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Breaking Barriers, Creating New Opportunities Equitable Early Childhood Education for Philadelphia Black and Brown Communities

White Paper by the African-American Chamber of Commerce of PA, NJ, and DE

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Executive Summary

Recognizing the significant role that high-quality early care and education (ECE) plays in advancing economic growth in communities,¹ the African-American Chamber of Commerce of PA, NJ, and DE (AACC) advocates for the enhancement of resources dedicated to supporting the ECE business ecosystem. Our aim is to foster increased inclusivity, especially given the challenges faced by minority-owned ECE businesses, such as constrained funding and complex barriers to sustainability and expansion.

In this white paper, titled 'Breaking Barriers, Creating New Opportunities: Equitable Early Childhood Education for Philadelphia Black and Brown Communities,' we explore the inter-relationship between high-quality ECE and the broader well-being and economic prosperity of our communities.

Key Takeaways:



ECE minority-owned businesses bolster the economy, not only by creating jobs for residents but also by forging business networks that benefit other small enterprises and enrich the broader business landscape.



ECE is an essential upstream strategy to combat poverty, especially in communities of color. High-quality ECE programs are crucial in disrupting the cycle of intergenerational poverty.



While all ECE businesses face challenges such as slim profit margins and high staff turnover, these issues are especially pronounced for Black- and Brown-owned businesses, which also contend with systemic barriers.



Effectively addressing the challenges within the ECE sector can enhance families' economic stability and foster sustainable, long-term economic growth for our city.



The ECE sector has long faced funding shortfalls. As the pandemic stimulus support has ended, Black and Brown communities have experienced significant repercussions that have influenced the city's entire recovery trajectory.

Our focus extends beyond understanding the influence of ECE in breaking the cycle of inequality; it also encompasses uplifting ECE Black- and Brown-owned enterprises and the communities they serve. Grounded in community and evidence-based insights, this white paper addresses systemic issues directly, emphasizing the imperative of inclusive policies, collaborations, and strategic investments within our communities. Our shared goal is to collectively advance early childhood education, enriching the futures of all children, amplifying the economic impact of ECE Black- and Brown-owned businesses, and nurturing equitable outcomes throughout Philadelphia, PA.



Introduction

Founded in 1993, the African-American Chamber of Commerce of PA, NJ, and DE (AACC) has established itself as a prominent advocate for Black-owned businesses in the Delaware Valley and Southeastern Pennsylvania. Its mission is to support growth and enhance effectiveness within African-American enterprises in the region. The AACC diligently addresses the specific needs of the business sector and leverages its social capital to promote economic opportunities and cultivate a thriving environment for Black communities and beyond.

The AACC is committed to championing high-quality early care and education (ECE) across all Philadelphia, PA communities and fostering the growth and sustainability of Black- and Brown-owned enterprises in this sector. The ECE sector includes a wide range of programs and services. Access to high-quality ECE significantly influences children's developmental trajectories, particularly in their formative years, as extensive research consistently demonstrates its role in enhancing children's school readiness and contributing to the reduction of educational disparities.^{2,3} Therefore, it's essential to support these businesses to ensure they can continue to provide high-quality, affordable early childhood education. This support can take on multiple forms, encompassing braiding multiple funding streams, widened access to capital and credit, as well as the provision of resources to facilitate professional development.⁴

Furthermore, ECE Black- and Brown-owned businesses are cornerstones in their communities, with research illustrating their potential to stimulate economic growth by fostering business networks and providing contracting opportunities to other small enterprises. This collaborative dynamic not only contributes to job creation but also enriches the broader business landscape.⁵ Therefore, these businesses play an important role in propelling local economic development and nurturing an environment of inclusion and opportunity.

However, despite their significance in a vibrant economy, ECE businesses, especially those that are minority-owned, grapple with formidable challenges, including tight profit margins, inadequate funding, high staff turnover, and limited access to capital.⁶ Hence, enhancing support for these businesses is imperative, as it directly fosters local economic growth, and harnesses existing strengths and resources within communities. In our pursuit of equitable and sustainable communities, prioritizing the growth of ECE Black- and Brown-owned small businesses is equally essential.

In 'Breaking Barriers, Creating New Opportunities: Equitable Early Childhood Education for Philadelphia Black and Brown Communities, we explore the nexus between high-quality ECE and the overall welfare and economic empowerment of our communities, with a particular focus on effective equitable development that directly impacts the well-being and prosperity of Black and Brown communities.

