CUTTING CHILD POVERTY IN HALF AND MORE:
PANDEMIC-ERA LESSONS
FROM CHILD AND FAMILY ADVOCATES AND ORGANIZERS

Olivia Golden and Vivian Tseng
Foundation for Child Development
June 2024
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The United States accomplished an impressive feat in 2020–21: enacting federal policy reforms that halved child poverty and uplifted low-income families amidst a global pandemic. Many of the reforms, though temporary, were unprecedented in U.S. history, representing a sea change in U.S. policy toward young children. What enabled this to happen? And what can we learn about making those child and family supports permanent in the future?

This paper first discusses the country’s chronic underinvestment in children and resulting outcomes, including new data on poverty rates among young children; the need to recognize that parental well-being (as supported by living wages, affordable housing, child care, and other infrastructure) is inextricable from the prospects of young children; and the remarkably comprehensive pandemic-era response policies, including which changes contributed most to reducing child poverty.

The authors then offer five lessons, drawn from interviews with more than 30 of the extraordinary advocates and leaders who made this change happen, in the hope that they can inform future efforts to transform federal and state policy to tackle inequities across family income, race, and immigration backgrounds. The lessons:

**Center families with lived experience.** Centering families of color and immigrant families improved both policy design and implementation on the ground. Stimulus payments initially left out millions of children in immigrant and mixed-status families, for example; advocates working on behalf of the families pushed for them to increasingly gain eligibility. One state used federal funds to eliminate families’ fees for subsidized child care because organizers, having already asked, knew what families wanted most from policymakers. (Organizers then persuaded state legislators to keep the change after federal funds ended.) A groundswell of parent organizing, the scale of which is not yet entirely realized, is building collective power especially around child care and family policies.

**Expand coalitions to engage families, care workers, and allies.** In previous childcare advocacy, the conversation often started with children’s developmental needs or parents’ economic needs, but less often both and even less often with the third leg of the tripod, care workers. Including both parents and care workers in coalitions served to unite families with labor organizers and provide greater on-the-ground strength. Leading with workers also tied childcare policies directly to economic, racial, and gender justice movements.
**Build federal–state strategies to achieve equity.** Federal and state advocacy both matter greatly. Federal policy is critical to achieving equity and scale across the nation, particularly given the growing concentration of young children in Southern states with the least supportive family policies. Federal programs cut child poverty in half through the Child Tax Credit, stimulus checks, unemployment assistance, and more. At the same time, implementing most of these programs required deep engagement by state and local advocates and organizers. State and local advocacy and organizing also spur federal policy change, build greater impact onto the federal foundation, and create momentum and power for the future. As one example of this virtuous cycle, the success of the federal Child Tax Credit motivated many states to expand their own tax credits, and the failure to renew the federal expansion galvanized some states to make up for the shortfall.

**Strengthen coalition infrastructure.** The most powerful coalitions bring together many different roles, perspectives, and contexts. Coalition leaders noted that building skills, governance structures, trusted relationships, and capacity are indispensable to success—including the ability to collectively learn from successes and failures and strategize forward. This work is often underfunded, despite its centrality to social change.

**Sustain long-term efforts.** The 2020–21 policy successes were enabled by many years of advocacy and organizing work: documenting the strengths and weaknesses of existing policies, writing legislation, developing new policy ideas, organizing communities and workers, creating and sustaining movements, defending past wins, building coalitions, enacting child- and family-friendly policies at the state level, and supporting congressional allies. Among the examples shared is the story of the $50 billion emergency infusion of funds to save the childcare system—the largest federal investment in child care since World War II. Part of sustaining long-term effort is recognizing that wins are built upon losses. Funders and others must frame success in ways beyond policy victory or loss in the moment.

Success in meeting these challenges on behalf of young children is not optional. It is neither moral nor practical to settle for a future where only White children, or only children whose parents are wealthy, have necessary supports. These five approaches shine a light on the next steps for moving the country ever closer to one where all young children and their families can thrive.