

Seeds of Equity: Fostering Inclusivity in Children's Savings Account Programs

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Preface

Picture this: It's "deposit day" for a second-grade class participating in a Children's Savings Account (CSA) program. The whole class is on a field trip to the bank, where they will learn about saving for the future and everyone will make their very first deposits into their savings accounts – accounts that the teacher has told them will help them go to college one day. As the class lines up in front of the teller, one student freezes. Money is tight at home and their parents didn't have anything to give to them to deposit. They hang back, hoping no one notices. How does this child feel? What lesson do they take away from the day?

Anticipating this possible scenario, one CSA program, San Francisco Kindergarten to College (K2C), took steps to ensure that all children are included in their deposit days. For example, every single child goes through the deposit line, regardless of whether they have money to contribute. Those who lack funds simply get the word "practice" written on their deposit slips. Where possible, K2C also raises funds from donors to give each child something to deposit.

The day-to-day choices CSAs make in operations and outreach have a great impact on how their programs are experienced by children and families. The thoughtful yet simple steps that K2C took to avoid making children feel left out on deposit days inspired us to learn more about these kinds of practices. This report is the fruit of that investigation. We hope that by sharing the creativity and thoughtfulness of CSA programs across the U.S. with others in the field, this report will encourage ongoing innovation and inclusion.

Introduction

Children's savings accounts (CSAs) are programs that provide children with savings or investment accounts and financial incentives for the purpose of postsecondary education or other asset-building purposes. CSAs are associated with a range of benefits for children and their families, which can help young people succeed in school from childhood through postsecondary education. Many cities, states, and localities have implemented CSAs in recent years, such that more than 124 programs covered over 965,000 children nationwide in 2020.¹ 2021 brought the numbers over one million for the first time, and the field continues to grow.

CSA programs vary widely in every aspect of their design, and thus their ability to reach children from all backgrounds. Researchers and program administrators have noted that formal program features (e.g., enrollment procedures and program-provided deposits) have important implications for the equity and inclusion of children from families with low-income, documented and undocumented immigration statuses, and families of color.² It is likely that programs' approaches to operations and outreach also have important implications for equity and inclusion.

While the terms "equity" and "inclusion" carry many meanings, we are primarily referring to families' ability to meaningfully participate in all aspects of the CSA program, including enrollment, interaction with materials, access to financial incentives, and engagement with the program. The COVID-19 crisis has added a new layer of concerns related to equity in access to and engagement with CSAs.

The study has two main goals:

- To document the barriers faced by families to equitable inclusion in CSA programs, including longstanding barriers and new ones arising from or magnified by the COVID-19 pandemic
- To document promising practices in CSA operations and outreach to enhance equity in CSA participation and engagement

Barriers and opportunities identified in this report

Trust in institutions: One of the challenges respondents brought up most frequently was CSA participants' - or potential participants' - lack of trust in institutions, be they the CSA program itself, government entities, or financial institutions. To address challenges related to trust and engagement, respondents identified several strategies for embedding CSAs in communities, empowering community members to champion the program, partnering with trusted organizations, and structuring staffing to facilitate trust.

[Explore more opportunities on page 13](#)

Access to financial institutions and familiarity with financial products: Respondents detailed a variety of strategies to address the barriers that families face in accessing financial services, including connecting families to banking services, prioritizing relationships and representation, and structuring their program in response to families' preferences and needs. Programs that house accounts in state 529 plans face particular challenges, as many families are not familiar with these plans or the basics of investing. These programs have developed additional strategies to educate families and facilitate their participation in 529 accounts.

[Explore more opportunities on page 15](#)

Language and literacy: Language and literacy barriers may prevent CSA programs from communicating effectively with families. Fully addressing these barriers would often require more resources than CSA programs currently have, but programs have developed a range of strategies.

[Explore more opportunities on page 16](#)

Digital divide: Digital divide challenges - including internet access, access to computers, and digital literacy - have only become more pronounced amid the COVID-19 pandemic. In our interviews, programs brought up strategies and opportunities to bridge these divides.

[Explore more opportunities on page 17](#)

Communicating with families: How does a CSA program get in touch with families, and when it does, what messages resonate most? These questions are core to CSA programs' work, and our respondents identified several strategies for reaching families from all backgrounds. Many programs partner with other organizations to reach more families or reach them more effectively. Some have experimented with various communications methods, from social media to radio to school packets. Respondents also told us about how they approach crafting their messages to families to reflect their values and speak to specific communities.

[Explore more opportunities on page 18](#)

Data sharing and analysis: Many of our respondents were candid about the challenges they face in accessing high-quality data needed to enroll children, communicate with families, provide equity-focused incentives, and evaluate their success in reaching families from diverse backgrounds. These are challenges that most programs are still working to address, but a few programs shared initial strategies with us.

[Explore more opportunities on page 20](#) 

Background and methodology

CSAs are grounded in the idea that setting aside money for children’s future education opens the door to a college-bound identity – to believing that education after high school is not only possible but a worthwhile goal. In fact, research shows that CSAs help children build a “college-going identity” from a young age,^{3,4} boost children’s educational engagement and performance,⁵⁻⁷ increase children’s educational expectations,^{3,8-11} and encourage families to save for education.^{11,12} CSAs are associated with numerous additional benefits for children and families, including early social-emotional development,^{13,14} child health,¹⁵ and maternal mental health.¹⁶

Beyond CSAs’ considerable promise to enhance equitable access to post-secondary education, the specifics of program design matter for equity and inclusion. For instance, automatic enrollment facilitates the inclusion of everyone, while opt-in programs (which require families to complete an application procedure) risk leaving out lower-resource families and those less familiar with financial institutions.¹⁷⁻¹⁹ Dollar-for-dollar matches, designed to encourage family deposits, tend to benefit high-resource families disproportionately simply because families with more financial resources can make more frequent and valuable contributions.

While these equity issues with program design have been documented, we know less about how the day-to-day operations of CSAs, their outreach, and their engagement with families affect equitable inclusion of families. To begin filling in these gaps, we interviewed 14 CSA programs from across the country that are innovating in the areas of equity and inclusion. Most of these interviews took place over Zoom and lasted approximately one hour each. Instead of an interview, one program opted to provide written responses. We conducted these interviews between June 2020 and July 2021; certain program details may have changed since then.

To identify programs to include in this study, we began with a purposive sampling approach, contacting a list of programs we had identified as taking innovative steps to enhance equity and inclusion. We then moved to a snowball sampling technique, asking each respondent to identify programs that were innovating in their approaches to building equitable inclusion in their CSAs. Many of the same programs were suggested by multiple respondents.

