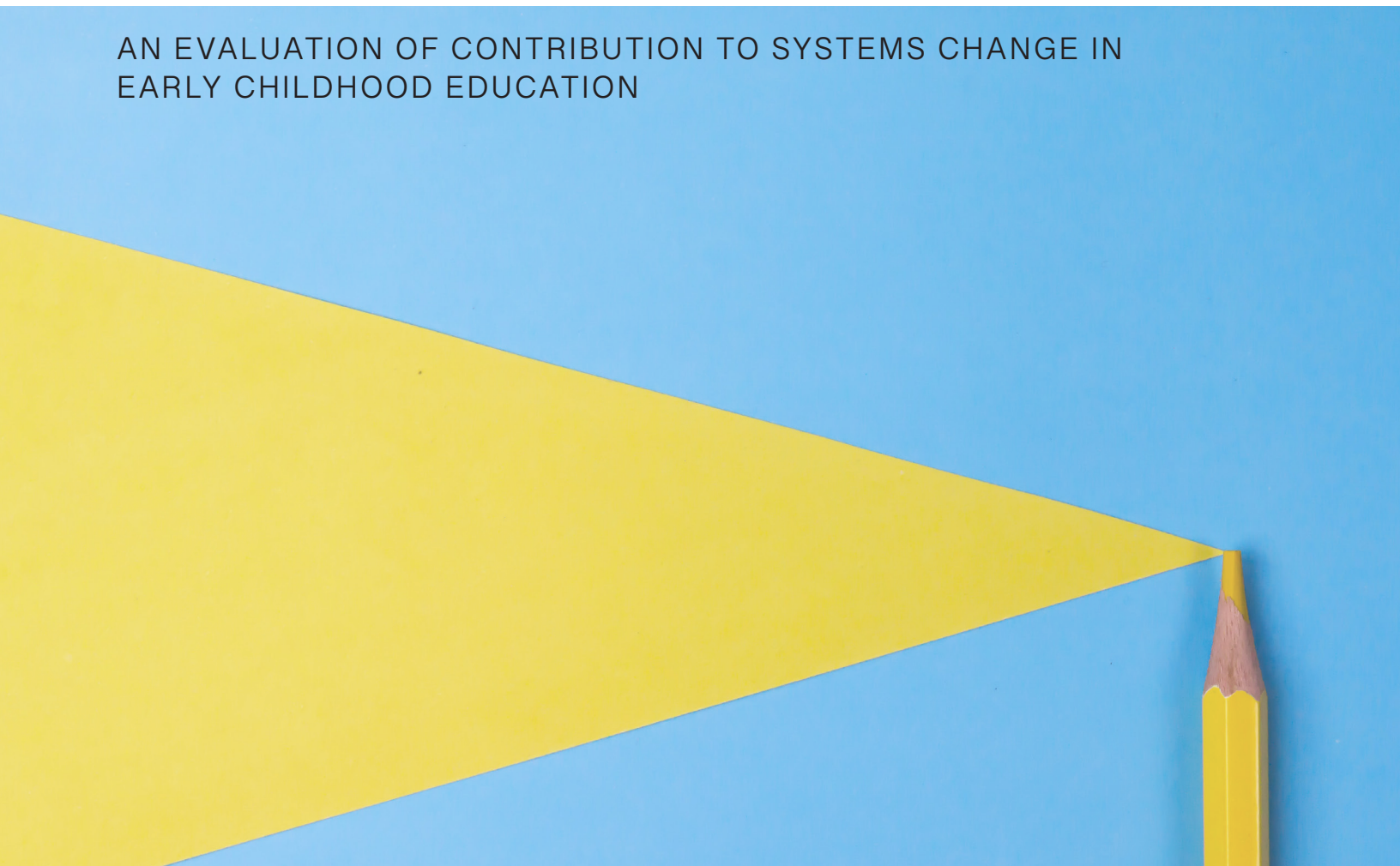


FEBRUARY 2023
YEAR SIX REPORT TO THE W.K. KELLOGG FOUNDATION

THE GRADUATE CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF EARLY LEARNING

AN EVALUATION OF CONTRIBUTION TO SYSTEMS CHANGE IN
EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION



CERE | Center for
Research Evaluation

CONTENTS

4	Executive Summary
5	Background & Evaluation Methods
6	Graduate Center for the Study of Early Learning: Program Description
7	The Early Childhood Education System before GCSEL
11	How did GCSEL contribute to change in the ECE system?
14	What did the CERE team learn about making systems change in ECE?
17	Implications
18	References

LIST OF ACRONYMS

CERE:	Center for Research Evaluation
ECE:	Early Childhood Education
GCSEL:	The Graduate Center for the Study of Early Learning
QRIS:	Quality Rating Improvement System
WKKF:	The W.K. Kellogg Foundation

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Graduate Center for the Study of Early Learning (GCSEL) was established in November of 2015 and works primarily to shape and improve the Early Childhood Education (ECE) system in Mississippi. The Center for Research Evaluation (CERE) at the University of Mississippi conducted a multi-method study to evaluate the work of the Graduate Center for the Study of Early Learning (GCSEL) as funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation (WKKF).

Under its funding agreement with WKKF, GCSEL proposed a broad scope of systems change efforts, which the evaluation team classified according to the WKKF's systems change framework of: components, infrastructure, connections, context and scale.

Prior to GCSEL

- **QRIS challenges:** The evaluation team found that Mississippi's Quality Rating Improvement System prior to 2015- 2016 was fraught with challenges, most notably concerns about racial injustice and prejudice in its assessments of ECE providers.
- **Competition:** Mississippi disbanded this system in 2016 but was unsuccessful in replacing it – this void destabilized the field, leading to confusion among providers and increased competition among agencies and advocates vying to design and implement a replacement system.
- **Fragmentation:** In the years following the QRIS removal, the ECE field was characterized by fragmentation, with stakeholders working in independent silos and with minimal collaboration.

Change in the System

The evaluation team found that collaboration efforts are improving in the field, but major structural gaps persist, including the lack of a centralized regulatory agency overseeing the field.

