



Financing an Anti-Racist Child Care System

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Foundations of Our Partnership

At Child Care Aware® of America (CCAoA), [our vision](#) is that all families will have access to equitable, high-quality, affordable child care. To reach that vision, it is important to understand the complex history of child care in the United States and how systemic racism has been a powerful force that shaped the creation of the child care system, as well as its operation over time. It is equally critical to understand the ways that a strong, antiracist public child care system can be a tool to confront the economic, health, and social costs of systemic racism that harm us all as a country by improving educational and economic opportunities for historically underserved groups of young children and families. CCAoA has partnered with the [Center on the Ecology of Early Development \(CEED\)](#) at Boston University's [Wheelock College of Education and Human Development](#) to explore what we know from existing research about the complexities of how systemic racism is affecting our child care

A racist policy is any measure that produces or sustains racial inequity between racial groups.

Antiracism is a powerful collection of antiracist policies that lead to racial equity and are substantiated by antiracist ideas.

——— *How to Be an Antiracist*¹
(Kendi, 2019)

system, and how we can work toward a strong, antiracist child care system. Partnership activities began with a webinar series in 2020, at which the first author of this brief was a speaker along with Dr. Aisha Ray of the Erikson Institute and Dr. Ashley C. Williams of the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment. This paper builds on the content of the [2020 webinar](#) series. Researchers at NORC at the University of Chicago also collaborated to provide data estimates and policy equity analysis for this publication.

Introduction

In his book, *How to Be an Antiracist*, Ibram X. Kendi (2019) describes racism as “a powerful collection of racist policies that lead to racial inequity and are substantiated by racist ideas.” He explains the intersectionality of what can be described as “classist-racist policies,” meaning those policies that discriminate systematically against, and can even be exploitative of, Black people, other people of color and marginalized groups, and people living in poverty. Martin Luther King Jr. (1967) shared this belief, as he explained in his last publication, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*², that the problems of racism and the problem of economic exploitation were woven together. Kendi offers the solution as the need to develop antiracist policies that strive to root out both economic disparities and disparities between racial groups.

U.S. child care policies play an essential role in helping families find their way out of poverty because they enable parents—particularly mothers—to work. Also, by increasing children’s access to high-quality, nurturing, and developmentally stimulating early care and education experiences that have life-long educational, health, and economic impacts, U.S. child care policies represent a crucial investment in our children’s futures. The Biden Administration’s Executive Order on Advancing Racial Equity has prompted governmental actors, policymakers, and researchers to systematically examine how our policies perpetuate racial inequities, increasing attention to how both racism and classism are intertwined in the ways our child care system is funded and how it operates.

The purpose of this brief is to examine one crucial dimension of U.S. child care policies—financing—with a racial equity lens. We consider what is required to achieve an anti-racist child care system and explore some preliminary data points to assess where we are relative to that aspiration. This analysis and discussion comes at a crucial time when the U.S. public child care sector was recently infused with an unprecedented level of relief and rebuilding assistance in response to the COVID-19 pandemic throughout 2020 and 2021, and at a time when additional large-scale investments are pending in federal legislation related to [President Joe Biden’s 2021 Build Back Better Framework](#). If expansion of the U.S. child care sector continues, we will have an unparalleled opportunity to use the child care system as a powerful tool to advance educational equity for children and economic equity for working families and providers.

This brief is intended to contribute to the growing body of work examining early childhood policies with a racial equity lens and exploring strategies for building an anti-racist child care and early education system, including recent works from the Children’s Equity Project³, The Center for Law and Social Policy⁴ and the National Association for the Education of Young Children⁵. These analyses and resources and more will be needed to inform comprehensive approaches to advancing racial equity throughout the many different levels of the complex U.S. child care system.

Gender Racism⁶ in the Underpinnings of the Child Care Workforce

Child Care Aware® of America's [historical timeline](#) illuminates the stark reality of how child care in our country began during the era of slavery. The highlight we present here depicts how child care policies have perpetuated **gender racism** within the child care workforce. Kendi explains that gender racism is based on policies that fuel inequality between women among different racial groups and that such policies are substantiated by racist beliefs, values, and gender traditions. The historically low financing levels of the United States' child care system are reflective of the gender racism in policies that has resulted in an undervalued workforce⁷ composed almost exclusively of female workers, a large percentage of which are workers of color.