The programs featured in this report reflect the variety of program structures and approaches in the CSA field:

- Participating programs are located across the country, from California to Oklahoma to Maine. Some serve predominantly rural populations, while others are based in cities. Three participating programs enroll children across entire states.

- Programs in the sample span all sizes, including seven programs that enroll fewer than 5,000 children in 2020, five programs that enroll 5,000-100,000 children, and two programs that enroll or set money aside for over 100,000 children.
- Some of these programs enroll eligible children automatically, while others require families to opt-in or claim their accounts.
- Most participating programs have universal eligibility, but two programs specifically target children from low- to moderate-income families.
- The sample also includes both new and older programs: three participating programs are among the oldest in the country, while two programs launched just last year.

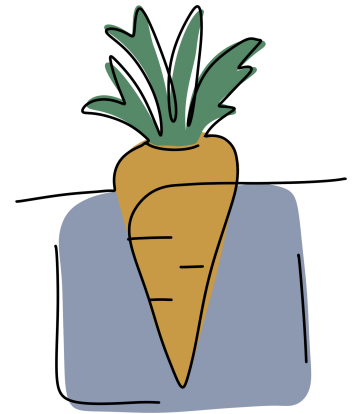
The interview respondents generously shared their time and views in order to provide lessons and ideas for the larger CSA field. While we point to individual programs’ practices and challenges wherever possible, we have omitted the programs’ names in cases where the content may be sensitive.

Program	Location	Year Launched	Enrollment	Approx. Enrollment
Providence Promise	Providence, RI	2017	Opt-in	Under 5,000
Oakland Promise Brilliant Baby	Oakland, CA	2017	Opt-in	Under 5,000
Oklahoma Native Assets Coalition (ONAC) CSA Program	Various	2014	Opt-in	Under 5,000
Prosperity Kids	New Mexico	2014	Opt-in	Under 5,000
Inversant	Greater Boston area, MA	2008	Opt-in	Under 5,000
Semillitas	Santa Cruz County, CA	2019	Opt-in	Under 5,000
CollegeBound Saint Paul	Saint Paul, MN	2020	Opt-in	Under 5,000
BabySteps Savings Plan	Massachusetts	2020	Opt-in	5,000-100,000
Boston Saves	Boston, MA	2016	Automatic	5,000-100,000
Promise Indiana	Indiana	2013	Opt-in	5,000-100,000
Oakland Promise Kindergarten to College (K2C)	Oakland, CA	2017	Automatic	5,000-100,000
San Francisco Kindergarten to College (K2C)	San Francisco, CA	2010	Automatic	5,000-100,000
My Alford Grant	Maine	2008	Automatic	Over 100,000
Keystone Scholars	Pennsylvania	2019	Automatic; families must open accounts to use funds	Over 100,000

Who faces barriers to meaningful participation in CSAs?

We first asked respondents to tell us about which populations of people they see facing barriers to full inclusion in their CSA programs, both before and during the pandemic. Respondents identified patterns by income, socioeconomic status, race and ethnicity, immigration status, and native language. These populations are not distinct from one another and often intersect in complex ways.

Income level: Nearly all respondents said that low-income families face barriers to participating in their CSAs. Some respondents defined income in terms of specific income bands – for example, families making under \$40,000 a year or those under the state median income. Others spoke of income in terms of families’ limited ability to save. Beyond financial limitations, respondents also noted that lower-resource families often have more stresses and demands on their time, which limit their personal bandwidth to participate in a CSA. **San Francisco K2C** additionally pointed out that families may face particularly acute barriers when lack of income produces extreme hardship and instability, such as homelessness.



Socioeconomic status: In a similar vein, some respondents spoke about socioeconomic status (SES) differences in who faces barriers in accessing their CSAs. SES goes beyond income to capture differences in educational levels, occupational prestige, and social position. For example, “working class” families may not have easy access to financial institutions due to the hours they work (**Inversant**), and materials produced by financial institution partners may “read high-income-class” and not feel accessible to lower-SES families (**Semillitas**). SES may also shape children’s and families’ understanding of post-secondary education. For example, **Prosperity Kids** said many of the low-income families they serve “do not even know a college graduate, let alone have somebody in the family who’s gone to college.”

Racial and ethnic background: Respondents also frequently described racial and ethnic differences in who faces barriers in accessing CSAs. Some detailed challenges faced by people of color generally, while others pointed to specific groups that may face challenges, including African American/Black, Latinx, Indigenous, Asian, and Middle Eastern families. Respondents from across the country – from California to Oklahoma to Maine – spoke to how communities of color have been hit hard by the pandemic, in terms of both illness and economic impact.

Immigration status: Several respondents identified immigrant families as a population that faces barriers to participation in CSAs. Some respondents spoke of immigrant or migrant communities broadly, while others focused on refugees or undocumented immigrants. Several respondents mentioned that among the families eligible for their program, immigrant communities have been disproportionately hit by the pandemic – whether it be higher rates of COVID, additional challenges in transitioning to online learning, or economic hardship. **Semillitas** pointed out that undocumented families, in particular, have fallen through the cracks because they were not eligible for federal pandemic aid.

Language: Program managers also identified barriers faced by non-native English speakers. Some respondents identified this group broadly as families that do not speak English at home, while others identified specific language communities – such as Spanish, Somali, and Hmong – that frequently face barriers in their communities.

Other: Other categories of families mentioned by respondents as frequently facing barriers include rural families, those in alternative family structures (including foster youth and single parents), and families with lower levels of literacy or digital literacy.

What barriers keep families from participating in CSAs?

In addition to asking which populations face challenges, we asked respondents to share the kinds of challenges they see families in their program face. While some barriers are unique to certain populations – for example, language barriers are experienced by English language learners – other barriers cut across a variety of populations. In this section, we summarize the major barriers identified by respondents.

Lack of trust in institutions

Among the barriers that came up most frequently is CSA participants’ – or potential participants’ – lack of trust in institutions, including service programs, government bodies, and financial institutions. Such trust concerns are consistent with prior CSA research.^{20,21}

In some cases, the barrier was a lack of trust in the CSA program itself. When families are unfamiliar with the CSA program or the organization(s) that run it, they are often reasonably hesitant to commit the time required to learn more, much less hand over the financial information that many CSA programs require to open accounts. Where a CSA operates out of a school or partners with schools, this lack of trust may be especially pronounced among families with less connection to their school. For instance, **Boston Saves** indicated that their staff and school-based outreach ambassadors struggle to build relationships with families who cannot or do not participate in school events.

