

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

When we wrote *Cradle to Kindergarten* in 2016, our goal was to ensure that *all* young children have the opportunity to fulfill their American dreams. Our goal remains the same for this second edition, but the policy and political context have shifted.

Over the last four years, several states have implemented or expanded evidence-based early childhood policies like paid family leave and public preschool, offering supports that give very young children more time with their parents, promote their development prior to kindergarten, and allow millions more American families to manage their work and caregiving responsibilities. But also over the last four years we have witnessed a retreat from expanding opportunity at the federal level; instead, inequality has expanded in our country. We see immigration policies that separate children from their parents, racialized dog whistles, and an inadequate and damaging response to a pandemic during which millions of children—particularly those in already disadvantaged circumstances—have been left without the educational and care supports they need to learn and grow. Socio-economic, racial, and ethnic inequalities have widened, and the COVID-19 pandemic has decimated an already fragmented and under-resourced early care and education system. These forces have combined to create a geographic patchwork of early opportunity: children and families in certain communities have access to the supports that help them thrive, and others are left to navigate the first few years of life—or parenthood—with little aid.

What has become clear is that the early childhood investments we describe in this book—a federal paid family leave social insurance

program, a child care assurance program with substantial federal investment, universal preschool for children ages three to kindergarten entry, and an expanded Head Start to serve many more children from birth to kindergarten entry—are needed more than ever. In fact, all of these programs must invest even more in access and quality—and in fighting inequality.

The original six chapters of *Cradle to Kindergarten* are not revised. Neither are the evidence-based arguments for what is needed and why; those arguments have only been strengthened with the advance of more evidence about the needs for children’s development and the lost opportunities, as well as the impacts, of interventions. The new epilogue details revisions to our 2016 policy proposals. We also update our estimates of the public investments needed at full implementation.

The good news is that the wide achievement and development gaps resulting from children’s circumstances of birth are not intractable; research increasingly shows that we can move the needle with public investment. Swift and bold action at the federal, state, and local levels is needed to provide the youngest among us with the opportunities to reach their full potential.