

► Introduction

Public policy has a significant impact on people, families, neighborhoods and how we as a society conduct our lives. It determines our tax rate, how schools are funded, the delivery of social services and where public transportation and public infrastructure are developed. More importantly, public policy affects the opportunities we have and the distribution of resources to individuals and communities.

The Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) has identified policy priorities that have the greatest potential to promote child and family well-being, advance equity, improve the performance of public systems and strengthen communities. The goal of CSSP's policy work is focused on ensuring that all:

- children are healthy
- children enter school ready to learn and are prepared to succeed
- youth are prepared to succeed as adults
- children grow up in safe, supportive and economically successful families
- communities have the resources and opportunities families need to thrive

► The Principles Guiding CSSP's Policy Work

CSSP applies several principles across all policy work. These principles articulate our core values and are fundamental to our approach to inform and influence federal, state and local policy.

Equity: CSSP's policy work is grounded in the belief that no public policy is race or ethnicity neutral. Every policy has an impact, through benefit or burden, on the lives of families. Pursuing policy strategies that take into account the existence of disparate opportunities and outcomes is the best way to meet both the needs of individuals and communities of color but also to meet broader societal goals. Policymaking with attention to equity creates solutions that best meet the needs of the *entire* community.

Results: All our work is focused on ensuring that children, families and communities achieve positive outcomes. We think policymaking should begin by aligning around a shared goal with clearly articulated results and use data and research to drive the strategies being implemented to meet that goal. A consistent focus on results holds all accountable to ensure that policy is making a measurable difference.

Two-Generational Strategies: Our policy work focuses on positively impacting outcomes for two generations - both parents and their children. To have a significant impact on children's success, it is critical to consider the well-being of their parents and caregivers. Conversely, parents cannot be successful as parents unless their needs are met. This work often extends to multiple generations – requiring a focus on addressing needs and achieving outcomes for grandparents, parents and their children.

Comprehensive and Coordinated Solutions: Families do not experience their lives in silos and it is critical that policy is created in ways that meet family and community needs *without* creating additional obstacles. CSSP is dedicated to developing policy solutions that promotes and supports comprehensive and coordinated strategies to reduce barriers at the family and community level.

Community Co-Investment: CSSP believes that effective policymaking can only be achieved through meaningful co-investment with community stakeholders. Expertise comes from both having experience in the policymaking, research and practice fields; but also from the lived experience of the youth and families who are impacted by policies. This serves to ensure policies meet community needs and builds in an important accountability mechanism.

Using Research and Evidence: Applying the best available research and science to policy and programmatic responses is always a critical focus of CSSP's policy work. CSSP is committed to identifying, communicating and applying research informed ideas that contribute to the healthy development and well-being of children, youth, families and communities.

► Our Priority Policy Areas

Early Childhood

CSSP's early childhood policy work promotes both child (from the prenatal period through age eight) and family well-being. In order for all children to thrive - be healthy physically, socially, emotionally and behaviorally - and be ready for and successful in school, policies must assist families to access opportunities, supports and services. CSSP is committed to closing the achievement gap facing children from families with low incomes and children of color, including ensuring access to high quality, culturally competent early learning and development programs and services. We place a particular focus on mitigating the negative impact of toxic stress on children and families who experience trauma.

Priority Issues:

Partner with, support and invest in parents.

- Include incentives for the engagement and support of parents as key partners in early childhood systems and programs (e.g. CCDF, QRIS standards).
- Encourage alignment of investments in early childhood and in other supportive services for parents. Coordinate eligibility policies and program availability so that children are engaged in developmental activities as their parents participate in mental health services, substance abuse treatment, domestic violence programs, job training, post-secondary education, adult literacy and other critical programs.
- Support navigators and centralized referral/linkage resources to help families to access services and supports across programs.
- Expand policies that support the protective and promotive factors that research has shown to reduce the likelihood of child maltreatment and encourage optimal development.
- Increase investments with attention to the needs of families with very young children (from the prenatal period to age three), including home visiting, early childhood mental health services and linking parenting education and peer support to early learning and development programs.

Support and incentivize a continuum of supports to monitor and promote child development.

- Continue funding opportunities that offer states incentives to expand access and raise the quality of child care, pre-kindergarten and full-day kindergarten programs (e.g. Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge).