CSA programs led by State Treasurer’s offices or city departments often encounter a lack of trust in government. As **San Francisco K2C** pointed out, distrust of government may be due to specific concerns, such as fear of being deported, or due to negative interactions with government agencies in the past.

In other cases, respondents pointed specifically to a lack of trust in financial institutions. **Promise Indiana** and **Inversant** both identified discomfort and distrust with financial institutions as a barrier. Families may not have experience using traditional financial services like bank accounts, or they may be concerned that financial products will not meet their needs. As **Boston Saves** put it, “people don’t fully trust government and people also don’t fully trust financial institutions, and this is a program that sits at the intersection of those two things.”

Distrust may also take the form of general apprehension: **Oakland Promise K2C** noted that “people say, ‘Why are you giving me free money? What do I have to do? What’s in it for me?’ Or ‘she’s five now. We’ll see if the money is still there when she turns 18.’” **BabySteps Savings Plan** and **Promise Indiana** identified similar themes of distrust of “free money,” a barrier that has been documented elsewhere in CSA research.^{22,23}

Limited access to financial institutions and familiarity with financial products

Many respondents said their participants face barriers accessing financial services related to their CSA. Families may face barriers in physically accessing financial services, in understanding how to navigate financial systems, or in feeling welcome and respected in financial institutions.

At the most basic level, families often struggle to access what they need to make deposits into their accounts. Families may not have computers or internet access at home, making it difficult to manage accounts online. Where CSA accounts are managed by brick-and-mortar banks, families may struggle to reach the bank due to transportation, location, or limited business hours. **Inversant** cited “financial services deserts” in their service area, and **San Francisco K2C** noted that working families may not be available during banks’ operating hours.

Another barrier is families’ familiarity and comfort with navigating financial systems. In some communities, participating in a CSA program may be families’ first introduction to banking or investing. As **Oakland Promise K2C** put it, “for families that are under-banked or unbanked, this seems like a 0 to 100 thing that I’m asking you to do.” Another theme that came up across multiple interviews was that families may not feel welcome at their CSA’s financial institution. One respondent told us that “our families don’t see themselves reflected in our financial partner’s materials,” while another pointed out gaps in the quality of service that high-income and low-income banking customers receive.

CSA programs that utilize 529 plans pose additional barriers for participants. Nationally, only about 6% of families with resident children under 25 own 529 accounts or Coverdells (similar but less-often utilized savings accounts for education).²⁴ This low utilization reflects the barriers program managers identified. One issue is that both the owner and beneficiary of a 529 account must have a Social Security Number or Individual Taxpayer Identification Number (ITIN), which can pose a problem for families in which one or more members lack immigration documentation. A second issue is that 529 accounts may be unfamiliar and intimidating to families. As **Promise Indiana** put it, “529 sounds scary, like if you don’t know what a 529 is, like, ‘I’m not signing up for that thing.’” Navigating the required forms – which may not be in a language families understand – and choosing among investment options can be difficult for families. And while CSA programs often try to walk families through the process, there are legal barriers to translating forms or providing investment advice.

Barriers to financial services were heightened during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many banks reduced their hours or went online-only during the height of the pandemic, making in-person access more difficult. **Inversant** observed that pandemic-related precautions made it hard for many banking customers to access information in ways they are comfortable with: “a lot of low-income families, and families with just less access and literacy, they feel they’re actually abandoned and left out during COVID.” Some CSA programs typically walk families through the process of filling out financial forms

and opening accounts, working as an intermediary between families and financial institutions. As the pandemic shut down in-person contact, these programs were forced to abandon their intermediary role or attempt to do the same work over the phone, which posed its own challenges.

Language barriers and literacy

Language barriers often keep CSA programs from communicating effectively with the communities they serve. When there is no overlap between the languages children and families speak and those spoken by CSA program staff, outreach partners, or partner financial institutions, families may not learn about the CSA, may not understand what they need to do to enroll or earn incentives, and may not benefit from additional college access or financial literacy programming.

Many of the CSA programs we talked to serve significant numbers of families who do not speak English at home. For example, **Providence Promise** described language barriers as one of the largest challenges their program faces, estimating that about half of the public school families they serve do not speak English at home. **CollegeBound Saint Paul, San Francisco K2C, and Oakland Promise Brilliant Baby** noted that even with multilingual staff, they cannot meet all the language needs of the communities they serve. As Oakland Promise reported, “We have English, bilingual Spanish, and bilingual Cantonese coaches. That is three out of many languages spoken in our community.”

In some cases, it is not the CSA program itself but their partners that lack language capacities. Several respondents flagged that their financial services providers or state 529 plans only provide materials in English – and many are prohibited from translating these official forms. For example, **Promise Indiana** noted that they can translate their own materials, but

when [families] go to register, or enroll in their account, they would have to use an English form. We’re not even allowed to have a translated form – it has to be the one that they use for compliance. So that’s a huge barrier.

Another program likewise told us that language barriers similarly affect school staff, including teachers, principals, and guidance counselors. Despite a majority of students and families in their district speaking Spanish at home, many school staff do not speak Spanish. Staff may be able to send translated materials home, but they cannot converse with families. As a result, families who do not speak English do not have equal opportunities to have their questions about the CSA program answered.

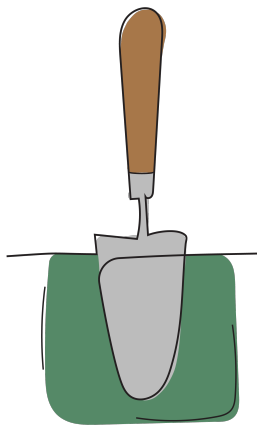
Further complicating language barriers, this program noted that the quality of translation matters. Facing language barriers, school administrators and staff would “just be pulling in any person who might be bilingual or who might speak some Spanish ... it became very clear to us that our Spanish-speaking families have not been receiving the same information as our English-speaking families.”

A barrier that came up less often in our interviews was literacy and reading levels. Surprisingly, **Semillitas** was the only program to mention this barrier, noting that in their region, the average adult reads at a third-grade level. Thus, they stated, “we need the financial partners of the CSAs to do a better job of providing educational materials that are made for third-grade reading level or less.”

Semillitas' community is not alone in facing this barrier. Nationally, 19% of adults age 16 to 65 score in the lowest levels of literacy,²⁵ and many CSAs likely operate in communities with even greater rates of low literacy.

Digital divide

For some programs, communications challenges include not just language barriers but the “digital divide,” which includes internet connectivity, hardware access, and digital literacy, especially among lower-income communities and in rural areas. The digital divide has only become more pronounced amid the COVID pandemic due to schools, businesses, and other programs relying heavily on online access instead of in-person services.