Understanding the ECE Landscape

The early care and education (ECE) sector in Philadelphia, PA stands at a pivotal juncture, facing a spectrum of challenges while simultaneously being presented with fresh opportunities for innovation and expansion. In 2023, the African-American Chamber of Commerce of PA, NJ, and DE collaborated with Adtigo Group LLC to conduct a preliminary study with ECE minority-owned business owners. This research underscored the fundamental importance of centering the perspectives and experiences of minority-owned small ECE businesses in shaping meaningful solutions within the ECE field. The research identified a need for collaborative spaces where ECE business owners can gather to tackle urgent challenges and advance equity through knowledge enhancement and skill development. This paves the way for transformative changes at both the individual and business levels.⁷

The AACC's research identified approaches that encourage business owners to harness their unique strengths. By pursuing tailored professional development and implementing deliberate strategies, they can foster sustainability, inspire their industry peers, and unlock unparalleled potential. Additionally, independent research indicates that leadership programs that emphasize the cultivation of relational-entrepreneurial leadership skills among early educators could be a viable approach for prompting positive change in the ECE sector. Such initiatives also aim to equip ECE educators as front-line leaders and change agents through targeted leadership development.⁸

To improve ECE, understanding the multifaceted concept of “quality” is essential. Research by the Federal Reserve System's Early Care and Education Work Group and Public Works Partners found that quality goes beyond state standards, capturing both providers' and parents' views. Given the limited care choices, parents sometimes prioritize convenience and cost over quality. The study advocates for enhanced government support, a strategy that would not only benefit parents and ECE enterprises but also catalyze the delivery of higher-quality care.⁹ Research on childcare in Philadelphia highlights the pandemic's impact and reveals that the city's high-quality ECE meets just 37% of the potential demand. While there has been notable progress, especially with the marked increase in quality seats in communities of color from 2021-2022, there is still a pressing need to guarantee equitable access to quality childcare for all families.¹⁰

Examining the demographic makeup of Philadelphia can offer deeper insights into these findings, particularly in areas heavily impacted by the ECE supply-demand gap. Based on the latest Census data, Black or African-American residents form the second largest racial/ethnic group in Philadelphia, representing 43% of the population. Residents identifying as White comprise 44.6% of the population, followed by Hispanic or Latino residents at 16.1%. Asians make up 8.2%, individuals identifying with two or more races represent 3.0%, American Indian and Alaska Native account for 1.0%, and Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islanders constitute 0.2%.¹¹

ECE: Shaping Economic Futures and Reducing Poverty

ECE plays a pivotal role in addressing poverty challenges, especially due to its undeniable impact on social mobility for families and children living in poverty. Furthermore, the benefits of ECE radiate beyond young learners' gains, offering substantial economic dividends to the wider community. For instance, every dollar channeled into early childhood programs yields a return ranging from \$2 to \$7, reflecting decreased social service expenses, augmented tax incomes, and heightened economic vigor.¹²

Despite experiencing its lowest poverty rate in nearly two decades, Philadelphia remains the most impoverished large city in the United States. Current data from the U.S. Census Bureau reveals a citywide poverty rate of 22.3%.¹³ Moreover, this rate varies across racial and ethnic groups. Hispanic residents have the highest rate at 37.9%, followed by Black residents at 30.8%, Asians at 22.9%, and Whites at 17.7%. This disparity highlights the heightened economic challenges faced by communities of color in the city. Specifically, the poverty rates for Black and Hispanic residents are almost double that of their White counterparts.¹⁴

The latest data also reveals a distinct variation in median household income in Philadelphia based on race and ethnicity. White non-Hispanic households reported a median income of \$78,010, which is over twice the amount of \$38,289 reported by Black households. Meanwhile, Hispanic households had a median income of \$44,795, marking a notable 38% rise from \$32,425 in 2019, an exceptional increase within two years.¹⁵ However, it's essential to gather more data in subsequent years to determine the persistence of this upward trend.

