncover and address inequities.
- **Create a joint learning agenda with the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).** A joint agenda will create opportunities to reduce fragmentation across the early care and learning field. Fragmentation, bureaucratic inefficiency, and lack of coordination in the administration of early childhood funding and programming creates real obstacles to access and results in many children missing out on the support they need. Integration and alignment matter on the ground to families with young children who too often have trouble determining what services they might be eligible for and how to access them. By collaborating with HHS on learning agenda topics like addressing the social emotional needs of staff and the use of the Quality Rating Improvement System (QRIS), ED and HHS can generate new research findings and ideas for cross-agency demonstration projects, shared technical assistance, guidance, and budget priorities that will benefit children, families, and providers across the continuum of care.

We further recommend agency leaders and staff review the equity principles and agency recommendations named in *Start with Equity: 14 Priorities to Dismantle Systemic Racism in Early Care and Education* written by the Children’s Equity Project in December 2020 (linked [here](#) and attached as an appendix).

Thank you for considering our recommendations. For additional information, please contact Nadia Gronkowski, Program Manager of Advocacy and Policy at Start Early, 33 W. Monroe Street, Suite 1200, Chicago, Illinois 60603, ngronkowski@startearly.org.

Sincerely,

National Organizations

American Federation of Teachers

Attendance Works

Bank Street College of Education, Learning Starts At Birth

Child Care Aware® of America

Committee for Economic Development

The Educare Learning Network

The Education Trust

First Five Years Fund

First Focus on Children

National Association for Family Child Care

National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education

National Workforce Registry Alliance, Inc.

New America Early & Elementary Education Policy Program

Parents as Teachers

Start Early

State & Local Organizations

Alaska

Alaska Children's Trust

California

Child360

Early Edge California

Colorado

Clayton Early Learning

Colorado Children's Campaign

Connecticut

The Connecticut Association for Human Services

Florida

United Way Miami

Georgia

Georgia Early Education Alliance for Ready Students

Idaho

Idaho Business for Education

United Way of Southeastern Idaho

Illinois

Children's Home and Aid

Erikson Institute

Latino Policy Forum

Legal Council for Health Justice

Metropolitan Family Services

Prevent Child Abuse Illinois

Synapse Early Learning Systems

YMCA of Metropolitan Chicago

YWCA Metropolitan Chicago

Louisiana

Louisiana Policy Institute for Children

Maryland

Maryland State Family Child Care Association

Missouri

Kids Win Missouri

Montana

Zero to Five Montana

Ohio

Action for Children

Pennsylvania

Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children

South Dakota

Coeur Wharf Resources (a partner of United Way of the Black Hills)

United Way of the Black Hills

Texas

First3Years

Washington, DC

Educare Washington, DC

House of Ruth