Internet access was most commonly cited as a barrier by programs that serve largely rural and dispersed populations, including **My Alford Grant**, **ONAC**, and **Prosperity Kids**. These populations may face particular challenges that go beyond a simple lack of internet access. For instance, **My Alford Grant** noted a lack of consistent, high-speed access: “In Maine, a lot of the digital divide is like me trying to figure out how not to get dropped from a call for the third time, you know, because my bandwidth isn’t very good.” Unequal access to the internet was not solely a problem for areas of sparse population. This issue was also raised by **San Francisco K2C**, which operates not only in a metropolitan area but in a global center of technological innovation.

Hardware access is a closely related issue. CSA families may not have a computer at home from which to check their account balance or receive information about the program. Lacking a computer, families may access CSA services from a smartphone instead – but this route also presents challenges, such as reading financial disclosure forms on a small screen or navigating websites that are not optimized for mobile.

Many families also face gaps in digital literacy, the ability and comfort to use digital platforms to find information and communicate with others. **BabySteps Savings Plan** noted that opening accounts online “was a speed bump for many families.” Other programs said that some of their families lacked email addresses, did not know how to use Zoom, or were unable to sign documents online.

The COVID-19 pandemic has sharpened the digital divide for CSA participants. For example, **Boston Saves** shared that some of their families lack the “digital proficiency” to check their account balances and engage with the program. Prior to the pandemic, program staff could sit with participants and walk them through the steps – but “being able to provide support for that is much harder when we can’t see people in person.”

Similarly, some “high touch” CSA programs – those that would typically count on a lot of face-to-face contact with CSA participants – said that pandemic precautions forced them to rely on technology in place of their usual personal contact with families, and this was a poor substitute. For example, **Promise Indiana** said that they see the best opt-in rates when they embed their program into in-person public school registration events, allowing families to hear about the program from trusted people and have their questions answered. But “now we’re relying on sending an email or having

families watch a video who might not have access to do so.” Lamenting the loss of in-person contact in areas with spotty internet access and cell phone reception, **Prosperity Kids** likewise summarized: “our initiative is high touch, and we were out of touch.”

The changes wrought by the pandemic and digital divide also have implications for who CSA programs can reach. Noting difficulties in helping families with 529 applications over the phone, **ONAC** reflected that “we’re probably not reaching the hardest to reach that we were reaching before; we are still reaching the very hard to reach, but we are not reaching the hardest to reach.”

Challenges in communicating with families

CSA programs – including those with automatic enrollment – typically want to communicate with families to maintain their interest and encourage their ongoing engagement. Beyond language barriers and bridging the digital divide, programs identified a host of challenges in reaching families from all backgrounds. These challenges include knowing how to best reach families, having correct contact information for families, missing some segment of families regardless of communications mode, and making sure their messages break through the barrage of messages families receive. The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic has changed what kinds of outreach programs can do, making communication with families even more difficult.

Several program managers highlighted challenges in identifying modes of communication that reach the families they serve effectively. As **Boston Saves** put it, “our biggest challenges are figuring out the places people go to for information and how to get there.” Similarly, **CollegeBound Saint Paul** – which faces legal constraints on their ability to automatically enroll children whose mothers are not legally married – pointed out that opt-in families must first hear about the program on the radio, in the newspaper, or at an event. Their challenge is determining which of those (or other as yet unidentified) avenues best connect them to unenrolled families. **BabySteps Savings Plan** flagged that broad, statewide programs face the challenge of trying to reach all families throughout the state, while smaller programs can more easily concentrate outreach efforts to specific communities.

Another challenge that came up in several interviews is maintaining correct, up-to-date contact information for families. **San Francisco K2C** explained that they often “lose” families when they move, and tracking families who move in and out of the city can be difficult. **Oakland Promise Brilliant Baby** engages families by sending financial statements in the mail each quarter, but the program faces

challenges around making sure that we have the accurate address in the 529 operator’s database. Those are logistical challenges that all lead to the larger issue ... which is how to keep accounts live, front and center in the minds of our families?

Even when CSA programs get creative with how they reach families, they often find that they are not reaching some segments of their service area. For example, **San Francisco K2C** initially mailed program information to families directly, but they recognized that they were not reaching homeless students and students who moved frequently. Acknowledging these issues and the fact that many of their families trusted the schools more than the City, they then tried sending information home in students’ backpacks. This strategy worked well until children reached middle and high school, when information sent in backpacks became less likely to reach parents. The program is now experimenting with text messaging in addition to other forms of communication.

Where programs reach parents at in-school events, they may miss families who are less engaged with the school due to work schedules, demands on their time, or other factors. **Oakland Promise K2C** told us they originally built their program around in-person interaction with parents at schools, but

your knowledge of our program really relied on you being at the school. We are trying to think more broadly about where else to reach families besides schools – can we advertise in libraries? Where are families going besides the school? Because not everyone can make it there.

Beyond the logistical challenges of pushing messages out to families, a few programs raised challenges related to their messages standing out and being seen as relevant. For instance, **My Alford Grant** queried,

Are the messages that we're sending resonating? Do they cut through the clutter of the thousands of other messages that [families] are bombarded with every day? That's a really important starting point for us because if they don't get the message, if they don't know they have the Alford Grant, then they're not going to be motivated to take the kinds of steps that we want them to take.

Communication challenges are not just about the means of reaching families but also about the content of their messages. CSA programs may also struggle to communicate with families where there are perceived or real differences in values between families and CSA programs. **My Alford Grant** pointed out that families in more rural areas and those without education after high school might not see the value in postsecondary education and, further, may resent messages that imply their children should have a different life path than they do:

They frankly think they're doing fine. They're working hard, they're putting food on the table ... Parents want really good things for their kids, that's not the issue. The issue is who gets to define what a good thing is for their kids.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic prevented many CSA programs from carrying out their regular in-person outreach. Statewide programs **BabySteps Savings Plan** and **Keystone Scholars** both had to shelve plans to do outreach at hospitals, welcoming newborns. **Boston Saves** likewise was forced to abruptly cancel a series of school roll-out events it had planned for March 2020, which were intended to introduce the program to families and support them in enrolling. **Semillitas** identified several interrelated challenges that affected their ability to reach parents during the pandemic: COVID became “the center of communication for everything,” parents had suddenly had other priorities and needs, in-person outreach events were canceled, and partner service organizations no longer had the capacity to promote the program.