Given these disparities in income, the potential impact of ECE programs becomes even more crucial. Studies have consistently shown that children who participate in high-quality ECE programs have better educational outcomes, higher graduation rates, and increased earning potential in adulthood.¹⁶ Specifically, early interventions, such as ECE programs, are known to equip children with foundational cognitive and social skills that lay the groundwork for long-term academic and professional success. Considering the elevated rates of poverty in Black and Brown communities, the significance of high-quality early childhood education programs, with their established effectiveness, cannot be overstated. Concurrently, the repercussions of program closures and child care shortages extend beyond the immediate realm of education, potentially precipitating economic downturns through job losses in the industry and the involuntary withdrawal of parents from the workforce. Moreover, ECE plays a pivotal role in disrupting intergenerational poverty, driving both economic advancement and social justice in Philadelphia.

Advocating for high-quality ECE for all goes beyond the realm of educational debate to resonate profoundly with the principles of social justice. At its core, ECE encapsulates the foundational experiences that shape a child's trajectory in life. Studies suggest that quality early learning experiences are foundational for the holistic development of a child, impacting their cognitive, social, and emotional growth.¹⁷ Yet, access to these critical services remains inequitably distributed, often mirroring societal inequalities. To genuinely address entrenched disparities, society should recognize high-quality ECE as a fundamental right rather than a mere privilege.

Beyond the Pandemic: ECE's Looming Funding Gap

ECE in Philadelphia and across the United States has been chronically underfunded, compromising the well-being of ECE providers and the children they teach, and threatening the economic security of millions of families.¹⁸ Though comprehensive investments from federal, state, and local governments have offered some respite, they have typically been insufficient. The expiration of the Covid-19 pandemic stimulus aid has raised concerns for the future among ECE providers, working families, and business leaders. Without additional investments or a significant restructuring of public ECE funding, the challenges for ECE businesses to maintain operational sustainability may intensify. Without taking immediate action, we risk undermining not only our ECE infrastructure but also the broader health and vitality of our communities.¹⁹

While the worst of the pandemic may be over, the economic landscape has transformed. Philadelphia's economy, in the wake of the pandemic, has lagged behind the national economic recovery trajectory. Its rebound has been more measured compared to many other cities.²⁰

The pandemic's ripple effects have necessitated a rethinking of traditional ECE business structures. Prevailing business models, once deemed effective, now seem truly misaligned with the transformed economic landscape. Indeed, without a fresh perspective on new funding models coupled with resources to support the success of all high-quality ECE enterprises, we might confront enduring consequences that extend beyond the immediate demands of the sector. Moreover, as we consider new strategies and funding models for essential investments in ECE, it's imperative to acknowledge and address the disproportionate effects of the pandemic on communities of color.²¹

In light of these challenges and the need for innovative solutions, there is an emerging consensus on the pivotal role of private-sector collaboration in fortifying the ECE sector. Recent research highlights the potential of private-sector involvement in bridging the ECE funding gap. Businesses and philanthropic entities possess the capacity to amplify the value of ECE, influencing public attitudes and steering policy outcomes. Through their advocacy, they can catalyze greater public investment in ECE.²² A subsequent study emphasizes the synergy between private and public sectors in ECE funding. Research suggests that when the private sector not only advocates for but also invests in ECE, it creates a multiplier effect, prompting governmental bodies to match or exceed these funds, viewing them as investments in societal well-being and future economic prosperity.²³

Multi-partner frameworks are gaining traction for enhancing equitable ECE access. Innovation grants stand out for sparking cross-sector collaboration and advancing ECE delivery. The Pay For Success approach ties funding to measurable outcomes, ensuring program quality.²⁴ Alongside these trends, a review of existing reimbursement rates and structures is vital.

The factors influencing the sustainability and accessibility of high-quality ECE programming and ECE small businesses are varied, spanning deep-seated socio-economic issues to the foundational structures of the ECE sector itself. These challenges, although prevalent, have a particularly pronounced impact on Philadelphia's Black and Brown communities, underscoring the need for urgent and context-specific solutions.

Long before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, communities of color contended with substantial financial disparities. For example, the enduring racial wealth gap has deeply impacted the Black community, particularly its small business proprietors.²⁵ This disparity became even more pronounced in 2020: from February to April, Black business ownership saw a staggering 40% drop—the most severe decline among all ethnic groups. This trend amplifies the growing disparities, as both Hispanic and Asian business owners reported decreases exceeding the national average.²⁶

Unpacking Key Challenges in ECE

Systemic Barriers

The historical disinvestment in Black and Brown communities, marked by unequal school funding and a lack of access to quality educational opportunities, continues to yield long-lasting implications for the field of ECE. Furthermore, due to the pervasive impact of racism and discrimination, communities of color disproportionately bear the consequences of historical underinvestment, resulting in disparities encompassing access, quality, compensation, and growth opportunities within the ECE sector.²⁷ Such entrenched disparities not only compromise the potential of individual learners but also perpetuate cycles of hardship, undermining the broader objective of creating an inclusive, equitable, and thriving education landscape.

