

Southern Early Childhood Education Justice (SECEJ) network

The Southern Early Childhood Education Justice (SECEJ) network, an initiative managed by the Southern Education Foundation, is a regional coalition that unites state and national policy organizations and advocates to improve and expand early learning opportunities across the South. This network of partners engages in strategic professional learning and works to create and advance a comprehensive, regional early childhood policy agenda with a deliberate emphasis on supporting Black children and children from low-income families.

The Need: Improve, coordinate, and sustain

The SECEJ network seeks to address the absence of a broad southern regional strategy to improve, coordinate, and sustain early childhood education through local-, state-, and federal-level advocacy. The SECEJ network aims to build upon the collective movement for racial justice and equity to transform early learning across the South.

Our Approach

The SECEJ network consists of early learning advocates, researchers, and practitioners at the local, state, and national levels. This collaborative effort also involves national partners and the creation of state advocacy councils influenced and led by parents and providers. National partners assist the SECEJ network in many ways, such as by providing critical research, supporting the development of the federal advocacy agenda, and providing technical assistance to the state advocacy councils. State advocacy councils convene a diverse set of partners, including parents, caregivers, early childhood education providers, and policy experts, to develop state-level advocacy plans and objectives. The network convenes quarterly in virtual and in-person settings to engage in professional shared learning and refine its coordinated advocacy strategy.

The Case for Early Learning Justice in the South

The nation's early learning system, like its K-12 and higher education systems, has long reflected the enduring impacts of racism. White and Black children had deeply unequal access to the nation's first public kindergartens, with more than 50 programs for White children in operation by the time the first public kindergarten for Black children opened in 1879. The challenges faced today by the largely non-White, almost exclusively female early-care workforce can be traced to the vestiges of enslavement, when Black women often were forced to care for the children of their enslavers. The SECEJ network's regional advocacy and policy objectives seek to improve these statistics and create a better early learning system for all children --especially Black and other children of color, and for early childhood education professionals.



- The South is home to **60% of the nation's Black children under age 5** and nearly **50% of children in low-income working families**.¹
- **Black children access high-quality early learning programs at a rate of 15%** compared to 24% for White children.³
- Black and Hispanic children **start kindergarten seven-to-12 months behind in reading** compared to their White peers.⁴
- Head Start only serves **58% of eligible Black children** and **38% of eligible Hispanic children**.⁵
- Child-care subsidies only reach **one in seven eligible children** in the U.S.⁶
- In 10 SEF states, average **annual infant-care costs currently surpass average in-state tuition costs** at public four-year colleges.⁷

The SECEJ network is supported by a three-year, \$3.1 million grant from the Bezos Family Foundation. Nearly three dozen early childhood organizations have joined the network since its pilot phase began in early 2022.

1. KIDS COUNT Data Center. The Annie E. Casey Foundation. <https://datacenter.aecf.org/>
2. [Programs were considered high-quality based on their rating on the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale](#)
3. Friedman-Krauss, A., Barnett, W. S., & Nores, M. (2016). How much can high-quality universal pre-K reduce achievement gaps? Center for American Progress. <https://www.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2016/04/NIEER-AchievementGaps-report.pdf>
4. Ibid.
5. Hardy, E., Joshi, P., Geronimo, K., Huber, R., Acevedo-Garcia, D. (2020). Unequal Availability of Head Start: How Neighborhood Matters. diversitydatakids.org. https://www.diversitydatakids.org/sites/default/files/2020-01/ddk_unequal-availability-of-head-start_2020_4.pdf
6. CCDBG: Overview. First Five Years Fund. (2024, January 10). <https://www.ffyf.org/resources/2023/03/ccdbg-overview/>
7. States facing up to the staggering costs of child care. Southern Education Foundation. (2023, February 27). <https://southerneducation.org/resources/blog/2023/02/14/costs-of-child-care/>