These COVID-related challenges can have lasting implications for CSA programs. A few programs noted that the trust and rapport they build with families relied on in-person connections and relationships; the pandemic disrupted opportunities to build this trust. **Providence Promise** said that pre-pandemic, they would typically have at least one, often multiple, meetings with parents to help them get to a point of being fully informed and invested in the program. Similarly, **Oakland Promise Brilliant Baby** said that they were “more relational and interpersonal” before the pandemic, noting that opt-in programs, in particular, require engaging with and having personal connections with parents.

Competing demands on families

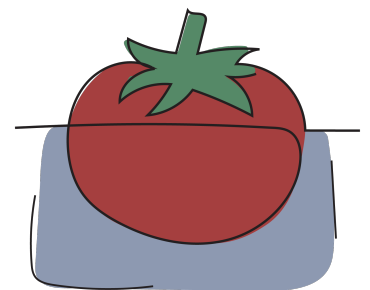
Respondents identified a cluster of barriers related to the competing demands on families' time, money, and day-to-day bandwidth. Families that are especially strained in these resources may struggle to participate in CSA programs. The COVID-19 pandemic has only heightened these issues.

Many families, especially marginalized families, face time constraints and logistical barriers to participating in CSAs. As **My Alford Grant** put it,

In a state like Maine, for example, to go to a school on a Tuesday evening, it means you have to have a car that's working because there's virtually no public transportation in the state. And, you know, it depends on when you've gotten off shift, and if any of the kids are sick and whether you can find a babysitter, or whether you just plain have the energy for it.

Families that CSA programs hope to serve often also face strains on their finances. **Providence Promise** told us that financially distressed families must prioritize "day to day and week to week" challenges. **Semillitas** noted that families feel "a lot of guilt on not being able to provide more for their kids' future because they needed to spend everything today." Even programs that do not require families to contribute financially saw family finances as a barrier. As **BabySteps Savings Plan** noted, "a lot of people think they have to contribute, so they don't open the account. They feel like they will have to contribute immediately, and they don't have the money."

The COVID-19 pandemic and economic recession have intensified these issues. Several programs reported that since the onset of the pandemic, more and more families are worried about being able to meet their basic needs. During the pandemic, many families have faced layoffs or cuts to their work hours, struggled to maintain housing or pay bills, or even had trouble finding basic needs like diapers in stores. **Boston Saves** described the pandemic as exacerbating challenges to engagement for families that already had challenges: for "families who are already facing barriers to entry...now it's like, 'I can't even think about this right now because I am going to lose my house, or I can't pay my bill.' It's just compounded."



Beyond financial difficulties, families also face logistical challenges and emotional stressors. **My Alford Grant** summarized COVID-related challenges this way: "families are overwhelmed first and foremost ... they're trying to juggle work and school, or not being in work and their kids not being in school." Some families have been trying to navigate unemployment benefits and job searches, while others are struggling to find childcare while they work. When schools switched to distance learning, families had to scramble to keep their children supervised and engaged in schooling. Speaking to how hard distance learning was for families, **Providence Promise** said that balancing everything was

stressful for all our families because they had to be home, they had to be a parent, they had to be a teacher, they had to be the chef ... it's something that we're still dealing with, and it's going to be something that we're going to be dealing with for a while now.

Data-related challenges

Access to high-quality data – including student demographic information, family contact information, comprehensive lists of eligible children, and data related to incentives – is a key ingredient of an equitable CSA program. The program managers we spoke to identified two primary data challenges that have equity implications: data sharing to facilitate enrollment and incentives and data analysis to assess who the program is reaching.

Prior research suggests that programs with universal, automatic enrollment are best situated to reach students who have been historically excluded from postsecondary education. Such programs ensure participation by children from low- and moderate-income families and families of color, as well as reduce racial and income disparities in savings.¹⁷⁻¹⁹ However, many CSA programs are unable to access data that would allow them to enroll children automatically or at least reach out to all eligible children directly. For example, **Boston Saves** reported that privacy concerns have prevented Boston Public Schools from sharing a list of all students with the program.

Similarly, programs face challenges in accessing the data needed to provide incentives automatically. Some programs offer “benchmark” incentives that celebrate children achieving certain goals or milestones. These programs must either rely on families to submit documentation of qualifying activities or must have access to alternative data sources. The former is burdensome for families, while the latter can be difficult for CSA programs to access and manage.

Finally, CSA programs often lack the data they would need to evaluate their success in reaching families from all backgrounds. Several respondents expressed a desire to have complete data on their participants’ race, income, immigration status, and native language, which they could then compare to the demographic composition of their service area. However, such data often are not collected systematically or are not available to the programs due to privacy or confidentiality issues.

Operations and outreach strategies to enhance equity

Respondents were eager to talk about the strategies their CSA programs practice to address equity issues, often offering up their ideas before we asked. These strategies range greatly in their scope. Ideas covered everything from explaining the buttons in a Zoom call to incorporating family participation from the ground up. Collectively, these strategies address the barriers laid out in the previous section.

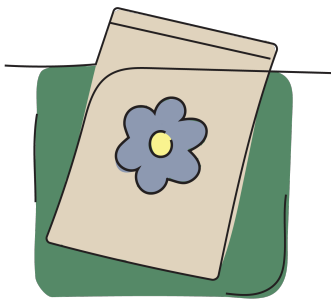
Addressing lack of trust in institutions

One of the challenges respondents brought up most frequently was CSA participants’ – or potential participants’ – lack of trust in institutions, be they the CSA program itself, government entities, or financial institutions. To address challenges related to trust and engagement, respondents identified several strategies for embedding CSAs in communities, empowering community members to champion the program, partnering with trusted organizations, and structuring staffing to facilitate trust.

Some programs worked to build trust by encouraging community ownership from the ground up. **Oakland Promise Brilliant Baby** explained that equity “is so baked into our program that it’s hard to separate out. A lot of our work is done explicitly with lower-income families and communities of color.” They added that their program works to add the “relationship piece” onto the “knowledge piece,” making sure participants are truly connected with the program, rather than merely recipients of information. **Semillitas**, **CollegeBound Saint Paul**, and **Boston Saves** were each designed through intensive community input processes, which allowed the families who would eventually participate in the program to make decisions about the program’s goals, incentives, and operations. **Boston Saves** stressed the importance of place-based approaches. As they advise other programs,

Don’t just copy what another city has done. Make sure it works for your constituents, your population. So talk to them and learn what the equity concerns are for them. What do the parents actually want? How do you design something that folks will actually use that responds to their very real needs and wants?