Beginning with enslaved African women who cared for the children of slave owners, often at the expense of their own children, child care beyond the immediate family has historically been provided disproportionately by women of color. It has a long history of being regarded as women's work, deserving of little or no pay, instead of a skilled profession with equitable compensation.⁸

Another important inflection point, highlighting issues of gender racism in U.S. public policy

debates, came during the push for welfare reform in the latter part of the 20th century. Political scientists captured evidence of the unfounded, racist stereotypes of mothers receiving public assistance that shaped welfare policy reform debates.⁹ The policies that came out of these often-misinformed debates ultimately pushed women (disproportionately women of color) into the workforce. This had implications of course for the U.S. child care system, as the women who were pushed into work needed someone to care for their children.

Historical analyses of policies raise concerns that the inequities in the child care system are rooted in underlying classism, racism, and sexism which have given way to policies that magnify unequal treatment of marginalized women within our society. Women of color represent roughly 40% of the child care workforce^{10,11}, and the median wage for child care workers in 2020 was \$12.24 per hour, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, which is below the living wage.¹² And, almost 15% of child care workers live below the "official" poverty line, which is more than double the percentage of workers in poverty as compared to other industries.

Greater Child Care Investments Needed to Dismantle Racial Inequities

Quality child care is an essential resource that should be available to all children and families regardless of family income, race, ethnicity, culture, or geographic location. Unfortunately, demographic, economic, and education evidence demonstrate this is not the case. Our child care industry is primarily a private fee-for-service industry that leaves families alone, and often with limited information, to navigate the dynamics of a complex child care market. Even more so, unlike K-12 schooling (a basic right for U.S. children), U.S. policies have historically reflected the view that the ability to select and pay for child care services largely is an individual family responsibility, not an educational or child health and wellbeing entitlement warranting public funding levels that guarantee broad child care access for all children.

Despite some key periods of expansion, the U.S. child care and early education system has historically faced insufficient levels of investment to meet the needs of low-income children and families. In the 1960s, with the advent of the Civil Rights Era and the launch of the federally funded Head Start Program, more families of color with limited income gained access to quality child care programs. However, even as the largest federally funded early childhood education program, Head Start historically has reached less than half of the eligible children in the country.¹³ Fast forward to the latter part of the 20th century when federal funding from the Act for Better Child Care (ABC) Bill¹⁴ and Child Care and Development Block Grant Act of 2014 (CCDBG)¹⁵ provided expanded support for improvements in child care programs and assisted families with low incomes in obtaining child care. However, similar to Head Start, access to CCDBG for eligible children and families remains low, with less than 15% of eligible families estimated to be served in fiscal year 2018.¹⁶ The result is that too often, children—particularly low-income children and children of



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color—spend time in care with quality levels below what is needed to support children’s learning and development.^{17,18} These patterns of low access to high-quality care among low-income and children of color only perpetuate long-standing racial and equity gaps in education.

Currently, parents at all income levels, and especially low-income parents, face myriad challenges in securing child care, including a lack of available child care providers in their area (especially infant and toddler and nontraditional hours care), unaffordable costs (averaging 35% of the median income for a single parent)¹⁹, which far exceeds the Department of Health and Human Services recommended benchmark of affordability at 7%²⁰), and low levels of quality across the system. And it is well-documented that Black, Hispanic* and Indigenous low-income working families are the most likely to face multiple unfair barriers to accessing high-quality affordable child care that meets their needs.^{21,22} Meanwhile, because the cost of providing high-quality child care is a labor-intensive service and therefore costly, the current system leaves providers to operate on razor-thin margins, resulting in an industry that pays extremely low wages to a disproportionately female work force (a large percentage of whom are workers of color), and lacks the resources required to improve quality and provide stable care to families.

**We use the term ‘Hispanic’ as a demographic descriptor within this paper. We recognize that other terms also are used, like Latinx (a term used for people of Latin American descent that promotes inclusivity). While Latinx, specifically, was introduced more than a decade ago in the U.S., it was added to the English dictionary in 2018. And according to a bilingual 2019 Pew Research Center Survey, 23% of adults who self-identify as Hispanic or Latino have heard of the term Latinx, and only 3% say they use it to describe themselves. With respect and consideration, we have chosen to use the term ‘Hispanic’ as a descriptor in this paper.*



Why do parents spend so much on child care, yet early childhood teachers earn so little?

