If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together. -Lilla Watson

**Early Childhood Iowa Equity Guiding Principles**

Principles to Address Race, Ethnicity, Culture and Language

An equitable early childhood system that ensures each and every child is healthy and successful benefits all Iowans, regardless of race, ethnicity, culture and language[1]. While the following principles put a priority on addressing equity[2] for children from diverse racial, ethnic, cultural and linguistic communities, it is important to recognize that disparities exist across other forms of diversity such as ability, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, geography, gender identity and expression, and family structures. These guiding principles affirm that our focus on race, ethnicity, culture and language benefits all children and their families. Addressing equity is one way we make our state a great place to raise children. The intersectionality of race with other social identities (e.g., African American children living with a lesbian couple, new immigrants living in isolated rural areas; dual language learners who also have a disability) allow an emphasis on race, ethnicity, culture and language to also affect other identity groups.

Demographic data illustrate that Iowa is becoming more diverse and young children are leading the way. Non-whites in Iowa grew from 6 percent of the population in 2000 to almost 10 percent in 2015. Among children under the age of 4, non-whites and Hispanic whites make up 23 percent of that population. Iowa’s population is changing because immigrants from around the world are making Iowa their home. Data also show access and outcome disparities between white and non-white children. Increasingly, Early Childhood Iowa (ECI) is applying a “Racial Equity Lens” [3] in its approach to system building such as policy making, system financing, increasing quality, ensuring services are accessible to all children, and that Iowa has a diverse and effective early childhood workforce. By intentionally using an equity lens, ECI’s system building efforts, at the state and local level, take into account the impact of systemic bias and racism [4] at personal, institutional and structural levels.

From Iowa’s white majority population, social systems and structures emerged based on the priorities and perspectives of that population. Iowa’s early childhood system has reflected this historical power structure. This has led to intentional and unintentional policies, services, systems, and institutions that are not inclusive or equitably responsive to the needs and strengths of children and their families who are racially, ethnically, culturally or linguistically different from the majority population and produce disparate outcomes. Our early childhood systems develop and perpetuate barriers for these families making it difficult to achieve economic security, educational success and healthy outcomes. These guiding principles provide a framework for reflection and action to address the historic inequities in our
state. The end goal is an equitable society where “the distribution of society’s benefits and burdens would not be skewed” (Aspen, n.d., p. 1) by race, ethnicity, language or culture.

Why develop equity guiding principles?

First, we want to affirm racial equity as a central value that informs and shapes the priorities of Early Childhood Iowa. Second, we need guiding principles because they help describe a vision of what we want our state to be. These guiding principles uphold our equity vision in which racial and ethnic identity are not predictive of disproportionate outcomes for children and families. Third, an equity approach requires us to focus on broader systems so that we eliminate disproportional results. We do not blame children and families for undesirable results, but instead focus our attention on system impacts. Edward Deming is quoted as saying, “Every system is perfectly designed to get the results it gets.” Real change requires systems change. Finally, we believe equity is an ethical responsibility for professionals working in early childhood.

The Guiding Principles

Principles to Define and Establish Equity

1. A COMMITMENT TO ADDRESS EQUITY: Equity means responding so people have what they need to be successful. By moving from equality to equity, we recognize the relevance of race and ethnicity, value individual’s potential and strengths, and develop supports and services that are responsive to each and every child and family. We are committed to building systems where disparities based on race and ethnicity no longer exist.

2. A COMMITMENT TO HIGH EXPECTATIONS: Early childhood services and systems in Iowa will provide equitable access to opportunities for all children to be healthy and successful, expecting that they can reach optimal levels of physical, social-emotional and cognitive development within healthy, safe and nurturing families.

3. A COMMITMENT TO RECOGNIZE THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CULTURE: Every individual is rooted in culture (see footnote 1) and is central to her or his identity and a source of pride and strength. Early childhood systems and services will be aware and responsive to the important role that culture and language play in shaping a child’s development [5].

4. A COMMITMENT TO CHANGE: Early Childhood Iowa will apply an equity lens [6] to build and make changes to the current early childhood system to meet the diverse needs of all children and their families. Changes in the early childhood system will be based on a frequent assessment of strengths, needs and outcomes using those results to plan and implement services and systems that respond to the cultural and linguistic diversity of the population, removing barriers to success. A commitment to make these changes will be manifest in intentional efforts at goal-setting, planning, implementation, and evaluation.

Principles for Strategy

5. CRITICAL ANALYSIS: We will continuously work to identify root causes and strategies to address disparities at the individual, interpersonal, organizational, institutional and structural levels to build and sustain an equitable system for children 0-5 and their families.
6. FAMILY ENGAGEMENT: We will promote equity through intentional and authentic engagement of families. Family engagement assures leadership by families and communities that incorporates their values and contributions in decision making and planning, builds vital partnerships with them to better support and serve all Iowa families and results in a more equitable system.