GCSEL's Contributions

- **Direct support to ECE providers:** The evaluation team found that GCSEL offered a unique contribution to the field through its work directly with ECE providers.
- **Trust-building:** While the ECE field has a large number of advocacy and stakeholder organizations, most are working at a systems level with very little direct contact with providers. GCSEL, however, provides services directly to providers, which has positioned the organization well to foster trust across levels of the ECE system. This trust building is critical as the overall field reorganizes in response to concerns about the QRIS, its removal and the absence of a new state system.
- **GCSEL fills gaps in the ECE system:** Its work with ECE providers makes GCSEL a gap filler and it is seen among other ECE stakeholders as one of the only organizations that fill in during periods of rupture to assist providers and bring stability to the system as it evolves. A key asset in this gap filling work is the positive reputation of GCSEL leadership in the ECE community.
- **Efforts at political change seen as least influential:** The work of the GCSEL at other levels, and particularly its work to shape the overall political context of the field, are seen as less effective in advancing its goals relative to its work with providers directly.

The State's Quality Rating Improvement system had major challenges, including concerns about racially prejudiced assessment outcomes. The removal of this system and lack of an adequate replacement then fractured and destabilized the field.

GCSEL's unique contribution is in its direct work with ECE providers. This direct connection fills gaps in a fragmented system and contributes to field stability.

GCSEL should build and foster connections between ECE providers and external organizations, focusing on increasing racial diversity in field leadership.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Current Assessment of ECE System

With regard to the ECE field broadly, the evaluation team found that overcrowding of stakeholders and competition among them for scarce funding, resources and control has inhibited progress toward an improved and stable ECE system.

Collaboration among stakeholders and agencies is improving and the need for this collaboration is widely recognized in the field. An emerging trend in the field is the unification of stakeholders behind the Mississippi Department of Education's Early Learning Collaboratives program. These collaboratives have demonstrated success, have unparalleled legislative support and enjoy the support of a large share of ECE advocates.

There is a schism in the field between ECE advocates/agencies and the ECE providers with whom they work. Increased collaboration between providers and advocates/ agencies is necessary for the successful implementation of any ECE system in Mississippi and the evaluation team finds that GCSEL is uniquely poised to facilitate these collaborations.

Recommendations

Based on the evidence of this evaluation study, the CERE team recommends that:

Foster Connections

GCSEL continues to work to build and foster connections between ECE providers and external organizations, with a particular interest on increasing racial diversity and representation in field leadership.

Prioritize Direct Support to ECE Providers

The GCSEL should prioritize its work involving direct contact with ECE providers and shift focus away from work at the level of political context.

Institutionalize Leadership

Finally, the GCSEL should work to institutionalize the positive reputation and connections of its leadership in order to ensure its sustainability, to prepare for eventual leadership transitions, and to better equip itself to address and mitigate future ECE field instability.

BACKGROUND & EVALUATION METHODS

The Center for Research Evaluation (CERE) at the University of Mississippi conducted a multi-method study to evaluate the work of the Graduate Center for the Study of Early Learning (GCSEL) as funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation (WKKF). GCSEL is in its sixth consecutive year of funding under its agreement with WKKF and presently concluding a second three-year grant cycle.

The evaluation questions under consideration were:

1. In what ways is the GCSEL initiative contributing to advances in Mississippi's ECE system?
2. What has the project team learned about how to effect change in Mississippi's ECE system?

To address these questions, CERE personnel collected and analyzed data from multiple sources over the course of this project performance period. CERE used data collection strategies to evaluate the specific activities of GCSEL and to assess the broader ECE landscape and its systems-level changes over time. These data sources are detailed in Figure 1:

FIGURE 1: EVALUATION DATA COLLECTION STRATEGY

Activity Mapping	
Data source:	GCSEL provided CERE a comprehensive list of its activities and summaries of each.
Approach:	The evaluation team mapped GCSEL's stated programs and objectives on to the WKKF's domains for understanding systems change according to each activity's express goal.
Purpose:	To understand which pieces of GCSEL's work are intended to target the WKKF domains—and what they were likely to achieve within those domains
Survey of Program Participants	
Data source:	CERE conducted a web-based survey (n = 181) distributed via email to all participants of GCSEL programming, training and events.
Approach:	Response rate for the survey was 6% and participants received monetary incentives for completion. The CERE team used descriptive statistical techniques to analyze the data.
Purpose:	To capture data on the changes program participants have observed in the ECE system broadly and the extent to which participants connect these with the work of GCSEL
Key Stakeholder Interviews	
Data source:	CERE conducted qualitative semi-structured interviews (n = 28) with GCSEL personnel and key stakeholders in related programs.
Approach:	CERE used a multi-stage coding process to analyze interview transcripts and determine emergent themes.
Purpose:	To capture more in-depth data about what the team and its partners have learned about supporting systems change over the life of the project
Document Analysis	
Data source:	The sample under consideration was comprised of documents (n = 33) referenced in interviews and those cited in media coverage of ECE from 2016 - 2021.
Approach:	CERE conducted a landscape analysis of the ECE system and context through text analysis and synthesis of selected documents.
Purpose:	To understand what the relevant domains looked like prior to the work of GCSEL and to generate a retrospective baseline against which to compare GCSEL's work

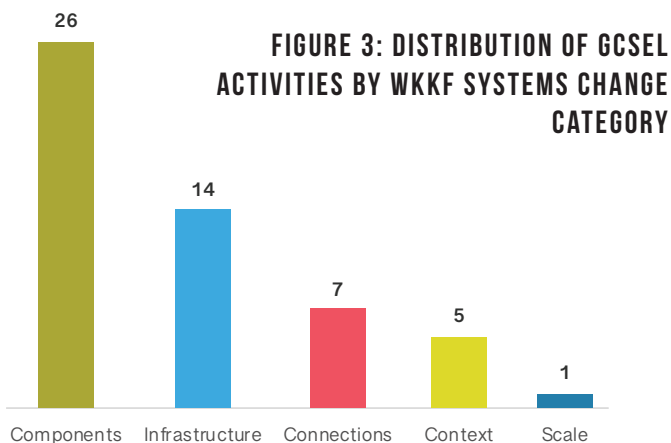
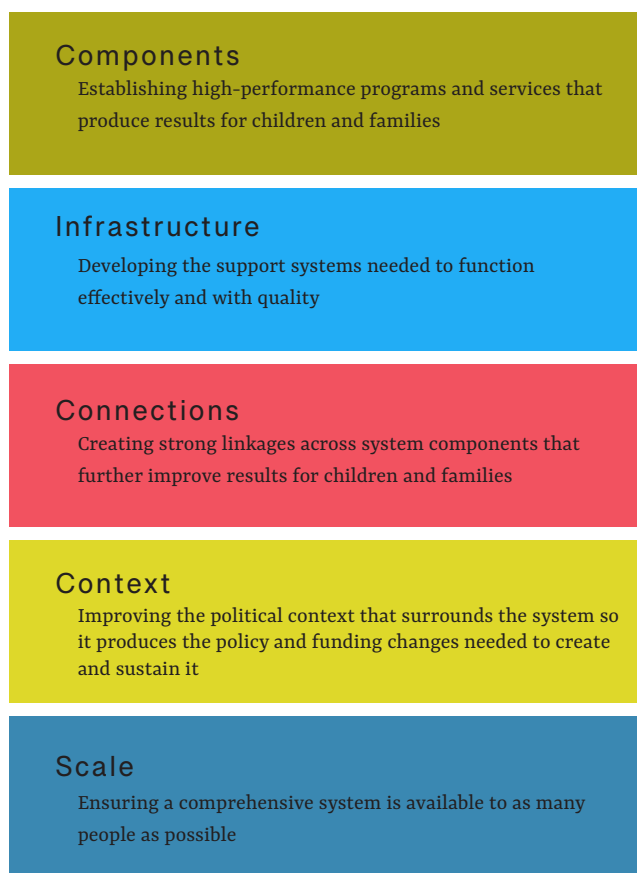
GRADUATE CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF EARLY LEARNING: PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