- Use Medicaid, CHIP and the ACA to fund comprehensive developmental screening, monitoring and linkage to needed services and supports for children birth to age eight.
- Support and fully engage parents in the development of comprehensive birth through third grade assessment systems in order to appropriately measure children's health and development across domains.
- Promote policies that support and engage families during the transition from early childhood care to kindergarten (e.g., alignment of standards, parents' involvement in transition planning and activities, etc.).

Create incentives to develop and sustain early childhood serving systems at the state and local level.

- Require joint planning, implementation and data sharing among child and family serving systems (e.g. health care, early education and early intervention providers).
- Align eligibility policies across child and family service programs to ensure families seamless access to the work, child care and other supports they need to be financially stable and support their children's development.
- Incentivize family- and community-level data collection on key indicators related to children's health and development and families' access to services and programs.
- Offer flexible funding for communities to meet the needs of young children and families in exchange for accountability for results.

Ensure that families with multiple unmet needs are provided with services and support.

- Promote and incentivize strategies that target sources of toxic stress (e.g. crime, substance abuse, mental illness and environmental toxins).
- Promote trauma-informed policies that prioritize the developmental needs of young children in child welfare, early intervention and early learning systems.
- Prioritize access to comprehensive, high-quality early learning and development programs such as home visiting and early head start for children who have experienced trauma or face multiple challenges.
- Promote policies that incentivize and enhance services to children with special health care needs and their families, including financing for family support services and resource and referral services across sectors.

Youth

CSSP's youth policy work is focused on making sure youth have the optimal developmental opportunities needed to grow into successful adults – including policies to address risk and to promote protective factors. Policy should provide opportunities for youth civic engagement, support healthy social activities and ensure safe communities in which youth can live. When young people face challenges like homelessness, teen pregnancy or interaction with intervening public systems like juvenile justice or child welfare, they experience more barriers to reaching a healthy adulthood than their counterparts. CSSP's policy work is focused on ensuring that the systems working with vulnerable youth provide the supports and services necessary to meet their needs and ensure their well-being as adolescents *and* adults. CSSP's youth policy focuses on the potential of all young people to grow into successful adults if provided the right opportunities.



Priority Issues:

Promote policies that enable youth transitioning from foster care to have access to the range of supports they need.

- Extend supports to youth in and aging out of the foster care system, including: extending foster care to age 21 with continued legal advocacy and permanency planning; expand Medicaid benefits for foster youth to age 26 through annual automatic enrollment and re-enrollment and provide priority access to safe, affordable housing options for youth transitioning from foster care.

Reduce first and subsequent unplanned pregnancies among teens and ensure that when young people are parenting they have the supports and services they need to be successful.

- Focus intervention efforts on vulnerable teens, such as teens in foster care, those transitioning out of the foster care system and those involved with the juvenile justice system.

Ensure the eligibility restrictions in Fostering Connections do not create a barrier to providing services to older parenting youth in foster care.

- Clarify that the interpretation of Fostering Connections does not exclude newly parenting foster youth who are unable to meet the conditions while caring for a newborn.

Support the needs of specific populations, including runaway and homeless, undocumented and LGBTQ and gender non-conforming youth.

- Expand non-discrimination and pupil rights laws to support the health and development of LGBTQ and gender non-conforming youth.
- Ensure the collection of data regarding system-involved LGBTQ and gender non-conforming youth to ensure accessible and appropriate programming.
- Support efforts to reduce the number of these youth dropping out of high school.
- Support all policy efforts to keep families together in immigration related matters and support increased educational and citizenship opportunities for undocumented young people.

Health

CSSP's health policy work is focused on ensuring that all families have access to health care - including preventative care - that children's social, emotional and behavioral health needs are met and that parents are healthy and able to provide for their children with needed love and support. Science reinforcing the importance of both early healthy development and youth development is a key component, as is meeting the needs of individuals and communities of color. Health indicators such as life expectancy and infant mortality have improved for most Americans; however, people of color still experience disparities in health outcomes for preventable diseases, mortality, cancer and disability. Additionally, racial and ethnic minority families face particular challenges associated with an increased likelihood of receiving lower quality health care, regardless of insurance status or income. CSSP believes in policy that helps advance health in the context of place (in homes, neighborhoods, schools and work environments) because where families *live* strongly impacts their health and well-being.



Priority Issues:

Support high-quality home visiting as a part of a broader early childhood system.

