



Education Program Strategic Plan

Updated in 2018

For more than a decade, the Heising-Simons Foundation has invested in early childhood education, in recognition of the critical role the early years of life play in establishing a strong foundation for future success. Yet for millions of children, particularly those who are living in poverty and children of color, access to high-quality learning opportunities is limited or nonexistent. Working to overcome the systemic and other barriers that have impeded progress is at the core of the strategy described below.

Process

The Education team started by interviewing many diverse external stakeholders to gather their views and counsel on the biggest problems to solve in early care and education¹ (EC&E) and the highest-impact roles available to philanthropy. We reviewed a comprehensive set of the Foundation's Education grants using a common set of criteria. We commissioned the Foundation Center to develop a curated dataset of early care and education philanthropic activity across the nation yielding maps intended to help us and others determine where our philanthropy could be complementary to the work of other organizations and where it might be distinctive.

We then distilled lessons learned from our past several years of grantmaking in education, noting challenges in raising child outcomes at material scale. The Education program staff used these lessons to inform core shifts in our strategy, to establish specific outcome goals, and to focus and deepen our areas of investment. Most importantly, we affirmed our belief in the centrality of high-quality adult-child interactions and supportive, high-quality learning environments for children. In early May 2018, we shared our draft strategic plan with EC&E experts and philanthropic colleagues to gather their input and adjusted our strategy based upon this feedback. In June 2018, our Board approved our new strategy.

The Problem We Seek to Address

Children from families with low incomes and children of color have inequitable access to high-quality educational opportunities and have lower educational outcomes than their peers. For example, just 24 percent of 4th-grade children living in poverty were assessed as proficient in math on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in 2015 in the United States, compared with 58 percent of children from non-low-income families. Gaps start early and result in much lower rates of college completion and social mobility for children from families with low incomes and children of color. While we do not believe that our work—or even the whole education system—can by itself close such gaps, we do believe that we can make a significant contribution to reducing these disparities.

¹ Many terms are used in the field to describe the education and care of young children and their families. Please refer to section "Definition of Terms" below, where we provide a definitional typology to describe how we define the early childhood developmental period, how we distinguish formal educational settings from informal settings, and how we describe aspects of the workforce that cares for and teaches young children. These terms are used throughout this document.



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Goals

We have identified ambitious child outcome goals to bring a disciplined focus on outcome improvement; to force us to identify what works, and what does not, at scale; and to identify opportunities to improve the lives of many more children.

- **Our long-term goal:** To facilitate the creation and strengthening of early childhood systems necessary for children from low-income families and children of color to reach their full potential, by the year 2044, the year when the US becomes a majority-minority nation.
- **Our 10-year goal for California:** To improve educational proficiency rates for young children from low-income families and children of color by 10 percentage points over the next 10 years.
- **Our 10-year goal for national work:** To develop coherent early childhood education systems in 5 to 7 states over the next 10 years that will enable children from families with low incomes and children of color to reach their full potential.

Approach

Our strategy spans birth to 3rd grade and recognizes that early learning happens in many settings, some within the formal education system and some outside of it—most notably, within the family context. Our work straddles the silos that exist within the birth-to-3rd grade policy and practice space to create a more coherent system that better serves children and families, particularly those of color and with low incomes. We will maintain a national focus, with a strong emphasis on our home state of California.

We intend to organize our work in two complementary portfolios:

- **Enabling Conditions**, where we focus on creating the systemic conditions that best enable high-quality adult-child interactions and positive learning environments, both nationally and in California; and,
- **Effective Practice**, where we focus on supporting effective practices that enable high-quality adult-child interactions within the systems and settings in which children from families and children of color develop and learn.

Each portfolio will house a set of major initiatives. Each major initiative is a multi-year, multi-grant sub-portfolio designed to make significant progress toward our goals. Within the Enabling Conditions portfolio, we will work on a common set of challenges, although the starting point for each will be tailored to readiness conditions either within California or in states across the country.

We expect to define three or four major initiatives in each of the two portfolios over the next few years.

To date, we have defined three major initiatives, two within Enabling Conditions and one within Effective Practice.

- **Enabling Conditions (national): Stabilizing the Early Childhood Education Workforce** to ensure that all professionals in the workforce have the knowledge, skills, and institutional supports



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needed to effectively foster young children's growth and development. This includes compensation on par with ECE teachers' K-12 counterparts.

