Southern Early Childhood Education Justice (SECEJ) network

The Southern Early Childhood Education Justice (SECEJ) network, an initiative of the Southern Education Foundation, is a multi-state, 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 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
The network seeks to address the absence of a broad southern regional strategy to improve, coordinate, or sustain early childhood education through local-, state-, and federal-level advocacy. The SECEJ network seeks to address this gap and propel a collective movement for racial justice and equity to transform early learning across the South.

Our Approach
The development of this regional strategy demands the collaboration of dedicated partners at every level. The network consists of early learning advocates, national organizations, and new state advocacy councils. National partners will assist the SEF network by providing critical research, supporting the development of the federal advocacy agenda, and providing technical assistance to the new state advocacy councils. State advocacy councils each will convene a diverse set of partners, including parents, caregivers, early childhood education providers, and policy experts to develop their own state-level advocacy objectives. The state advocacy councils will also identify and recruit grassroots advocates and local early childhood champions into the SECEJ network.

The Case for Early Learning Justice in the South
The nation’s early learning system, like the K-12 and higher education systems, has long been influenced by the enduring impacts of racism. The growth trajectory of the nation’s first public kindergartens was largely unequal between White and Black children, with more than 50 programs for White children in operation by the time the first public kindergarten for Black students opened in 1879. Further, 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. Unfortunately, racial disparities persist in our early learning system today. The SECEJ network’s regional advocacy and policy objectives seek to improve these statistics and create a better early learning system for all children and 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
- SEF states² led the nation in the expansion of early childhood education by pioneering statewide public pre-K programs³, but only about 40% of the region’s 4-year-olds were enrolled in free, public pre-K in 2021-22.⁴
- Black children access high-quality early learning programs at a rate of 15% compared to 24% for White children.⁵
- Black and Hispanic children start kindergarten seven-to-12 months behind in reading compared to their White peers.⁶
- Head Start only serves 58% of eligible Black children and 38% of eligible Hispanic children.⁶
- Child-care subsidies only reach one in seven eligible children in the U.S.⁹
- In 10 SEF states, average annual infant-care costs surpass average in-state tuition costs at public four-year colleges.¹⁰

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.

Sources listed on the following page.

2. Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, West Virginia


5. Programs were considered high-quality based on their rating on the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale


7. Ibid.


10. https://southerneducation.org/resources/blog/2023/02/14/costs-of-child-care/