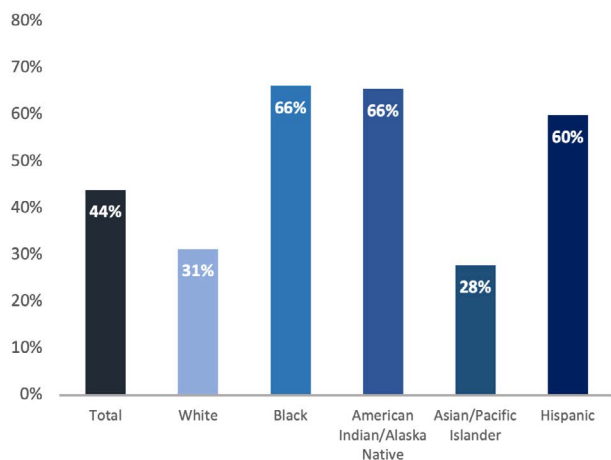
The average cost of child care is out of reach for many families and rivals college tuition, while early educators are among the lowest paid workers in the country. How is this possible? High-quality early care and education experiences, to which early educators are essential, provide lasting benefits to children, our economy and society, but receive only minimal public investment. The Center for the Study of Child Care Employment at UC Berkeley and Child Care Aware® of America teamed up to create a [video](#) that explains why parents cannot afford to pay, educators cannot afford to stay, and to propose a solution for a better way to support children, their families and early educators.

The current state of our child care system reflects our financing approaches, which fail to provide the requisite investment levels to support an antiracist child care system. ***To support an antiracist child care system, policies must be created that enable public investments to support high levels of access to the highest-quality care for children living in our lowest-income communities and families. Data in the next section will illustrate how public investments that do not meet these criteria contribute to racial inequities for children and families.***

Hastened Public Investments Needed to Actively Advance an Antiracist ECE System

Public investments in the U.S. child care system can only be considered anti-racist if they advance policies that **actively** confront longstanding racial inequities for children and for working parents. Despite public investment increases in the last decade, many children remain unserved by the ECE system. Our major source of public investment in the U.S. child care system—the Child Care Development Block Grant (CCDBG)—seeks to improve outcomes for young children from low-income working families by increasing access to high-quality child care and early learning opportunities. Children in low-income families face increased developmental risks due to the dynamics of growing up in poverty, and also face increased barriers to accessing quality child care (including affordability and availability of quality care). Moreover, low-income working parents who lack affordable, stable care for their children face additional barriers to employment and economic security. High-quality child care can have a positive impact on children’s development.

Figure 1. Percent of children (age 0-9) living at or below 200% poverty



Source: American Community Survey, 2014-2018.

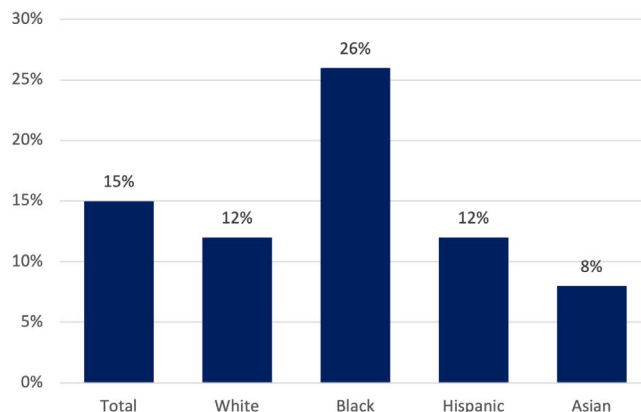
Because Black, Hispanic and Indigenous children are more likely to live in economically vulnerable families (Figure 1), policies that provide accessibility for low-income children by expanding their enrollment in high-quality care will reduce gaps between low-income and higher-income children, which reduces racial gaps in access to high-quality early care and learning, and ultimately their developmental outcomes.

While public investment has been steadily increasing over the past decade, and while early childhood policies have likely contributed to a narrowing of socioeconomic and racial gaps in children’s outcomes, progress is slow. Although school readiness gaps narrowed meaningfully between 1998 and 2010, it would take an estimated 60 to 110 years to completely close gaps if they continue to narrow at the pace observed during that time period.²³ This slow rate of progress shows that our investments and policies need to do more to build an antiracist U.S.

child care system—one that **actively confronts** inequities in children’s early opportunities.