- High-quality home visiting programs, administered by well-trained professionals, should be used to help meet the needs of young families, including building their promotive/protective factors and providing access to information about children's health, development and safety

Support early social, emotional and behavioral health.

- Support the integration of mental health consultations in early care and education and for home visitors. Ensure the integration of behavioral health care in primary care settings. Support opportunities for family strengthening and family skill development.

Increase the number of federally qualified and school-based health centers that that serve both the school population and their families.

Education

CSSP's educational priorities start with equitable opportunities for quality early education and continue through young people graduating from college and moving on to careers. The education policy work is focused on the belief that children should be provided with every chance to be successful, and that attention to equitable outcomes is of paramount importance to ensuring that goal. With significant racial disparities – Black and Latino children graduating from both high school and college at lower rates than their peers – CSSP is committed to closing educational opportunity gaps, ensuring that children are performing at grade level and guaranteeing that families have the supports they need to make certain their children have the best educational outcomes.

Priority Issues:

Make high-quality, affordable child care and early education programs accessible.

- Expand accessibility through policies designed to support the unique needs of each community and target both the supply and integration of services to those communities where child care options are the most limited.
- Ensure that parenting youth in foster care receive priority for quality child care.

Ensure educational continuity for children and youth in foster care.

- Require that young people remain in the school that they are enrolled in at time of removal and throughout placement changes, unless a school change is in the child's best interest.

Promote “cradle to career” approaches to education.

- Support and expand efforts that link educational opportunities and improvements with other community resources and services in communities experiencing disinvestment.



Child Welfare and Family Supports

A key component of CSSP's child welfare policy is a focus on prevention and making sure children are not separated from their families unless absolutely necessary. When children *are* involved in child welfare systems, they should have a permanent family connection and be supported socially and emotionally. Guiding this work is a philosophy that recognizes that while government has a critical role in keeping children safe, it requires partnerships with the community, parents and the children and youth it serves in order to address the complicated and unique needs of families. African American and American Indian/Alaskan children remain far more likely to be in foster care than their counterparts within other racial/ethnic groups and experience worse outcomes. Our child welfare policy work applies to improved outcomes for all children, but is focused strongly on the need to address the currently disparate outcomes for children and families of color.

Priority Issues:

Require the provision and coordination of economic supports as maltreatment prevention strategies.

- Remove policy barriers that prevent child welfare and income support agencies from comprehensively and jointly serving the needs of vulnerable families.
- Provide and coordinate supports for families, such as workforce assistance, housing assistance, cash assistance, food stamps, child care subsidies and other income security measures to prevent or divert contact with child welfare systems whenever possible.
- Expand housing supports and prioritize the housing needs of families in the child welfare system.

Focus on improving outcomes for children and families of color and reduce racial disparities.

- Promote equitable funding and other resources for tribal governments and child welfare systems with the goal of improving supportive services and outcomes for American Indian children and families.
- Require the collection and analysis of child welfare performance and outcome data by race and ethnicity.
- Support all policy efforts to keep families together in immigration related matters.

Require that child welfare agencies collect data about the incidence of parenting youth within the foster care population and assess their current service array for serving this population.

- Amend the Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) to gather information about this population. Other potential data collection opportunities: Statewide/Tribal Automated Child Welfare Information System (SACWIS) and the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS).
- Require states to identify what they are doing to ensure that pregnant and parenting youth in foster care are assisted in keeping their children safely with them and out of foster care.

Support Comprehensive Child Welfare Finance Reform Efforts.

- In order to ensure the best outcomes for children and families that come into contact with the child welfare system, and to ensure that all states are able to integrate the latest research and



policies shown to achieve those outcomes, CSSP supports reforming child welfare financing in a way that supports best practice - including efforts to increase funding for prevention and post-reunification services.

Poverty and Economic Stability

Poverty is a problem that impacts more than one in seven Americans (15 percent of the population). The poverty rate is even higher for children, 21.9 percent of whom are living in poverty. There are also significant equity issues, with Black and Latino families facing significantly higher rates of both poverty and liquid asset poverty (being unable to survive at the federal poverty level for three months if they lost their income). Research shows that when families lack adequate income and assets, they face hardships including hunger, substandard housing and untreated illness. These hardships are especially harmful for children, who are more likely to experience long lasting negative outcomes in the areas of health, social and emotional development, educational attainment and employment. Developing creative anti-poverty approaches that include both traditional safety net policy expansion and place-based anti-poverty policy is critical. Since families do not experience the issues related to poverty in isolation, CSSP is committed to work that creates a continuum of supports and services that meet the complex and intersecting needs of this vulnerable population.