7. COMMUNICATION: Rooted in trusting and mutual relationships among individuals and groups, we commit ourselves to candid and frequent two-way communication, across all levels of Early Childhood Iowa. Two-way communication ensures transparency, and feedback loops that engage stakeholders, families and communities at all levels of planning, decision-making, and implementation.

**Principles for System Components**

8. QUALITY SERVICES AND PROGRAMS: An equitable system recognizes that equity is an essential dimension of quality. We will intentionally employ an equity lens (see footnote #3) when developing, implementing and evaluating policies and practices designed to improve services and programs.

9. PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT: An equitable system will recruit, promote and support a culturally and linguistically competent and diverse workforce that understands and addresses stereotypes and biases, and is capable of providing culturally and linguistically responsive service. The workforce should be trained in culturally and linguistically responsive practices, recognizing internal racial bias.

10. RESOURCES AND FUNDING: An equitable system requires funding and resource allocation that ensure the healthy development of all young children regardless of race, ethnicity, culture and home language.

11. RESULTS ACCOUNTABILITY: An equitable system requires ongoing data collection by race, ethnicity and language so the system can assess ongoing disparities within implementation, access and outcomes.

12. GOVERNANCE: An equitable system eliminates barriers to positions of power and leadership. Leaders and decision-makers that influence early childhood programs, institutions and systems must reflect the racial and ethnic diversity of the state.

13. PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT: An equitable system creates intentional pathways of communication and influence that ensure underrepresented groups are informed and have a voice in the development and advancement of the ECI system. Families and communities are equipped to be strong advocates for creating an equitable early childhood system, and the engagement from a broad spectrum of stakeholders incorporates diverse values and contributions in decision making and planning.

Footnotes:

1. These terms—*race, ethnicity, language* and *culture*—are politically-charged and often misunderstood. For the purposes of these guiding principles we understand these terms as follows:

   -Race: A social construct that has no empirical basis in fact. However, it still remains a powerful idea based on skin color that shapes the lives of children and families and impacts their success
and well being. Race is often a significant part of a person’s identity and racial identity emerges early in children, well before the age of three.

-Ethnicity: Ethnicity refers to the social characteristics that people may have in common, such as language, religion, regional background, culture, foods, etc. Ethnicity is revealed by the traditions one follows, a person’s native language, and so on. Race, on the other hand, describes categories assigned to demographic groups based mostly on observable physical characteristics, like skin color, hair texture and eye shape. (Aspen Institute, n.d.)

-Language: spoken or written communication that serve as an important means of connection and relationship among people. Communication is fundamental to the human experience, and is among the first important things young children learn. A child’s first language is a foundation on which all other language, literacy and learning will be based.

-Culture: the values, beliefs, linguistics, customs, practices, expression, and patterns of thinking and styles of communication that shape our behaviors, expectations and reactions. It is shared by a group of people and expressed through behaviors in response to the specific needs of its members. It goes beyond race and color to include the diversity characteristics listed above, physical characteristics and groups with similar values, experiences and orientations/preferences. Culture is increasingly understood as inseparable from development. It evolves over time reflected the lived experience in particular time and places. Individuals both learn from and contribute to the culture of the groups to which they belong. (ECI 2011; NAEYC 2019)

2. Equity means everyone is given what they need to be successful. He or she is given the same opportunities but relative to his or her need. It differs from equality which means that everyone is treated the same. Equality aims to promote fairness, but it can only work if everyone starts from the same place and needs the same help. (For more on this see http://culturalorganizing.org/the-problem-with-that-equity-vs-equality-graphic/).

3. “A racial equity lens means paying attention to race and ethnicity [and language and culture in this document] in analyzing problems, looking for solutions and defining success” (GrantCraft 2007).

4. Racism is understood as unfair advantage based on race and is understood to have personal, institutional, and systemic manifestations. At the personal level, racism is a negative bias (both implicit and explicit) which is often referred to as prejudice or discrimination. At the institutional, structural or systemic level, racism refers to the process by which “public policies, institutional practices, cultural representations, and other norms work in various, often reinforcing ways to perpetuate racial group inequity. It identifies dimensions of our history and culture that have allowed privileges associated with ‘whiteness’ and disadvantages associated with ‘color’ to endure and adapt over time. Structural racism is not something that a few people or institutions choose to practice. Instead it has been a feature of the social, economic and political systems in which we all exist” (Aspen, n.d., p. 1).

5. The primary focus of equity as it addresses culture and language should be cultural and linguistic responsiveness, which means respecting the right of each child to maintain her or his cultural and linguistic identity, promoting the importance of home language development, of making modifications to deliver effective results.
6. Cultural competence is defined by ECI as “a set of congruent practice skills, attitudes, policies and structures, which come together in a system, agency, or among professionals and enable that system, agency, or those professionals to work effectively in the context of cultural difference” (Cross, 1989).

REFERENCES