The Graduate Center for the Study of Early Learning (GCSEL) was established in November of 2015 at the height of the political uncertainty surrounding the Mississippi Quality Rating Improvement system. The GCSEL received funding support from organizations that included Mississippi ECE within their grantmaking priorities and strategic planning. Thus, elements of systems change can be seen from the time of the GCSEL’s founding. The GCSEL’s mission, vision and goals are outlined below.

Mission	<p>To promote and facilitate the support of child development and learning by establishing policies and practices dedicated to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing leadership in the field as well as informing leaders charged with decisions that impact the lives of children birth to eight years of age • Conducting research and reporting various research findings that have a direct impact on the well-being of children birth to eight years of age and their families • Collaborating with stakeholders and programs that focus on the needs of young children and their families
Vision	<p>To provide informed leadership, research and interdisciplinary collaboration in the field of child development and early education, with a commitment to respecting the rights of children to learn and grow in an environment that supports their natural ability to explore, experiment, create and wonder.</p>
Goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Serve as an online resource to various stakeholders by providing informations on the education and healthy development of young children • Provide information and professional development on the most current research-based/best practice approach for use in educating children birth to eight years of age to teachers, school administrators, policy makers and parents • Provide families information to support their role as teh children’s first and most important teacher • Generate and/or report research findings on the negative impact poverty has on brain development of young children to inform stakeholders for the purpose of developing and implementing interventions to offset potential developmental delays • Support the implementation of the University’s graduate early childhood programs • Support the operation of the campus early care and education program serving pre-school children

To understand systems change and to guide its work, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation (WKKF) proposed five types of system changes, which are defined in Figure 2. In evaluating change within Mississippi’s ECE system, we recognized a need to move beyond the question of whether change occurred and further explore the questions of how, why and for whom change occurred. Throughout the evaluation, we classify the work of the GCSEL both in terms of what kind of change is being sought according to this framework. The CERE team used an activity-mapping method to connect GCSEL’s list of activities to the WKKF framework for systems change. The largest shares of these activities mapped onto Components and Infrastructure, as illustrated in Figure 3. This mapping approach allowed the evaluation team to categorize the GCSEL work according to the type(s) of change each activity was designed to effect.

FIGURE 2: WKKF’S TYPES OF SYSTEMS CHANGES



THE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION SYSTEM BEFORE GCSEL

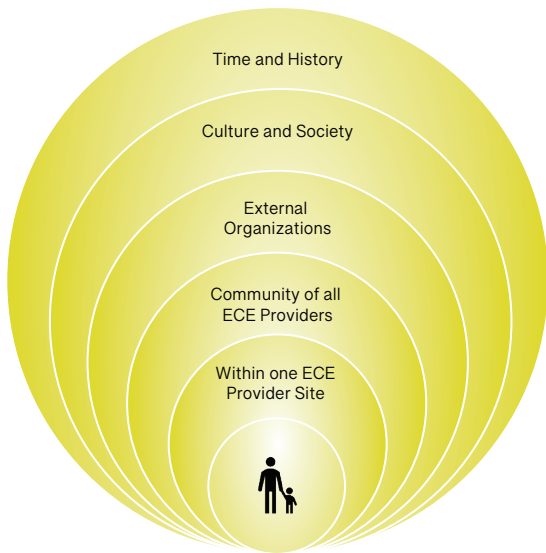


FIGURE 4: LEVELS OF THE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION SYSTEM

At the heart of the early childhood education (ECE) system is each early childhood education provider. These providers exist within a broader system, and changes to any level of that system have impacts for providers. Understanding the levels of this system is critical to understanding what aspects of it can be targeted for change and to what effect.

Adapting a model introduced by Bronfenbrenner [i], the CERE evaluation team organized these locations of change as illustrated in Figure 4. Change can occur:

- Over time
- In the culture and society in which the system is situated
- In external organizations that are related to ECE but are not themselves ECE providers (eg. relevant state agencies or nonprofit advocacy organizations)
- In the entire community of ECE providers
- Within individual sites

In evaluating the work the GCSEL and the discussion of the broader system in which it operates, the evaluation team has used this framework to sort the changemaking goals of the overall program. To ascertain whether and how GCSEL contributed to advances in Mississippi’s Early Childhood Education system, CERE evaluators sought to construct a retrospective baseline and to assess what changes occurred in the field in the years under consideration. Our analysis of interview data coupled with our landscape

and document analysis reflect three major areas shaping the field: changes in the field over time, relevant social and cultural contexts and the role of external organizations shaping the ECE system.

Major State-Level Changes in the System in 2016-2017 Continue to Reverberate

In 2016, Mississippi’s ECE system reflected significant breakdowns in the areas of context, components, connections, infrastructure and scale. Document analysis reflected a common thread was central to each of the five areas – chronic underfunding. In terms of context, system failures were driven by disputes over political spending of the millions in federal dollars that Mississippi received to improve its ECE system. ECE policymaking tended towards a ‘carrot and stick system’ wherein: a) on-the-ground ECE providers were viewed as the key to solving ECE problems, but rarely were consulted in policy-making; and b) Mississippi’s ECE providers were either enticed or pressured into compliance through the state’s quality rating system.

Funding incentives were tied to MS Quality Stars, the state’s early childhood quality rating system. However, the system ultimately failed in establishing uniform quality standards and was discontinued in 2017. Thus, the development of high-performance ECE programs and services was stymied (components). In addition, funding wars created a competitive climate, which limited some of the connections that might otherwise have strengthened ECE partnerships and collaboration.