To support an anti-racist child care system, public investment levels need to provide for high levels of access to the highest-quality care for the most vulnerable children. Instead, as described above, U.S. federal child care assistance policies have historically provided access to child care to less than 15% of eligible low-income children nationally, and children of some racial and ethnic groups have even lower levels of access. As Figure 2 shows, 15% of federally-eligible children in FY2018 received child care subsidies, and rates of subsidy receipt are low across all groups, although they do vary by race/ethnicity: Roughly 12% of federally-eligible White and Hispanic children received subsidies in FY18 compared with 26% of Black children. Rates for Asian federally-eligible children were the lowest (8%).

Figure 2. Percent of federally-eligible children receiving subsidies, for each racial/ethnic group

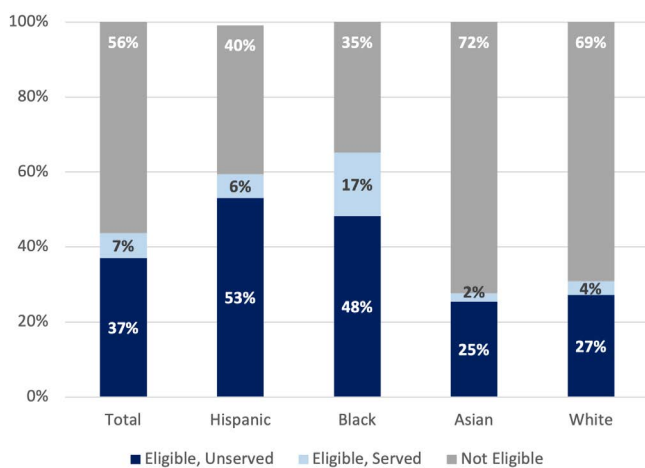


Source: Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning & Evaluation, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2021). Data FY18.

Notably, even for racial groups with relatively higher access rates (e.g., Black children), more than 70% of all eligible children in every racial/ethnic group remained unserved based on fiscal year 2018 data. These patterns of racially disparate access are concerning as they raise the question of why children who are eligible based on their income are unequally reached/served based on their race/ethnicity? This topic has been the subject of ongoing examination.^{24,25,26}

While disparate access among eligible children is concerning, it is also crucial to examine how high levels of unmet need for children of different racial/ethnic groups translate into unequal levels of child vulnerability *at the population level*.

Figure 3. Estimated percent of all children who are eligible and unserved, total and by race/ethnicity



Source: Authors' calculations of FY18 federally-subsidy eligible children receiving subsidies (ASPE) and American Community Survey data, 2014-2018.

"Children ages 0-9 included in estimates. Number of children estimated to be federally eligible for subsidies includes children with family income below 200% of the federal poverty level. Number of children served estimated by applying the percentage of children receiving subsidies in FY17 to the estimated number of eligible children.

Figure 3 reflects how, at a population level, the high unmet need for high-quality child care puts children in all race/ethnic groups at risk and has a disproportionately harmful impact on Black and Hispanic children (among the groups included in this analysis). Among White and Asian children ages 0-9, we see that 1 in 4 children are **eligible and unserved**, defined as children estimated to be income-eligible and not served by child care subsidies. This compares to 2 out of 4 Black and Hispanic children in the U.S., which is more than double the rate of White and Asian children. If the goal is to build an antiracist child care system, it is crucial that we set policy targets that account for the racially unequal implications of underfunded programs at the population level. With a rapidly diversifying child population, our failure to set antiracist policy goals will only exacerbate the costs, in terms of lost human/developmental potential, of a child care system that allows racial inequities to persevere.

Are recent and proposed public investment expansions enough to build an antiracist U.S. child care system?