To build trust and facilitate ongoing community input and engagement, several CSAs have set up opportunities for community champions, parent councils, and ambassadors to represent the program in the community. For example, **Prosperity Kids** develops leadership among CSA parents, including hiring some of them, because “that’s how trust gets built, right? Because I’m talking to somebody that I know...they’re not ‘the man,’ and they’re not going to sell me something I don’t need.” **Providence Promise** reports that their parent council “has evolved into one the driving forces of our entire program,” playing a key role in keeping families engaged and making deposits. Their youth council, born out of a suggestion from the parent council, allows middle and high school students to shape the program to fit their needs.



These decentralized, community-driven engagement initiatives have proved especially important in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, **Boston Saves** provides stipends to family champions who come from similar backgrounds and often speak the same languages as peer families at each school. The family champion program helped the CSA transition to virtual communication during the pandemic by recording accessible and engaging videos for families. Similarly, **CollegeBound Saint Paul’s** ambassador program – which consists of “community folks that are talking to their own communities about CollegeBound Saint Paul” – produced the idea for a very successful drive-through baby shower as a COVID-safe engagement strategy.

All CSAs in this study expressed the central role that community partners play in helping to build trust in their programs, especially by helping with outreach or administration. Respondents also detailed several strategies for leveraging partnerships with external organizations to build trust. **Boston Saves**, **Promise Indiana**, and **San Francisco K2C**, for example, work closely with their local public school systems so that families receive program information from trusted school-based sources. **ONAC**, which travels to often-remote Native American communities to help families open CSAs, relies on longstanding relationships with tribal leaders, Native-led nonprofits, and Head Start programs to “get people in the door” for their account opening events.

Respondents also detailed how they sought out and selected the kinds of partners that would help them build trust in the CSA. **Prosperity Kids** seeks out “high trust organizations” that understand the complexities of poverty, align on mission and values, and have a high profile in their local community. Before they launched their program, they asked people in the community, “Who’s the trusted financial institution in your community?” and used that information to select their account holding partner. **CollegeBound Saint Paul** seeks partnerships with wraparound community organizations and culturally-specific organizations - “they’re the ones that have that trust and rapport built with families.”

Of course, partnerships are not always simple or static. Several respondents noted that partners’ capacity to assist with CSA enrollment or administration fluctuates with changing community needs, including those brought on by the COVID pandemic. For instance, **ONAC** noted, “if you look at the death rates from COVID, American Indians, unfortunately, are at the top of the list ... everybody we’re working with is in crisis, and has been for months.” They went on to observe that these circumstances made CSA outreach impossible for some and a lower priority for others.

Finally, another component of building trust is having a CSA team that reflects the communities in which it works. Several programs spoke to the importance of CSA staff reflecting the diversity of the communities they serve. In most cases, respondents who brought this up framed it as a growth area for their program. For example, **San Francisco K2C** expressed a desire to eventually have outreach and engagement specialists for Latino, African American, and Asian communities that can “speak the languages, understand the cultures, and be out there.” **Oakland Promise K2C** acknowledged that “we have a gap in our programming serving undocumented families” that they are working on bridging through staff trainings.

Connecting families to financial services

Respondents detailed a variety of strategies to address the barriers that families face in accessing financial services, including connecting families to banking services, prioritizing relationships and representation, and structuring their program in response to families’ preferences and needs. Programs that house accounts in state 529 plans face particular challenges, as many families are not familiar with these plans or the basics of investing. These programs have developed additional strategies to educate families and facilitate their participation in 529 accounts.

Several respondents told us about work they are currently doing or hope to do in the future that would help connect families to high-quality financial products and information. For example, **ONAC** partners with Bank On to improve the financial stability of unbanked and underbanked communities and help them access safe and affordable financial products and services. **Providence Promise** works to get families banked and provides financial literacy workshops. **Oakland Promise Brilliant Baby**, which offers financial coaching, hopes to eventually develop a broader financial education initiative, with topics geared around financial wellbeing and empowerment. As one program manager put it, “it shouldn’t come off as, ‘I’m trying to convince you to open an account,’ but rather, ‘this is an option available to you.’”

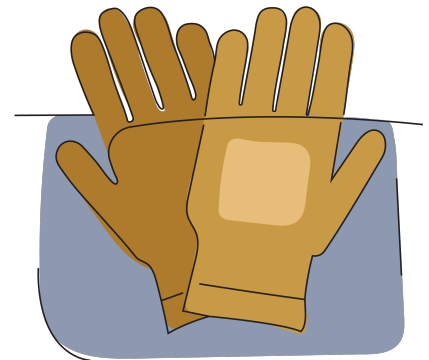
Inversant, in particular, spoke to the importance of relationships and representation in banking services. They chose their banking partner in part because it had the necessary language capacity,

and its tellers were hired from the local community. **Inversant** also stressed the importance of CSA participants being able to speak with a “real person” to set up accounts, one who would treat them as valued customers. Their program design is based around the belief that children’s savings and financial planning become more relevant “when you make it personal, like when families see that as not just a savings account or a bank account, but they’re seeing it as somewhere they’re taking action, they’re relating a lot of their personal dreams and goals.”

Several programs shared how they were working to be responsive to family preferences and needs. For example, **Boston Saves** has an open program model, allowing families to house their CSA in a bank of their choice. Multiple programs chose custodial account structures – in which accounts are held by the CSA program or a third party – to allow for automatic enrollment, meet the needs of families that do not have Social Security Numbers or ITINs, and address family concerns about savings affecting their eligibility for public benefits. **San Francisco K2C** shared several ways they hope to eventually be able to respond to family needs, including accepting deposits at schools or City Hall and distributing money through preloaded cards to make funds available to unbanked families.

Programs that hold savings in 529 accounts must do additional work to educate families who may not be familiar with investment accounts of this kind. For example, recognizing legal limits on how much they can advise families on asset allocation within 529 accounts, **ONAC** generated an investor education booklet that they can share with families instead.

Many 529-based programs also take steps to lower barriers and facilitate enrollment for families. For example, **Keystone Scholars**, which is based out of the Pennsylvania Treasurer’s Office, eliminated enrollment fees and minimum initial deposit requirements for the state’s 529 plans. Other programs often dedicate staff time to walking families through the 529 application step-by-step, so they can answer questions. One CSA program reported that some families feel more comfortable with program staff typing in information to the 529 application because they’re worried about making mistakes.



Recognizing the barriers inherent to working in 529 plans, **Semillitas** told us that they dream of eventually moving away from 529s in favor of “a local, regional investment vehicle that actually holds the funding, and ... can serve as a revolving loan for low-income, [people of color] business owners in the region.” This hypothetical financial service would be locally owned and structured as an omnibus, so it would not count against public benefit asset limits.

Overcoming language and literacy barriers

Language and literacy barriers may prevent CSA programs from communicating effectively with families. Fully addressing these barriers would often require more resources than CSA programs currently have, but programs have developed a range of strategies.