From 2016 to 2021, the ECE system in Mississippi underwent a substantial degree of change at multiple levels. In 2016, the Quality Stars program—a Quality Rating Improvement System—was disbanded and replaced. The new program, titled “A Family Based Unified and Integrated Early Childhood System,” was proposed in late 2016 with an anticipated launch date of 2019, but did not materialize. During the same period, the state’s Early Learning Collaboratives were expanding, with an increase in legislative appropriations from \$4 million in 2016 to \$16 million in 2021. [ii]

THE STATE’S QUALITY RATING IMPROVEMENT SYSTEM HAD MAJOR CHALLENGES. THEN ITS REMOVAL DESTABLIZED THE FIELD.

THE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION SYSTEM BEFORE GCSEL

This period of change was characterized by a sense of uncertainty among ECE providers and advocates. Interview participants described this period, noting:

“ So, four to five years ago [c. 2016 – 2017], we had a really positive effect with the pre-K because of the funding piece. We were coming around to a time where legislators were more comfortable talking about pre-K. We were several years into the pre-K program, we had shown really good results already. There was a lot of celebration around that. And, so, I think that on the pre-K side, we were in a good spot. For childcare it was a very stalled spot. There was movement, but it seemed to be a very confusing direction, a very confused role about what was happening and who was making all the decisions. ”

“ I think that things like our attempt at a quality rating system, I mean, I think that that was a system put in place to support centers that ultimately kind of fell apart.... There were the efforts of the quality rating system, I think initially made some impact and had potential, but by that point was kind of fizzling out. Our early learning collaboratives were just coming onboard, so the state department was kind of organizing their early childhood department kind of restructuring and organizing their early childhood department then, and staging things for where we are now with early learning collaboratives and statewide curriculum. ”

These changes that happened over time are changes of context and of infrastructure. Under a model of ECE systems change outlined by the WKCF, context change occurs when decisions about policy and budget are altered in response to the political environment. Infrastructure change occurs when the overall regulatory space for ECE in Mississippi changed such that the supports and barriers to ECE success were very different across time.

Aspects of the System at the Social and Cultural Level

ECE providers and, by extension, the children and families they serve, report different experiences of Mississippi’s ECE system according to race. These categorical differences have persisted over time and continue to shape the landscape in which GCSEL works. Interview data and findings from the document analysis indicate that providers experience racially disparate effects of the ECE system, such as perceptions of prejudice in the system’s evaluation metrics:

“ It was a total failure. That program was not for us. It was the QRIS, further segregated programs that were deemed worthy and from programs that were deemed unworthy, usually along racial lines, primarily separating the haves and the have nots, middle income from lower income.... That’s the most racially biased tool I’ve ever seen in my life and very, very punitive. Nobody wants to be rated in their community publicly or one or two based on some asinine evaluation by some asinine evaluator. And, so, if I could share some things with you that would just make the hair on the back of your neck stand up, no reason to go through that. ”

CONCERNS ABOUT RACIAL INJUSTICE SHAPE THE ECE SYSTEM

An undercurrent of structural racism permeates the sociopolitical context of Mississippi’s ECE system. [iii] According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation [iv], 28% of Mississippi’s children live in poverty with Black children representing nearly half (45%) of this group. Given that 53% of Black children living in poverty are under age five, Mississippi’s Black children and families are very likely to benefit from participation in high quality ECE services. Yet, data from the present document analysis reflected that Black children and families faced significant barriers in accessing Mississippi’s various ECE programs. The Child Care Payment Program (CCPP) is one such program.

The Mississippi Department of Human Services (MDHS) Division of Early Childhood Care and Development (DECCD) described the CCPP as a program “designed to assist low-income Mississippi families by offering a seamless system of high-quality [childcare] through the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) subsidy program.” [v] Over the years, Black families and Black childcare providers have brought several grievances (up to and including a legal action) against MDHS citing

racially discriminatory practices restricting access to the CCPP. In response, Black families and Black childcare providers garnered support from various political figures, policy advocates and watchdog organizations to foster transparency in ECE policymaking and program implementation. The collective dialogue resulted in both a softening of and shift in language over time with class disparities, gender disparities and calls for transparency progressively being emphasized over reports of racial discrimination. Still, Black children and families reportedly represent over 90% of those seeking and struggling to access CCPP services. [vi] Thus, the cultural factor of racial discrimination shapes the overall field in which ECE providers work. Change efforts like those documented here reflect a kind of context change; ECE providers and advocates worked to change the context of the ECE system at the level of social and cultural issues. These efforts are ongoing and the entire ECE context must be understood through the lens of the social and cultural frames in which it operates.

THE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION SYSTEM BEFORE GCSEL

Aspects of the ECE System External to ECE Providers

At the core of ECE in Mississippi is the community of ECE providers around the state and the children they serve. The overall ECE system is shaped by these providers and, critically, is also shaped by the input of organizations and actors that are not ECE providers, such as state regulators and ECE advocacy organizations. The field of ECE advocacy organizations in Mississippi is densely populated. Historically, this community has been characterized by a lack of collaboration. Many interview participants referred to this lack of collaboration as “silo”-ing—meaning to work in exclusive groups or without broad collaboration, as in the examples below, each from a different interview participant:

“ I think it's got to be structured in a way that it includes everyone. I think there are times in Mississippi where there are silos and we'll do everything with all of these, but we're going to leave this one group out, or this group's going to bring all these people together, but we're going to leave this one group out here. I think it's got to include everybody, and it's got to include all of us working together. ”

“ So, a lot of people moving, a lot of people working in silos, grant money would come in, it would be spent, it would go back out, they would go away and the work would stagnate or just not be shared. ”

“ I think that things were very siloed, I don't think that there was a universal approach. I think that there were many organizations and agencies doing good things, but they were doing them in isolation. And so, sometimes there was overlap, sometimes there were gaps. ”

THE ECE SYSTEM IS CHARACTERIZED BY FRAGMENTATION, BUT IS MOVING TOWARD COLLABORATION

This silo-ing effect was frequently cited throughout interviews. Promisingly, interview participants noted that changes over the past four to five years (roughly 2016 – 2021) had evidenced a greater degree of collaboration among organizations. This increase in collaboration represents a change in connections. The examples below are typical:

“ I think I see more people willing to work together to reach goals, instead of it being my organizations does this, your organization does that. I feel like I finally see groups coming together and saying, 'Okay, well we feel this need really good, but we need to reach this goal and you're already reaching this goal, so how can we work together to make sure all of this is getting done?' I see a lot of that in context to right now that I think is making a huge difference, a big difference, but it's still not to the level that it needs to be. So, there's still work to be done, but I do see progress in that aspect of things. ”