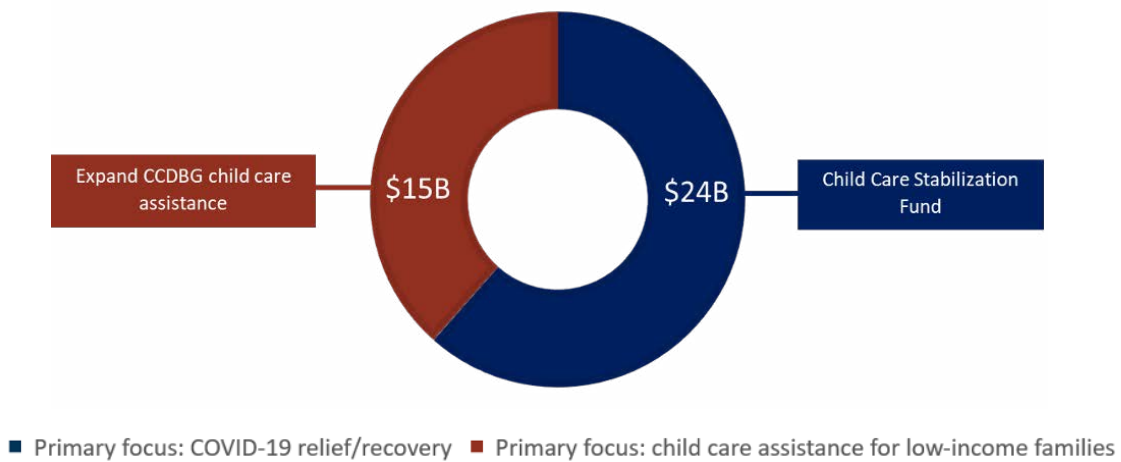
The passage of the American Rescue Plan (ARP) Act in March 2021 infused \$39 billion into the child care system. Another \$100 billion of federal child care funds for 0-5 year-olds was proposed under the first three years of funding in the most recent federal legislation aimed to support President Joe Biden's Build Back Better Framework ("BBB"); \$24B in FY22, \$34B in FY23 and \$42B in FY24. These investments represent a fundamental shift in the financing approach of the U.S. child care system on a scale that is

positioned to address the large levels of unmet needs described above. Our estimates indicate the potential for these investments to make meaningful progress at confronting longstanding racial inequities for children and families. Monitoring is recommended to ensure they are sufficient to not only expand access to basic care, but to cover the true cost of high-quality child care (estimated at \$16,000 per child per year to cover the true cost of high-quality infant care).²⁷

How far can recent and proposed investments take us?

The \$39 billion provided as a part of the ARP Act includes \$24 billion to support providers through stabilization grants. In addition, \$15 billion is provided through CCDBG – which can be used to expand child care assistance for low-income families.²⁸ The ARP Act’s funding is in addition to relief funding provided in 2020 through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act and the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations (CRRSA) Act (Figure 4).^{29, 30} These investments were on a scale that was unprecedented at the time in U.S. child care financing. They have been essential to stabilizing the child care infrastructure in the U.S. during the COVID-19 pandemic, without which an antiracist child care system would not be possible. However, because baseline levels of investment in the U.S. child care system were so low relative to need (as described in Figure 3 above), these investments alone will not be enough to ensure a robust antiracist child care system—one that is actively confronting unequal access to high-quality early care and learning.

Figure 4. Federal ARP Act Relief Funding for Child Care (\$39B)



Source: Center for Law and Social Policy, 2021.³¹



If we consider just the discretionary CCDBG funding within the ARP Act, this led to a CCDBG funding increase of 2.6 times, from a baseline funding level of \$5.8B in FY17 to \$15.0B under ARP Act.³¹ If this funding increase was utilized in ways that hypothetically provided capacity to serve 2.6 times more children (for sake of illustration), then an additional roughly 3 million children could gain access to subsidies, bringing the total number of children served by CCDBG to close to 5 million (out of an estimated 13.5 million children who were eligible based on federal criteria in FY17). While this unprecedented expansion is extremely meaningful, these higher investment levels would likely still leave a large majority (for example 60% or more) of eligible children unserved.³² In reality, states are already using the ARP Act CCDBG discretionary funding for a number of capacity-building purposes – including, but not limited to, direct assistance to increase eligible children served.³²

Next, if we consider the federal child care funding in the most recent proposed legislation to support President Joe Biden’s Build Back Better Framework, funding levels would reach \$24B in FY22, \$34B in FY23, and \$42B in FY24. These proposed funding levels would represent increases of 4x, 6x and 7x, respectively, over baseline FY17 CCDBG funding levels. However, the proposed federal funding pertains only to children ages 0-5, and also includes higher income thresholds for eligibility compared with historical CCDBG income thresholds, which prevents direct comparisons to FY17 CCDBG funding and program reach. Nevertheless, these funding levels have the potential to reach a majority if not all children and families

³¹FY17 funding levels are included in this paper as they directly correspond to estimates of income-eligible children. In, FY21, the most recent full-year appropriations cycle, CCDBG was funded at \$5.91 billion.