Priority Issues:

Improve supports for families and their children by strengthening the safety net.

- Supporting refundable tax credits, subsidized food and child care opportunities and supplemental income programs are an important starting point in ensuring that children are successful and are a foundation to CSSP's anti-poverty strategy.

Invest in communities facing the most significant barriers.

- Make investments in programs, like the Department of Justice's Building Neighborhood Capacity Program, that support high-poverty communities that are working to improve outcomes by developing strategic relationships and building community partnerships to address issues like affordable housing, workforce barriers, educational gaps and public safety.

Promote family financial success through supportive work/family policies.

- Although the federal Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) guarantees workers leave when they have a child or need to care for a family member due to illness, FMLA only guarantees unpaid leave and only employers with 50 employees or more are required to comply. Many low-income families simply cannot afford to go without income for weeks at a time. Allowing working families the paid leave they need to navigate normal life course events such as the arrival of a child or a significant illness, helps to promote family economic stability.

Provide supports for families facing multiple-barriers.

- Parents' well-being has far-reaching effects on the well-being of their children. Supporting parents in their efforts to overcome challenges such as mental illness, domestic violence and substance abuse helps to strengthen families. Effective policies should help parents access the resources they need to ensure their own well-being and that of their children.



Community Change

Place matters and strongly impacts the health, safety, educational and employment opportunities of children and families. Unfortunately, many communities face significant challenges due to years of disinvestment, including high rates of poverty and unemployment, failing schools and housing instability. Residents in these communities are disproportionately families of color – who experience outcomes far worse than the norm for most Americans. CSSP’s policy focus on place-based initiatives is driven by the belief that taking a comprehensive approach to addressing these issues - while leveraging community strengths and targeting investments - can be transformative for communities and for families. Central to our approach is the importance of the participation of communities themselves in establishing their desired results. Doing this work successfully entails dismantling the structures that perpetuate disparities in outcomes and opportunities and replacing them with innovative solutions that take into account the unique strengths and needs of every community.

Priority Issues:

Promote affordable housing and housing protections for poor and low-income families.

- Support the development of responsible, affordable housing. Expand responsible financing options and protections against predatory mortgage lending and advance opportunities for housing counseling and financial assistance. Whenever possible, connect publicly-funded housing options to systems of supports and services for families as well as access to public transportation, grocery stores and other public amenities.

Improve community infrastructure through increased cross-sector collaboration.

- Expand coordinated federal programs such as: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development’s (HUD) Choice Neighborhoods initiative that links housing improvements with appropriate services, schools, transportation and access to jobs; U.S. Department of Education’s Promise Neighborhoods initiative that links education improvements with community services; HUD’s Sustainable Communities initiative that aims to increase livability, sustainability and social equity values by integrating housing and transportation to land use plans and zoning; and, U.S. Department of Justice’s Building Neighborhood Capacity Program that helps neighborhoods secure the skills, resources and partnerships needed to address complex challenges.

Support healthy community design.

- Support the development of neighborhood environments that are safe, have access to healthy foods, include green spaces and safe places to play and have access to public transportation, libraries, affordable housing, jobs and childcare.

Invest in the organizational development of community-based organizations.

- Invest in programs that support organizations in their efforts to deliver the best possible services for families and communities.

Promote innovation through increased flexibility and accountability.

- Support policies that provide communities with the opportunity to innovate, and therefore meet the unique needs of residents. These policies should include a results-focused approach that has built-in accountability.



CSSP is a national organization recognized for its leadership in shaping policy, reforming public systems and building the capacity of communities. We influence and support elected officials, public administrators, families and neighborhood residents to take the actions they need.

Our goal is to make sure low income children can learn, develop and thrive with the support of strong families, in safe and healthy communities.

CSSP translates research and new ideas into strategies for on-the-ground implementation. We use the knowledge from those real experiences to better inform the next generation of ideas, programs and policies.

To make sure changes are equitable and sustainable, CSSP believes in the importance of engaging residents as leaders in work that affects their lives.

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