CSA programs often work to translate their materials, within the constraints of state and federal law. For example, all of **BabySteps Savings Plan** materials are translated into the state’s top ten languages.

Due to 529 enrollment rules, **Promise Indiana** cannot have families fill out translated 529 forms; instead, they have a translated, laminated enrollment form that families can cross-reference as they fill out the English-language form.

In addition to translating materials, some programs are working towards interpretation services and offering multilingual staff. For example, **San Francisco K2C** hosted a series of virtual “college tours” during the pandemic, offered in English, Spanish, and Chinese. Other programs, including **BabySteps Savings Plan** and **CollegeBound Saint Paul**, build partnerships with community organizations that have multilingual capacity.

Semillitas indicated the importance of making materials simple and accessible to people of various literacy levels, saying, “our approach is as automatic with as limited parent input needed as possible. And then all our materials are read for third-grade reading literacy levels.” This combination of creating opportunities for families to automatically earn financial rewards and removing literacy barriers optimizes inclusiveness and accessibility.

Bridging the digital divide

Digital divide challenges – including internet access, access to computers, and digital literacy – have only become more pronounced amid the COVID-19 pandemic. In our interviews, programs brought up strategies and opportunities to bridge these divides.

To address gaps in internet access, Oakland Promise is a partner of the Oakland Undivided Initiatives, whose mission is to bring computer technology to everyone in the city. In neighboring San Francisco, the school district distributed hotspots to help families, including those participating in **San Francisco K2C**, access the internet from home.

Recognizing that many of their participants do not have computers at home, CSA programs take steps to make materials accessible in other ways. For example, **My Alford Grant** ensures their online materials are optimized for mobile because they know many families access their website from cell phones. Similarly, **ONAC** does its CSA-related financial coaching by phone and teleconference so families without computers can join.

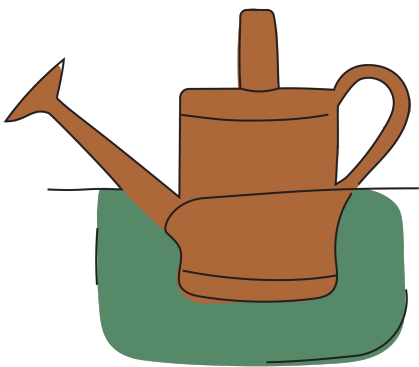
Building families’ digital literacy is ongoing work for many programs. For example, **Oakland Promise Brilliant Baby** moved all their coaching, enrollment, and group work online in response to the pandemic. Because many families were using Zoom for the first time, they were intentional about explaining how to navigate the platform and what the buttons do. Families were then able to use this knowledge in other contexts, such as virtual school meetings.

In some cases, the pandemic revealed not just challenges but opportunities for programs to use technology to reach families more effectively. For example, **Providence Promise** discovered that online enrollment was “at least as quick if not faster than it was in person,” and often more convenient to families. Oakland Promise also noted higher attendance at online family events than they had achieved in-person, likely because virtual events do not require transportation, parking, childcare, and other potential logistical barriers. These programs are among several that plan to continue offering virtual enrollment options even after the pandemic has subsided to meet the needs of families who cannot easily come into their office due to transportation or work schedule challenges.

Communicating effectively with families

How does a CSA program get in touch with families, and when it does, what messages resonate most? These questions are core to CSA programs' work, and our respondents identified several strategies for reaching families from all backgrounds. Many programs partner with other organizations to reach more families or reach them more effectively. Some have experimented with various communications methods, from social media to radio to school packets. Respondents also told us about how they approach crafting their messages to families to reflect their values and speak to specific communities.

Several respondents told us that they build partnerships so that families hear about the CSA program repeatedly and from multiple trusted sources. Among the organizations respondents sought out for partnerships were hospitals, community health centers, Head Starts, nonprofits, libraries, community-based organizations, public benefits offices, churches, and Native tribal leaders. To **My Alfond Grant**, an automatic, statewide CSA program, these types of partnerships are key to ensuring that families are frequently reminded that they have money set aside for college expenses, because families must know about their CSAs to reap the programs' full benefits. Likewise, **San Francisco K2C** articulated a vision where the whole community, from barbershops to houses on trick or treat routes, is involved in reinforcing the messages of the CSA.



Programs detailed a wide range of communication methods. Some programs use traditional media, such as radio stations and print media. Social and digital media were more commonly mentioned, with programs talking about how they use Facebook pages, webinars, and texting platforms to connect with families. **Promise Indiana**, for example, hopes to eventually create “short but compelling videos that people can watch and digest quickly” that cover subjects like why the program exists, how to sign up, and how to complement the college-oriented activities children are doing in the classroom. Programs also use school-based communication strategies, such as including CSA

information in schools' welcome packets, sending information home in backpacks, or pushing out messages through school newsletters or bulletin boards. For instance, **Boston Saves** dedicated staff time to learning how each of their 82 schools shares information with families so they can adapt their outreach strategy accordingly.

Programs are also intentional about the content of their messages. **My Alfond Grant**'s messages center around hope for children's future. Noting that Mainers are “tough” and “resilient” but have a “stubborn independent streak,” the program avoids sounding like they are telling people what is best for their children. Instead, they frame the promise of a CSA as offering the next generation more stability and control over their own destiny. **CollegeBound Saint Paul** said that their messaging is crafted to reflect high expectations and belief in children's potential, because “too often programs are designed around and rooted in mental models that don't believe in the full possibilities or potential of people who have lived the struggle,” and that bias is apparent in programs' communications.

In many cases, programs choose communication channels and messages to reach specific communities. For example, **CollegeBound Saint Paul** does print and radio advertisements in Spanish, Hmong, Karen, and Somali outlets, and **San Francisco K2C** is developing outreach via WhatsApp and WeChat, which many of their Chinese-American families use. **My Alford Grant** is consulting with leaders of community-based organizations to develop messaging, including visual representations, to help families “understand in a visceral way that they are part of this program and that their children are valued by the program.” The program is developing messaging sub-strategies specific to immigrants and refugees, low- and moderate-income families, families of color, rural families, single mothers, and tribal communities.

Recognizing the competing demands on families

When programs fail to recognize the demands on families' time, money, and personal bandwidth, they risk leaving out or alienating the families they serve. In our interviews, respondents identified a host of equity and inclusion strategies that acknowledge the many demands families face. These strategies include lowering barriers to entry, shaping incentives and messaging to not solely focus on saving, offering targeted or progressive incentives, addressing families' other needs through the program, and offering “high touch” services that keep families engaged.