“ I think a lot of organizations now, I are really starting to partner more in the early childhood education arena. It used to be people worked in silos. Those silos now are coming down. They're broken. People are starting to understand, organizations are starting to understand that I need to get more information, and I shouldn't just be sitting in my little area holding the information that I have. I need to share it. If there's something that I can share with MELA, then I share it with MELA. If there's something that I can share with another organization, then I do that. And when that happens, you're united, you're stronger, organizations are stronger. And it makes the community stronger. When I say community, I mean in the early childhood education system, rather. It strengthens that system. ”

THE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION SYSTEM BEFORE GCSEL

System fragmentation is not unique to advocacy organizations. The regulatory environment for ECE is similarly decentralized. The Early Childhood Education system in Mississippi is governed by three concurrent regulatory environments, each overseeing a particular subset of ECE providers and context and none of which is mutually exclusive. As a result, providers are subject to the oversight of various constellations of state agencies.

The Mississippi State Department of Health (MSDH) regulates childcare licensure. These regulations pertain to basic health and safety guidelines and apply to the 1,659 licensed childcare centers in the state. MSDH regulations apply to the greatest number of providers and have the fewest provisions for educational quality.

The Mississippi Department of Human Services (MDHS) administers the state's child care voucher program, which provides payment assistance to make childcare more affordable for qualifying families. Childcare providers who accept vouchers are subject to MDHS regulations in order to participate in the program. As of publication, 1,099 childcare providers accept MDHS vouchers. MDHS regulations apply to fewer programs than do MSDH regulations, but more programs than do regulations from MDE.

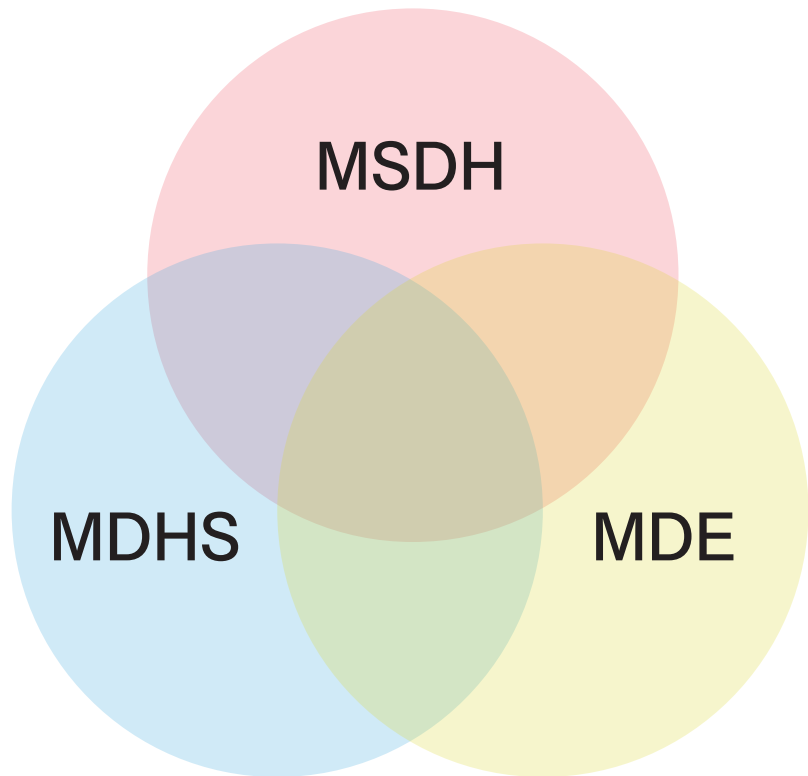
The Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) oversees the state's Early Childhood Collaboratives. These collaborative programs operate in 35 communities around the state and include combinations of school districts, Head Start programs and private Early Childhood Education providers.

While the number of Early Childhood Collaboratives is growing, MDE regulations presently apply to the smallest share of the state's providers. MDE regulations also have the most rigorous provisions for educational quality.

In the current regulatory environment, no single entity holds regulatory control over all of the state's ECE providers. The experiences of ECE providers and the children and families they serve vary according to the regulatory environment in which they are located. This has not changed and would require infrastructure change in order to be revised.

**ECE IN MISSISSIPPI
DOES NOT HAVE
A CENTRALIZED
REGULATORY AGENCY**

FIGURE 5: REGULATORY AGENCIES WITH OVERSIGHT OF ECE PROVIDERS



HOW DID GCSEL CONTRIBUTE TO CHANGE IN THE ECE SYSTEM?

GCSEL'S UNIQUE CONTRIBUTION IS IN ITS DIRECT WORK WITH ECE PROVIDERS

Working Directly with ECE Providers

Having compiled data about what changes occurred in Mississippi's ECE system and having categorized the changemaking goals of the GCSEL activities, the evaluation team then sought to assess how GCSEL tangibly contributed to change in the ECE system. We found that the primary impact of GCSEL's work was in its work directly with providers and in facilitating connections between the ECE provider community and the broader network of external organizations working to shape the field.

A large share of GCSEL's work focused on making individual providers better able to succeed within the current ECE system. This is a microsystems change, meaning the change is targeted within the site of each individual participating ECE provider or site. Data from interview participants indicated that GCSEL is one of very few, if not only, entities doing work at these levels of the system. In the quotes below, participants describe GCSEL work with providers to apply for funding or other supports that may have been otherwise inaccessible:

“ I think that [GCSEL] has contributed to increased funding, increased awareness, folks knowing enough to be able to ask for support and resources, that they didn't even know that were available to them, or to elevate their own needs. I think that she has in many ways, empowered folks to find their own voice and be able to speak up and say, 'I need this, I need that.' So, I think that that's been a large role, bringing the research, empowering folks, raising the awareness and the issues. ”

“ I can see [ECE advocates and agencies] trying and it's more talk about it now than it was four or five years ago (c. 2016 – 2017). Four or five years ago it wasn't hardly no talk about it, about anything with early childhood. 'What can we do to help childcare providers? And I truly appreciate what the graduate center did and Dr. Grace during COVID with these supplies. We was able to get those PPE supplies. And I tell you [we needed] every dime. ”