- **Enabling Conditions (California): Ensuring Accountability through a Data for Action Framework in California** to enable public agencies in California to meet the needs of young children and families by using high-quality integrated data to guide continuous improvement and inform planning, policy, practice, and operations to ultimately create an integrated system of services for young children.
- **Effective Practice: Creating Coherent Early Math Instruction in California from School Entry to Third Grade** to ensure that children, especially children from families with low incomes and children of color, are appropriately challenged and supported in math instruction to be proficient in math by 4th grade entry.

In addition to these three initial major initiatives, we envision future work in the Enabling Conditions portfolio that will bolster the capacity of state agencies to engage in functional governance of the early childhood education system (nationally, and in California when conditions are right). In the Effective Practice portfolio, we will explore major initiatives around family engagement, in math and generally; dual language learners; and meeting the needs of the most vulnerable children.

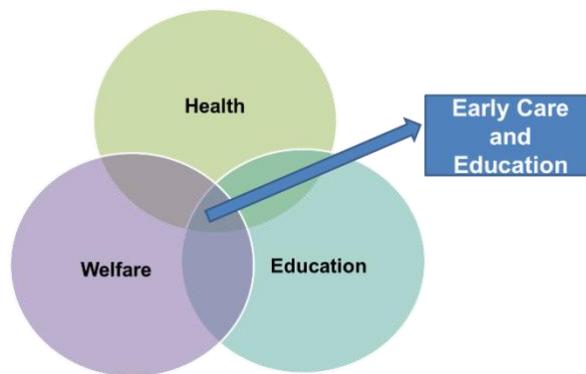
Measuring Progress

Attaining our goals will require a high degree of learning and adaptation, and we have developed a new annual process to guide our work. Each major initiative includes a clear learning agenda and measurable milestones for the next several years. Our new annual performance monitoring and management process will track progress relative to these milestones using initiative-specific data and will drive annual revisions to our major initiatives, as warranted. We also will track summative measures, such as results from the NAEP assessment and from third-party assessments of improvement in critical elements of state governance systems to track progress on our overall strategy.

Definition of Terms

Early Childhood Terms

- **Early Childhood:** We use the term “early childhood” to refer to the developmental period when children’s growth, development, and learning is the most rapid and profound. This period occurs from birth through age eight.
- **Early Care and Education:** We use “early care and education” (EC&E) to refer to the field at large, that serves children birth to age eight. This encompasses several segments of the population that care for, educate, and otherwise support young children and their families. These include, but are not limited to, formal and informal care and education providers, teachers, home visitors, health and mental health professionals, coaches, mentors, advocates, researchers, and policymakers who focus on young children and their families as a target population.



- **Early Childhood Education:** We use the term “early childhood education” (ECE) to refer to formal educational settings and the policies and systems that undergird them. ECE settings are one segment of the broader EC&E field and include direct service programs such as regulated child care centers, regulated family child care homes, Head Start, and publicly-funded prekindergarten.
- **Early Childhood Education Workforce:** We use the term “early childhood education workforce” (ECE workforce) to refer to the teaching workforce that will be the focus of our major initiatives that attend to workforce stabilization. These efforts focus on the teachers and leaders working in classroom/program settings in the ECE segment of the field.
- **Early Childhood Policy:** We use the term “early childhood policy” (ECP) to refer to the policy field and the individuals in the EC&E field, broadly, who focus on systems-building, policy, and policy advocacy related to education and care, as well as the health and mental health of young children birth to age 8.



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- **Informal Learning Settings:** We define “informal learning settings” broadly, including homes; museums; libraries; family, friend, and neighbor care; public assistance programs; summer learning programs; and other community-based settings in which children learn, outside of school classrooms.
- **Professional Development:** We define “professional development” as the ongoing training and education in which the current ECE workforce participates (e.g. coaching, mentoring).
- **Professional Preparation:** We define “professional preparation” as the formal education and training in which individuals participate prior to entering into the workforce (e.g. degree-programs, clinical experiences).

Other Terms

- **Families with Low Incomes:** We define “families with low incomes” as those that earn less than 200 percent of the federal poverty level (FPL). For children and families living in California, we further define “low income” as 70 percent of the State Median Income (SMI).