First, simply lowering barriers to entry makes CSAs available to as many children as possible. By definition, the lowest-barrier approach to enrollment is the automatic, opt-out approach. For example, **San Francisco K2C** and other opt-out programs see their automatic enrollment and universal eligibility as key equity strategies.

Many CSA programs in our study structure their incentives and messaging in ways that recognize that saving for college may be just one of many financial priorities for families. For some programs, this means including incentives not related to family savings behavior. For example, **Providence Promise** offers incentives related to reading books with parents and writing book reports. **Semillitas** offers “benchmark deposits,” financial contributions that families receive automatically when they take everyday actions like a well-child visit to a doctor or dentist. They intentionally do not call these rewards “incentives” because they want to be clear that these are actions parents would engage in regardless of the financial rewards from the program. They explained,

Parents are really doing the best they can for their kids, and they love their kids ... So we know they will take them to the doctor, we know they will take them to the dentist, we know they will get them immunizations, right, we know they'll enroll them in kindergarten ... And so because we know this, we're gonna celebrate with them, all of these journeys that they're already doing as part of the general path for child welfare.

Likewise, several programs adjusted their messages during the pandemic, in recognition of the many pressures and stressors families are facing. For example, **Inversant** was clear with families that they could use savings towards emergency expenses if needed. Several programs deemphasized savings and instead used their messaging to remind families that funds are still set aside for their children's future.

Some programs use additional incentives to encourage participation from low-income families. Through grant funding, **Keystone Scholars** offered an additional \$50 deposit to babies born to mothers enrolled in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) in the first half of 2021. Similarly, **CollegeBound Saint Paul** will offer an “equity bonus” for five years.

Respondents brought up a range of ways that they try to address families’ needs through their CSA programs. Some programs, such as **ONAC** and **Prosperity Kids**, offer emergency savings accounts, allowing families to save for more short-term needs alongside the longer time horizon of their CSA account. In response to the pandemic, several programs also started offering emergency cash assistance to their families or allowing no-penalty withdrawals from CSA accounts.

Meeting families’ needs may look different in every community, based on what programs hear from CSA participants. For example, **Providence Promise** builds workshops around priorities that come out of their Parent Council and Youth Council, covering topics such as unemployment benefits during COVID, household finances, and education rights. To round out its account opening events, **ONAC** offers additional programming around topics like Native art and food sovereignty. Programs may also use partnerships and referrals to address needs that families identify, such as connections to other college access programming, food banks, or legal assistance.

Implementing data strategies for equity

Many of our respondents were candid about the challenges they face in accessing high-quality data needed to enroll children, communicate with families, provide equity-focused incentives, and evaluate their success in reaching families from diverse backgrounds. These are challenges that most programs are still working to address, but a few programs shared initial strategies with us.

“Who is our program reaching and not reaching” is a key question for programs reflecting on their equity impact, but one that is often hard to answer with available data. Many CSA programs are unable to access data on the racial and ethnic makeup of their account holders (and other relevant demographic information), so they have limited ability to assess progress toward racial equity. For example, **BabySteps Savings Plan** indicated that zip code data from their financial provider provide their closest approximation for understanding racial equity in enrollment. By this gross measure, they noted, “I think it’s obvious that there is some issue with racial equity.” However, they also highlighted the limitations of this approach, such as the inability to identify the demographics of families within zip codes. In response to the dearth of participant-level data, **BabySteps Savings Plan** identifies high-priority areas for outreach based on aggregate data, such as birth rate, zip code demographics, and community rates of checking the box on babies’ birth certificates to receive information about the program.

Another challenge related to data is the question of how to implement financial rewards for families with minimal or no effort from the parents or guardians, as each application form or additional step can be a barrier for lower-income families’ access. For example, **Semillitas** plans to provide milestone deposits to children when they receive their immunizations or attend well-child visits. To do so without requiring parents to submit documentation, they are working on contracts with health partners to get data in HIPAA-compliant ways.

San Francisco K2C was likewise interested in implementing an “equity incentive.” Lacking data on individual families’ household income, they instead implemented the incentive through schools, considering all children in nine historically underserved schools eligible for additional deposits. This strategy allowed them to sidestep data access issues without putting the burden on parents to document family income.

While these programs’ strategies illustrate the creative approaches that CSAs can take to address data gaps, it is clear that additional strategies are needed to allow programs to access the data they need to assess and improve equity. Programs are continually seeking out new partnerships and best practices to address these challenges.

Conclusion

The CSA programs featured in this report identified a range of barriers – from internet access, to trust in government, to language capacity – that threaten to keep the benefits of CSAs from reaching all families. These challenges go well beyond the formal program design decisions, such as enrollment mechanisms and incentive structures, that predominate typical discussions of equity in CSA programs. In many cases, they illustrate how equity in a CSA program is inextricably tied to equity in broader communities, as families with low income, families of color, and those with limited English proficiency often face complex and compounding barriers to interacting with CSAs. Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic, which magnified inequities in health and economic wellbeing, also exacerbated the challenges faced by families attempting to engage with CSAs.

The CSA programs in this study demonstrated a range of strategies, from the simple to the complex, that ensure all children have the opportunity to engage meaningfully with the program, regardless of their racial, socioeconomic, and linguistic backgrounds. Three key lessons emerge from this research. First, these strategies require creativity and attentiveness to the particular needs of the children, families, and communities that programs serve. Equitable program practices do not look the same for every community; programs must listen to those they serve and be responsive. Second, common to many strategies listed here is a focus on building trust and relationships. A lack of trust and mutual understanding is evident when families do not feel welcome at financial institutions or do not see their experience reflected in a program’s messaging. Finally, it is clear from our interviews that programs that value equity must work to build that value into every operational, communications, and practical decision they make on an ongoing basis.

Addressing the barriers and implementing the equity strategies raised in this report may require additional funding, time, and buy-in from a range of partners. Some strategies may require programs to move more slowly, to fully incorporate families and communities in planning and decision-making processes. Funders and policymakers must be willing to commit funds beyond “dollars in accounts” to support activities like translation, wraparound services, and engagement events.

However, it is critical that CSAs address these barriers because CSA programs are often built on a vision of opening the doors to postsecondary education to those who have historically been excluded. We hope that this report sparks further innovation in day-to-day practices and helps facilitate partnerships and support to move the CSA field toward greater equity and inclusion.

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About IERE

Nested in the Heller School for Social Policy and Management at Brandeis University, the Institute for Economic and Racial Equity is a research institute that advances economic opportunity and equity for individuals and families, particularly households of color and those kept out of the economic mainstream.

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