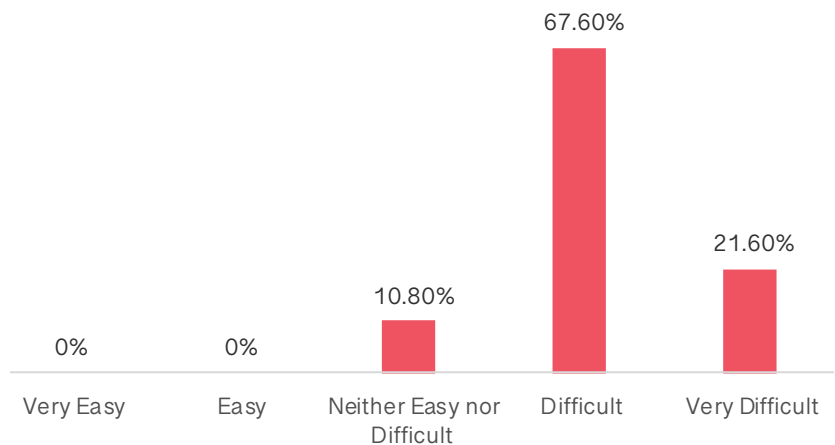
Survey findings further substantiate the idea that GCSEL has worked directly with centers in ways that would have otherwise gone unaddressed or under-addressed in the ECE system. For example, GCSEL's CCC+ program connected state agency funding efforts to ECE providers by dispersing cleaning supplies, masks and other necessities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Though the state agency program funding these supplies existed outside of GCSEL, survey participants overwhelmingly reported that securing COVID supplies without the GCSEL's CCC+ program would have been “difficult” or “very difficult.” Others went on to report that the unique contributions of the GCSEL directly to providers included trainings, materials that would otherwise be inaccessible and wide-ranging inclusion not seen elsewhere:

“ GCSEL provided options for providers to offer the CDA free of charge along with multiple training for free. ”

“ They provide MUCH needed resources that teachers would have to pay out of pocket for free. ”

“ They played an extremely important role in making sure that ALL programs were contacted and included in the opportunities being offered. They offered training to instruct programs on how to complete paperwork and correctly use the funds. The trainings were clear and specific. They took the time to clarify confusing situations while emphasizing the importance of deadlines and correct use of the funds. ”

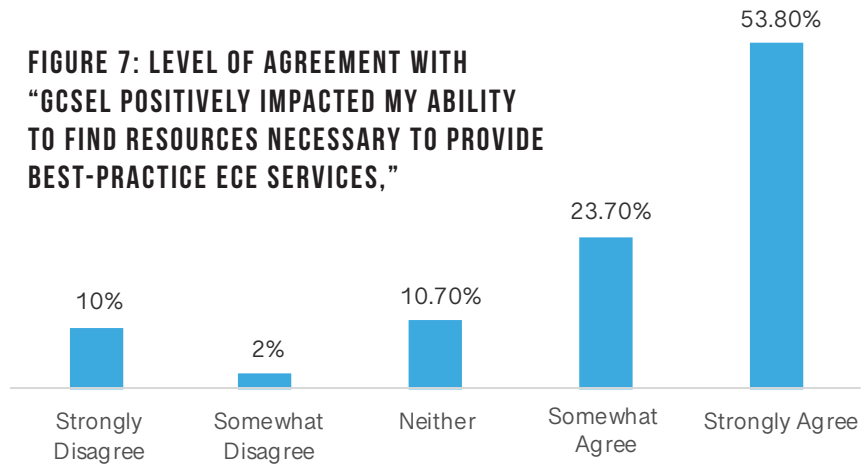
FIGURE 6: PERCEIVED DIFFICULTY OF OBTAINING SUPPLIES WITHOUT ASSISTANCE FROM GCSEL'S CCC+ PROGRAM



HOW DID GCSEL CONTRIBUTE TO CHANGE IN THE ECE SYSTEM?

Further, a majority of survey respondents reported agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement “GCSEL positively impacted my ability to find resources necessary to provide best-practice ECE services,” as illustrated in Figure 7. This provides further evidence for GCSEL’s role in connecting providers to services and resources.

FIGURE 7: LEVEL OF AGREEMENT WITH “GCSEL POSITIVELY IMPACTED MY ABILITY TO FIND RESOURCES NECESSARY TO PROVIDE BEST-PRACTICE ECE SERVICES,”



Building Trust at the Provider Level

Creating trust in the community is vital to the establishment of a system and that the GCSEL does on-the-ground work in rebuilding that trust following years of rapid overturn within the system. Participants outside of GCSEL have also noted the role of the center in filling gaps and repairing fault lines in the system, as in the example below:

“ She’ll tell you how to contact the superintendent’s office to ask about this, that. She was a very, very strong support for us during the pandemic. And we developed a relationship, a trusting relationship with her. ”

“ Oh, she’s proud to contribute at all of it as far as I’m concerned because she reached out to me and willing to work with me, I was open-minded, but I always knew she had the expertise. I always supported her. She was just in Washington DC and I always believed that if she had been to Mississippi, that silly standard and comprehensive program would’ve never taken place... But I think we know now that we can trust her and that she will help us. And when looking for the helpers, I think she stands out at the top. ”

These changes at the level of individual ECE site and the broader community of ECE providers taken together have primarily been components changes. These changes align with the concentration of GCSEL’s intended activities in the components change category and relate to introducing programming that makes ECE providers better able to succeed within the current ECE system. Data across multiple qualitative sources indicate that these have been the most successful efforts of the GCSEL.

In other arenas, GCSEL reports working with policy makers to change the ECE system for the better at the level of external, non-ECE-provider organizations. In doing so, GCSEL has tried to make changes via influencing the political context. Data indicate that these change efforts have been, overall, perceived as the least successful of the GCSEL endeavors. When survey participants were asked to rate their level of agreement regarding GCSEL’s impact in each of the five categories of change types, efforts to change the political context reflected the highest share of participant disagreement among any measure, as illustrated in Figure 8.

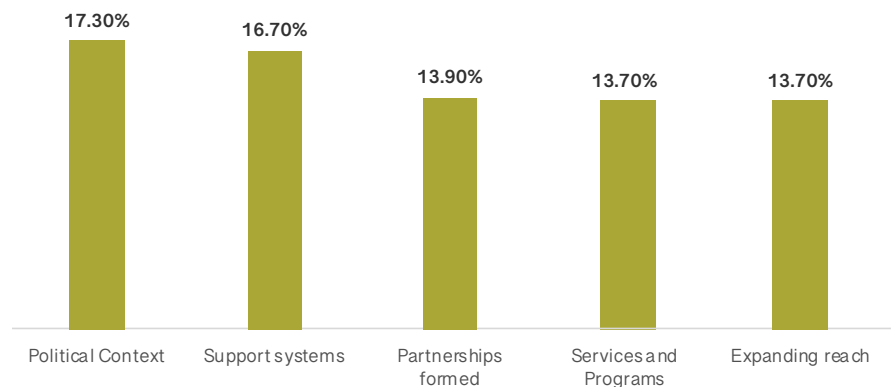


FIGURE 8: SHARE OF “DISAGREE” OR “STRONGLY DISAGREE” RESPONSES TO CHANGE-BY-TYPE MEASURES

HOW DID GCSEL CONTRIBUTE TO CHANGE IN THE ECE SYSTEM?

