



# Believing in Belonging

Compass for Kids Equity Statement

## The Why

At Compass for Kids, we believe in belonging. Compass for Kids was founded in 2011 to address a critical gap in services for children experiencing homelessness. Before Compass, barriers such as cost, transportation, and complex admittance paperwork prevented many children from accessing after-school and summer programs. By removing these obstacles, Compass for Kids created an inclusive space where children could thrive academically and socially.

Equity is central to our mission because children and families in our community face systemic barriers that impact their ability to succeed. Through our evidence-based curricula and assessments, we ensure that all children—regardless of background—have access to the tools and resources they need to reach their full potential. Our equity work is a commitment to breaking cycles of disadvantages and fostering an environment where every child feels a sense of belonging and empowerment.

## Community Needs

To craft this equity statement, and understand the needs of our community, we engaged in a six-month-long process to gather insights, intentionally including the people who will be most impacted by this work. This included:

- Surveying parents to understand their perspectives and engagement barriers.
- Direct input from children participating in Club Compass and the Youth Leadership Development Program.
- An advisory committee of individuals with lived-experience and expertise in equitable approaches.
- A staff retreat focused on evaluating and deepening our commitment to equity.

Key themes emerged from this process, reflecting deep insights from families, children, and staff about the barriers and opportunities related to equity within Compass for Kids.

Caregivers emphasized the significance of belonging, however, engagement remains a challenge.

Children, particularly those aged 5-10, consistently highlighted 'sharing' as a key principle of fairness and inclusion. This reinforces the need for an equity strategy rooted in shared access to resources, opportunities, and spaces. Older youth in the Youth Leadership Development Program (YLDP) shared a need for greater autonomy, being heard, and having a say in

decisions affecting them. They also pointed to the importance of cultural recognition, including the acknowledgment of heritage, food, and names as core aspects of identity.

Staff insights reinforced the importance of representative teams and ongoing equity education. Many team members noted the necessity of shifting from a "helping" framework to a "partnering" framework, ensuring that families are not treated as recipients of charity but as equal participants in shaping the program. Addressing systemic trust barriers was also identified as essential, particularly in reaching marginalized families who may be hesitant to engage due to past experiences of exclusion or judgment in institutional settings. These themes underscore the work needed to continuously build a truly inclusive and equitable environment within Compass for Kids.

The advisory committee put emphasis on the importance of continuing this collaborative process with actionable, measurable steps that align with Compass for Kids' commitments to equity. Recognizing Springfield's immigrant population, the advisory team highlighted the unique barriers these families face, including language differences, cultural adjustment, and navigating stereotypes. These individuals are often minoritized within most programs, reinforcing the need for Compass to actively celebrate and honor diverse cultures to foster a true sense of belonging. Additionally, advisors stressed the importance of integrating healing-centered, trauma-informed practices to support children and families holistically. Continued engagement with the broader community will be essential in raising awareness about Compass' work, building trust, and ensuring that all families feel welcomed and supported.

## Historical Context

Springfield, Illinois, has a complex and painful history of racial and economic inequities that continue to shape our present. The 1908 Race Riots, which led to the formation of the NAACP, are a stark reminder of the city's history of racial violence and segregation. The case of Tracey Mears, a Black student denied the title of valedictorian due to systemic discrimination, underscores how racial inequities have existed, locally, in education. Additionally, Springfield has struggled with ineffective systems of care for people experiencing homelessness, leading to a decade of decreased funding before a new strategic plan was established in 2023 to address these gaps.

At one point, Springfield was named as having the worst disparity between Black and White median household incomes of any metro area in the nation, further compounding economic inequality in our backyards. These disparities are not just historical – they continue to impact families today.

Inequities rooted in redlining, racial segregation, wealth and resource distribution, and systemic biases in education, healthcare, and employment have perpetuated cycles of poverty and exclusion and have shaped the lived experiences of the families Compass for Kids serves.

Compass for Kids exists because these inequities exist, and our work is a direct response to these systemic barriers and the need for intentional, equity-centered solutions.

# Values and Commitment

Our values guide our commitment to equity:

## *Belonging*

- We cultivate a culture where every child, family, and staff member are seen, heard, and valued.
- We intentionally learn and use each child's name and pronouns, recognizing the power of honoring people's personal identities.
- We celebrate cultural identities through shared experiences, traditions, and food, fostering community connections.

## *Results-Driven*

- We measure success not just by academic gains, but by the social-emotional growth of the children we serve.
- We use evidence-based curricula and assessments to ensure our programs focus on quality over quantity, driving meaningful impact.
- We continually analyze data and feedback from children, families, and staff to refine our approach and identify potential disparities.

## *Adaptable*

- We adjust our programs and outreach strategies to meet families where they are.
- We listen to children's evolving needs and create responsive, flexible learning environments.
- We remain open to co-creating new methods and innovations that improve our ability to support children holistically.

## *Value-Adding*

- We go beyond academic support by addressing broader barriers such as food insecurity and transportation.
- We empower children with leadership opportunities, helping them develop confidence and advocacy skills.
- We actively build partnerships that enhance the well-being of children and families, honoring the ecosystem in which we exist.

## *Excellence*

- We hold ourselves to high standards in programming, staffing, and engagement with families, including striving for full representation of our community in our team – including leadership and volunteers.
- We create an inclusive environment where continuous learning and improvement drive our mission forward.
- We probe our decision-making with an equity lens.

# Aspirations

Our vision is that all children in our community experience success and reach their full potential. To achieve this, we strive to:

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## ***Practice the Platinum Rule***

*Treating individuals how they want to be treated, rather than applying personal preferences as a one-size-fits-all approach.*

## ***Meet Families Where They Are***

*Recognizing that engagement looks different for every family and adjusting our outreach and support accordingly.*

## ***Center Sharing as an Equity Strategy***

*Whether it's sharing resources, opportunities, or even food, we recognize that equitable access is built on the principle of collective care.*

## ***Strengthen Cultural Awareness and Humility***

*Honoring diverse identities through intentional staffing, celebrations, relationships, and inclusive practices.*

## ***Ensure Representation***

*Working to increase the number of staff and volunteers who reflect the backgrounds and lived experiences of the children we serve.*

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At Compass for Kids, equity is not just a statement – it is a responsibility we live every day. We will continue to listen, learn, and evolve to ensure that every child has the opportunity to succeed, thrive, and belong.