Limited Availability of High-Quality Programs

High-quality ECE programs are commonly recognized as essential for realizing the benefits of early childhood education. Limited availability of high-quality ECE inevitably results in a lack of access for many families in Black and Brown communities. Disparities in access not only widen the educational gap but also undermine the long-term potential and socio-economic mobility of children in these communities. Moreover, research has shown that Black and Hispanic parents are more often living in segregated neighborhoods, making it harder for them to access high-quality ECE.^{28,29}

Socioeconomic Disparities

Multiple research studies highlight the vast socioeconomic disparities that exist in Philadelphia, frequently leading to unequal opportunities for children in communities of color.^{30,31} Disparities manifest across multiple facets of ECE, encompassing program quality, funding, teacher qualifications, early intervention strategies, health and nutrition protocols, language and literacy initiatives, school preparedness, and long-term outcomes. Such disparities often culminate in restricted access to essential resources, thereby compromising the accessibility and provision of high-caliber ECE. Addressing these gaps is imperative to ensure equitable opportunities and holistic development for all children.

Labor Market Complexities

The ECE sector is grappling with substantial workforce issues, including inadequate compensation and high attrition rates, which undermine the stability and continuity necessary for high-quality care and education. As a result, seasoned educators, who are instrumental in shaping the learning experiences of young children, are compelled to seek better opportunities elsewhere, thereby depleting the sector of valuable expertise and experience.³² Moreover, the ECE workforce contends with structural disparities in wages and opportunities, with women of color bearing a disproportionate burden of these disparities.³³ These combined challenges have far-reaching implications for both the workforce and the ECE business ecosystem.

Policy and Regulation Constraints

Policies and regulations must be designed to benefit families, providers, and ECE businesses, with a specific focus on ECE Black and Brown-owned businesses. Inclusive policymaking and regulations are essential within the ECE sector. Current policies and regulations may not adequately address the unique needs and obstacles faced by Black and Brown communities in Philadelphia. Therefore, it is imperative to monitor and adjust these policies and regulations to guarantee equitable access and support for all children and ECE businesses.

Charting the Path Forward

A robust ECE business ecosystem is needed for bolstering community wealth in both social and economic dimensions, especially within Black and Brown communities. Empirical evidence suggests that minority-owned enterprises exhibit rapid growth and innovation. These businesses play a pivotal role in providing employment, enhancing opportunities for other small enterprises, and driving economic expansion.³⁴ In light of their impact, it is essential to place a heightened emphasis on understanding and crafting interventions tailored to enhance their business acumen and resilience.

From this foundation, it's clear that the interplay of culture and context is central to the effectiveness of an ECE business ecosystem. ECE Black and Brown business owners offer invaluable cultural insights and lived experiences, uniquely equipping them to design and execute ECE programs that genuinely resonate with the communities they serve. Their influential presence in the ECE sector not only acts as a beacon for children in communities of color, illuminating viable pathways to leadership and entrepreneurship but also underscores the significance of representation of ownership in communities.

To advance ECE in Philadelphia, it's imperative to engage Black and Brown ECE small business owners in planning—from crafting business support strategies to influencing broader community and state systems. Strengthening partnerships between ECE businesses, economic development agencies, and financial institutions is vital. Central to these endeavors is integrating the perspectives of families from communities of color, ensuring ECE approaches truly reflect the needs and aspirations of those directly affected.

Determined to actualize an equitable future for Philadelphia's communities of color, the AACC embraces its role in championing resources for high-quality ECE. Drawing inspiration from policy frameworks proposed by national entities like the National Black Child Development Institute (NBCDI) and regional stakeholders, the AACC advocates for policies rooted in inclusivity. Policies should be developed with insights from communities of color, while also maintaining agility to address the ever-evolving demands within the ECE ecosystem.