Filling Gaps to Compensate for System Fragmentation

GCSEL's work directly with providers is also part of its intended changes for the broader ECE community. Interview participants report understanding GCSEL, and Dr. Cathy Grace in particular, as a gap filler with a wide reach that works to make resources and training available to ECE providers across a system with known fragments. This gap-filling role is also reflected in how GCSEL staff describe the work of the center; for example:

**GCSEL FILLS
A VITAL ROLE
AS AN ECE
SYSTEMS
GAP-FILLER**

“ I was here going about my business thinking, ‘Well, the state isn’t a mess from an agency standpoint.’ So, that’s even more of the reason for us to develop what we’re doing here because we’ve got to figure out a way that if we’re going to... not replace the state, because we don’t have that kind of reach, but to do the best we can with what we’re able to in the way of resources. ”

“ So, we’ve looked at the, I guess you could say emergency side and how we could influence a lack of a system to create some kind of a mini system for delivery of that sort of thing. ”

“ And, so, that is part of how you’re going to build systems and how you’re going to have a community of early childhood folks. And if you don’t have trust, then you can’t build that community. So, we’re back trying to create the whole system of trust. ”

Leveraging the Reputation of GCSEL Leadership Personnel

Notably, when participants described the kinds of change successfully effected by GCSEL, a dominant theme was the personal connection and individual influence of Dr. Cathy Grace herself. Participants cited her individual reputation and expertise as keystones of the center’s successful work:

“ I think she is such a well-respected name, that I do think people listen to her. And so I have no doubt that there’s a lot of ripple effect, that the light that she shines on things, that the attention that ECE initiatives and efforts get because she gets behind them, I think is very powerful, and people take notice. ”

“ Dr. Grace is recognized throughout the state, specifically in our discipline as a significant leader in early childhood. She’s the voice that many people turn to when there is a legislative action that needs to be addressed or a policy and in funding as well too. ”

“ There are people who are involved in early learning and I think she has the most expertise and she’s not self-serving. She really wants this for the children of Mississippi. I think if we’re to have an early learning system of any kind of quality at all, now is the time to pursue it under her leadership. I think without her it will not happen. ”

While these data suggest the definitive impact of the work, they also hinge on the involvement of a singular person. While the GCSEL work overall reflects the combined efforts of the organization, there is a wide perception of the center’s capacity to effect change as being dependent on the involvement of Dr. Grace the person, rather than dependent on the position of GCSEL director.

WHAT DID THE CERE TEAM LEARN ABOUT MAKING SYSTEMS CHANGE IN ECE?

Overcrowding in the ECE Field has been a Barrier to Progress

Beyond the scope of GCSEL itself, the CERE team also sought to examine how change is made in Mississippi's ECE system broadly. Interview data with ECE professionals and other stakeholders illustrated some successful pathways to change as well as some common challenges that are widely recognized in the field. Efforts to effect change in MS ECE have been stifled by competition among changemakers, primarily advocates, agencies and those external to the community of ECE direct service providers. Participants described this challenge noting:

“ You had basically a lot of competition, competing initiatives trying to do improvement separately, and Mississippi was known for that. I know of a number of situations where national funders wouldn't consider Mississippi because there was infighting and among key players and flat out. And so that was not productive. ”

“ It is almost like I told somebody in interview one time, it's almost like we have five or six different Mississippi's. I mean it's really that different. So, a cookie cutter approach doesn't work. ”

“ Again, I think universal leadership and universal efforts, getting everybody on the same page, was a challenge. I think that funding could be a challenge. That was one of the reasons that several of those initiatives either kind of morphed or folded. ”

“ And, so, I knew most people across the state and many of us who've been in this arena for a long time knew each other... and I think what happened in all of our defense is that there was so much work to do and so little time to really make the partnership connections that they weren't always occurring when they needed to. ”

Collaboration in the Field is Advancing

Data indicate that changes in connections are improving collaboration among advocates—a change that was celebrated by interview participants. Across the full range of interview participants, this change in connections is not attributed to the work of any particular entity, but instead is described as emerging organically within the community in response to its known fragmentation.

“ I mean, the system that we've been used to in the past few years has been a lot more whole than it was back then because if you had conversations about doing anything, you had to be really careful who you had those conversations with because it would be undone if somebody didn't want it to happen. And, so, it was still very disjointed and frustrating. ”

“ And, so, at the big agencies, we were all on the same page trying to go in the same direction. And we would call each other and talk to each other about plans for the future and what we really wanted to see happen. And if it was on a Saturday, it was on a Saturday. And it just didn't really matter what day it was, we just still talked about how we could get things going and moving in the right direction. ”

WHAT DID THE CERE TEAM LEARN ABOUT MAKING SYSTEMS CHANGE IN ECE?

The Field is Trending Toward Unification behind MDE's Early Learning Collaboratives

While efforts to collaborate at some levels have been more successful, competition or discordance among regulatory environments persists. Data indicate that there is support for addressing this problem by increasing the scale of the highest quality regulatory environment—thereby decreasing the amount of competition. Specifically, there was broad support for the further expansion of the state's Early Learning Collaboratives and with less support noted for other regulatory mechanisms, as in the following examples:

“ Pre-K collaborative is one... that's 35 [sites]. There's not 82 [sites, i.e., one per county]. So those 35 are receiving what they need, getting the resources to get a higher quality education, but then the others aren't. So, they're scaling up, but the other ones are stand... They're just there. ”

“ When you compare the total number of pre-K children in Mississippi to the number that actually get to sit in those pre-K classrooms, it's not enough. It's not enough at all. We're doing wonderful things with the ones that are there, and you're seeing amazing progress, but there are so many who aren't there. ”

“ I think probably the biggest thing that has been scaled up over the last five years are the preschool collaborative programs that are in school systems throughout the state, or collaborating with school systems throughout the state. We've seen a significant uptick in funding for those preschool collaborative classrooms. We don't have the Universal pre-K in Mississippi, but that's as close as we're coming right now, in regard to serving more children in high quality programs... I think from a scaling perspective, that's probably one of the big things that our legislature has been behind in supporting. I would argue that they could probably support it as a statewide program and we would be in better shape, but scaling it up every year has been something that has been a focus for them ”