³²If we use the number of estimated income-eligible children in FY2017 (13.5 million) as a proxy for how many children are eligible today, and if we assume that 2.6 times increase in funding increases the number of children served to a total of 4.9 million children, then we would estimate that CCDBG could serve 36% of eligible children under this expansion. This leaves an estimated 63% of children still unserved. This also does not account for substantial increases in the number of children eligible which could result from the negative economic consequences of the COVID19 pandemic. The estimates also do not account for additional children who may gain access to subsidies or tuition relief from relief/recovery funding. It is important to note that while these rough estimates provide a reference point for contextualizing the scope of the recent investments relative to potential need, these estimates are reference points only and do not reflect a robust simulation of the impacts of recent or proposed legislation.

in need as they are intended to do under this new entitlement program. Moreover, public investment levels in an antiracist child care system must support not only basic access, but they must also support high levels of access to *quality* child care. While there is some debate in the field about the definition of quality in child care, one of this paper's authors³³ demonstrates the findings for a classroom quality measure that takes into consideration whether teacher-child interactions are equitable, anti-biased, and culturally responsive. They believe it is interactions such as these that provide the foundation of what is needed in high-quality classrooms serving racially and ethnically diverse children. Based on historical disparities and inequities that are well documented, retaining a quality child care system is reliant on retaining experienced providers who

are skilled and trained regularly and compensated appropriately for the requirements and demands of their work. Child care quality can vary by the racial and socioeconomic composition of children served³⁴, and studies of some publicly funded early childhood programs (e.g., Head Start) suggest that Black children have lower levels of access to quality programs.³⁵ Persistent school readiness gaps are an indicator of insufficient system-wide quality levels to support an antiracist child care system that ensures high levels of access to the highest quality care for vulnerable children. Further, the long-term return on investment that we forgo when we choose not to invest in children early³⁶ reveals the economic irrationality of underinvesting in our child care system in the context of a diversifying child population.

The COVID-19 pandemic has elevated conversations in the early childhood community about equitable allocation and distribution of relief funding and resources for child care providers.

Relief funding and emergency supplies for early childhood programs were enabled through supplemental infusions into the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG). Once approved and flowing to states, state lead agencies and their systems partners need to respond rapidly to direct support to child care providers in emergent need. The lack of effective integrated or interoperable data systems that allow for point-in-time data across partners to be immediately accessible further complicated the process and made it very difficult to determine if workstreams to distribute monies and resources equitably reached early educators. Child Care Aware® of America's three-part 2021 resource suite on digital technology interoperability³⁷ calls out the need for designing digital technology and data systems to better ensure inequities are not perpetuated. Bolstered data systems are key to navigating current and future child care system fluctuations and priorities.

Conclusion

The U.S. child care system is challenged by an unmet need due to a historically underfunded system that has failed to meaningfully confront early educational inequities in children’s opportunities to learn and thrive, and economic inequities in low-income families’ access to child care needed to work. Additionally, the U.S. system has been shaped by policies that have perpetuated gender inequities and racism resulting in a low-paid and undervalued ECE workforce. Confronting racial and economic inequities relies on public investments to confront “classist-racist policies”³⁸ underlying the financing of the U.S. child care system. We see from the data presented in this brief how the current finance structure of the child care system has a disproportionate negative impact on Black, Hispanic and Indigenous families at the population level. This is evidence of how the distribution of funding for child care is a racial equity issue and one of the most powerful levers we have for advancing racial equity. Financing is the backbone of our system and it is impossible to have an antiracist system without adequate purposeful investment. We are on the precipice of unprecedented expansion, and current investments like the ARP Act and the proposed federal legislation to advance President Biden’s Build Back Better Framework are key tools for dismantling racial inequities within the child care system and later academic and economic disparities. As such, we assert that focusing on the financing structure of the child care system has great potential to contribute to an antiracist child care system in the U.S.



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