As a central figure in promoting purpose-driven partnerships, the AACC is positioned to connect stakeholders—government bodies, business leaders, ECE Black and Brown business owners, educational leaders, and community organizations—to amass resources and expertise. Our collective effort will continue to shape a more inclusive ECE environment in our city and put equity at its core. By implementing deliberate measures to strengthen the ECE ecosystem for all families, communities, and businesses we lay the groundwork for a brighter, more inclusive future in Philadelphia. As we progress, it's crucial to actively listen to and draw upon the expertise of ECE Black and Brown business owners, ensuring that the evolution of the ECE ecosystem is not just growth-oriented, but truly equitable. The path ahead offers an exciting opportunity to redefine the landscape of early childhood education in Philadelphia, making it a beacon for other cities to emulate.



Actionable Insights and Recommendations

To actualize a future where all children have access to high-quality ECE, collective action from stakeholders is necessary. Through informed strategies, we can transform the ECE landscape, making equity an achieved reality.

Build Capacity to Support Business Growth

Prioritize targeted professional development and training to enhance the competencies of providers and the business acumen of ECE business owners. This focus is central to ensuring Black and Brown business owners can sustain and expand their offerings of high-quality ECE. Through these efforts, we can also support the retention of talented and resourceful educators and ECE providers within our communities.

Invest in Multi-Partner Innovation

Create partnerships among ECE businesses, advocacy organizations, local educational and research institutions, government agencies, financial institutions, and other leaders to share best practices, pool resources, and collaboratively allocate investments toward initiatives that enhance the quality and accessibility of ECE programs. Harness the synergies from these multifaceted collaborations to develop novel funding models, enhance family engagement approaches, and community engagement strategies that collectively redefine the ECE ecosystem.

Embrace Adaptable Systems, Professional Practices, and Policies

For the ECE system, centered on structured early learning and development, to operate optimally, requires ongoing research and insights from a broad spectrum of ECE professionals and business owners. By emphasizing adaptability and inclusivity in policies, we address the diverse needs of children and challenges in the field of ECE. Supporting regular evaluations will help maintain the system's agility, ensuring it meets both educational and business demands effectively.

Support Technology Adoption

Technology can enhance educational outcomes and streamline ECE business systems by supporting individualized learning pathways, boosting operational efficiency, and elevating the overall quality of services provided. To harness these benefits, policymakers can facilitate access to modern technological tools through targeted grants and training for ECE providers and business owners. Moreover, promoting a tech-friendly regulatory environment will further encourage businesses to adopt and integrate these solutions.

Enhance Equitable Development in Communities

All ECE stakeholders must prioritize and commit to equity. Equitable development ensures that quality of life outcomes—like affordable housing, education, and employment—are equitably experienced by everyone in a community. For ECE and ECE Black and Brown business owners, this means creating a business ecosystem where they have equitable access to resources and opportunities.



ACTIONABLE INSIGHTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS



Build Capacity to Support Business Growth

Prioritize targeted training to boost ECE providers' competencies and business owners' acumen.



Invest in Multi-Partner Innovation

Leverage collaborations to create new funding models, family engagement, and community strategies that reshape the ECE landscape.



Embrace Adaptable Systems, Professional Practices, and Policies

Integrate research with insights from ECE business owners and providers to effectively support the future of ECE.

Champion adaptability and inclusivity in practices and policies.



Support Technology Adoption

Assist ECE businesses in leveraging technology to streamline operations, optimize digital document management, and improve the overall quality of services provided.



Enhance Equitable Development in Communities

Commit to treating equity and inclusion as essential business imperatives.

Create an equitable business ecosystem for ECE, especially for Black and Brown small business owners, ensuring access to resources and opportunities.



Reimagining Philadelphia's ECE Ecosystem:
Take Action and Measure Progress



Conclusion

Addressing challenges within the ECE sector necessitates robust support for ECE Black- and Brown-owned businesses. These enterprises inherently grasp and respond to unique community needs. By supporting their prosperity, we underscore the value of economic inclusivity and diversification, pushing for ECE industry evolution and fostering a more balanced distribution of wealth and resources in communities. This report highlights that genuine progress requires an integrated approach: informed policy-making, partnerships, and targeted investments. Equity, adaptability, and forward-thinking form the foundation for our path ahead. While this white paper doesn't claim to provide a comprehensive solution, its goal is to elevate the discourse, inviting diverse stakeholders to advocate for an ECE business ecosystem that advances equity, enlists new partners, and novel collaborations.

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