ECE Advocates and Agencies Need Stronger Communication with ECE Providers

Finally, the qualitative data collected here indicate that a divide exists between ECE providers (at the core of the ECE system) and the advocacy communities that work to change the system. Most changemaking efforts are of the political context sort. The needs of ECE providers are operating at a direct services level, and are not being addressed by these efforts. For instance, the term “infrastructure” was used by advocates and agency personnel to describe the infrastructure of the overall system, such as means of communication and sharing information as in the following example:

“ I think probably the biggest thing that has been scaled up over the last five years are the preschool collaborative programs that are in school systems throughout the state, or collaborating with school systems throughout the state. We've seen a significant uptick in funding for those preschool collaborative classrooms. We don't have the Universal pre-K in Mississippi, but that's as close as we're coming right now, in regard to serving more children in high quality programs... I think from a scaling perspective, that's probably one of the big things that our legislature has been behind in supporting. I would argue that they could probably support it as a statewide program and we would be in better shape, but scaling it up every year has been something that has been a focus for them. ”

When direct service providers discussed infrastructure, however, they more often described the brick-and-mortar features of facilities, as in the following:

“ We received the Child Care Strong funding infrastructure. You're talking about the actual framework, the actual buildings and facilities. I think the Child Care Strong funding allowed us to make upgrades to our facilities where we feel like we can really, really offer a quality environment. ”

This disconnect in use of the term, however, was not addressed by interview participants at all. It reflects a discordance between the base concerns of providers and of advocates – each understanding ‘infrastructure’ to reflect basic needs of their own aspects of the system and potentially failing to communicate across this divide.

WHAT DID THE CERE TEAM LEARN ABOUT MAKING SYSTEMS CHANGE IN ECE?

Other participants further described a divide between ECE providers and agencies and advocates, noting disagreements between the sectors, as in the following:

“

The leadership. That's one of the things that I see a lot of. Maybe childcare providers don't believe in that, but I don't know that they'd agree with that, but the leadership at all of these entities [is a strength].

”

“

But I think the other thing that I have seen from my perspective before I started this position, is there's amazing things happening in our state, but they don't trickle down to the people in the community doing the work. I know as a teacher that taught in pre-K for years and years and years, when I became in this position and this role and found out about all the resources and all the things that were out there, I was baffled at how I had been teaching for 16 years and I'd never heard of these things. I didn't know these things were available. I didn't know these things were out there that I could share with families.

”

GCSEL staff report actively considering this divide in the structure of their work, as in the following from a staff member of the center:

“

You weren't going to the people who were doing the services. It was somebody who wasn't boots on the ground. So when you're out of touch with what's happening on the ground, you're not making good calls because you don't know who it's going to impact. Even though I survived, many people didn't, many people still struggle to try to recoup what happened just to the people that were providing the services. So you see, they messed it up from the top down. And so then we can't even get to the bottom.

”

This further aligns with the previous finding that GCSEL is serving a unique role in its capacity to bridge the gap between direct service providers and broader entities within the system. In this way, the kinds of change made by GCSEL are unique and actively needed.

IMPLICATIONS

CERE's evaluation of the work of GCSEL sought to assess the contours of the ECE field and GCSEL's position in shaping it. Our analysis of interview data coupled with our landscape and document analysis reflect three major levels at which change has occurred in the ECE field: changes over time, in the social and culture context of ECE and among external organizations shaping the ECE system. Findings further suggest that a large number of organizations have vied for control and limited funding among these external organizations.

Data from interview participants indicated that a divide exists between ECE service providers and advocates and agencies working in the ECE field and that GCSEL is one of very few, if not only, entities doing work to bridge the connection between these groups. GCSEL proposed a broad scope of work to contribute to change in this system, including multiple types of goals and objectives that involve direct contact with ECE providers. The CERE team's activity mapping findings show that the largest shares of these activities mapped onto components and infrastructure types of change. In this way, GCSEL offers a unique contribution in an otherwise saturated field.

Findings from the evaluation suggest directions for growth for GCSEL's future work, including the following recommendations:

Build and foster connections between ECE providers and external organizations, focusing on increasing racial diversity in field leadership.

Macrosystems factors, most notably race, exert force on the shape of the system. This factor is acknowledged and discussed by interview participants, but there is little evidence for change-making efforts at present. An area of expansion for the work of the center should include changemaking efforts targeted at this problem and aimed at change through connections. Future evaluation work should examine the racial diversity or lack of diversity in the ECE field at each level of the system and assess the implications accordingly.

Prioritize work involving direct contact with ECE providers.

GCSEL should prioritize its work at the ECE site level and the level of the ECE provider community. The Center's unique position as a conduit between direct service providers and broader system entities enables its unique component contribution. Findings from evaluation data suggest that these component changes are the most successful of the centers' efforts and are not being provided by other entities in the field. GCSEL should deprioritize efforts to create change via political context. Findings from evaluation data suggest that these are the least successful arenas of the center's work and that these change efforts occur in a field already hindered by excessive competition.

Capitalize on leadership resources now to support sustainability later.

GCSEL should prepare for changes over time and in the regulatory environment and expect to adapt its strategies accordingly. GCSEL's current leadership is widely renowned, making potential leadership transitions challenging. Participants noted the involvement of Dr. Cathy Grace, and specifically noted that successful change efforts were contingent on her future involvement:

“ It is my sincere hope that while Dr. Cathy Grace is available, well let me say this. If we are to have a quality early learning system in Mississippi, we need to pursue that now under her leadership. Otherwise, I don't believe it will happen. ”

“ We need more people like that. We need more Cathy Graces. We need to clone her somehow. ”

“ I think Cathy has been, again, one of those individuals who are... She's not going to quiet down. She's going to continue to ask the important questions. She's going to be at the doorsteps or the email at least, of the persons who have opportunities to change things in Mississippi. Department of Human Services, Department of Health, Department of Education. All of those agencies are very familiar with Dr. Grace and understand her passion. Because of her passion and because of her very deep knowledge of early childhood, she has received funding and programming that extends far and wide in Mississippi in helping community-based providers. ”

The scale and sustainability of GCSEL's changemaking efforts would be bolstered by a leadership model that leverages Dr. Grace's influence and transitions this influence to the position of GCSEL director itself, rather than limiting it to a given individual occupying the position.

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