



SECTION

1

INTRODUCTION: A CHANCE TO GET IT RIGHT

For more than a decade, the Bainum Family Foundation has invested deeply in early childhood—the critical period from birth to age 5 that shapes a child’s learning, behavior, and health for life. →



As part of this work, in late 2021, we set out on a journey to do something that families with young children and early childhood experts in America have asked for: Get child care right.

We launched the WeVision EarlyEd effort by leveraging data from families and early childhood practitioners in Washington, D.C.—our hometown—for several reasons. This is the community we know best (through 10 years of in-depth work with dozens of partners and hundreds of families) and the community that trusts us most with their data. In addition, it is a community that has made significant strides toward providing and publicly funding a range of early childhood services that families with young children and the adults who care for them need to grow and thrive. It offered a great foundation on which to build.

With the help of Catapult Design, we first convened and listened closely to a cross section of families, educators, and administrators that manage, work within, or use D.C.'s child care system every day. We wanted to more

fully understand their experiences, concerns, and needs—and use that understanding to deepen our role as a supporter of community-led systems change. We then expanded our learnings by soliciting input from hundreds of early childhood education professionals from across the country at various conferences and meetings. We also reviewed research reports and monitored headlines for news about child care across the country. In addition, we gathered 50 of the leading child care policy influencers in Washington, D.C., in early 2024 to explore how child care policy issues are currently articulated and addressed.

Through this process, we learned that while communities have unique contexts and circumstances, the pain points around child care and the visions for an ideal child care system are



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the same at the core. And while we see increased (albeit still insufficient) public investments by states and local communities, they cannot make the ideal child care real without substantial and sustained state and federal funding. For these reasons, we quickly shifted our focus from a local effort to a national effort.

Today, child care is experiencing a period of great visibility at the national, state, and local levels. We are seeing increased media coverage and public awareness, and a wider advocacy base. It's no longer just the early childhood folks at the table, and the political conversations are notably cross-partisan. On the demand side, families are at a breaking point; they are demanding more and better options, all clearly defined to facilitate decision-making and supported with enhanced funding. On the supply side, educators, staff, administrators, and caregivers are at an equally pronounced breaking point, no longer willing to do this work in harsh conditions and for inadequate compensation and respect for the vital work they do.

A presenter at our national influencer meeting framed the situation powerfully: We must stop loving the problem.¹ All too often, we become so mired in what doesn't work in child care that it can be difficult to see the solutions and opportunities. We were encouraged to dwell less on describing the already well-documented crisis and focus more on working together to demonstrate what the world would look like if it were fixed.

That's what we intend to do through WeVision EarlyEd—to seize the moment and the momentum to make the ideal real. One critical action is identifying the gaps between what is (current pain points) and what should be (the ideal) in child care, and to understand what is standing in the way of closing these gaps.

The invisible but essential first step: letting go of outdated mindsets about child care. Before tweaking and developing child care policies, we first need to reshape our mental models about what is possible. Our old thinking and prevalent narratives are holding us back. Abandoning outdated thinking for innovative, commonsense solutions can transform child care.

Specifically, we must:

- * **Rethink when learning begins**, to recognize the crucial importance of children's early development.
- * **Rethink who needs child care**, making quality options available to all families.
- * **Rethink what child care costs and who pays for it** so that options are affordable for families and educators can make a living wage.
- * **Rethink quality** by right-sizing regulations, aligning to baseline standards and increasing family and professional autonomy.
- * **Rethink governance and decision-making**, to respect and benefit from the expertise of families, educators, and administrators.




This rethinking includes honestly and openly addressing the biases that continue to stand in the way of meaningful progress.

At the Bainum Family Foundation, we know we cannot merely name the issues, put Band-Aids on the problems, and hope transformative change magically happens. As a committed early childhood funder, we have a much broader responsibility to support systems change and demonstrate that the ideal child care is possible.

During our first decade in the early childhood space, we made investments of more than \$40 million in D.C. alone. What began as a gradual expansion of our work was solidified in July 2024, when we announced a five-year, \$100 million commitment to early childhood nationally—the largest single commitment in the foundation’s 56-year history. This funding will provide grantees and partners with the stability they need to meet the needs of young children and their families while advancing transformative narratives and policy solutions to pave the way toward a more equitable and effective child care system across the country.

Aligning policies, narratives, and practices with transformative mindsets, with all the messiness of the real world, is hard. We will be there every step of the way and will regularly share what

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we are learning with practitioners, advocates, lawmakers, families, and the broader public.

Making the ideal real is right in front of us. It is possible. But it will take collective ownership and leadership, and we will need to set aside some of our old ways of doing business. Most important, we need to keep young children, families, educators, and administrators at the forefront of our work. They deserve no less.

David Daniels
CEO and President
Bainum Family Foundation

Marica Cox Mitchell
Chief Program Officer
Bainum Family Foundation

CLARIFYING OUR TERMS

Terms to describe the care and education of young children often are used interchangeably but typically mean different things. Some of these terms also can reflect outdated mindsets about child care. We felt it important to reframe and clearly define the various options available to families and young children—for consistency as we discuss them and to be fully aligned with the concept of “making the ideal real.”

When we use terms in this report and in our work, this is what we mean:

Child care is the umbrella term we use to describe situations in which families, caregivers, and/or early childhood educators are responsible for the care and development of young children for a significant portion of a day.

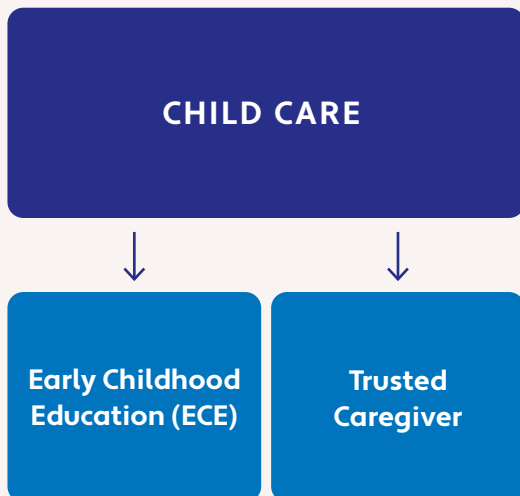
Early childhood education (ECE) is a specific child care option that focuses on supporting and documenting child and program outcomes, typically outside the child’s home. ECE’s aims go far beyond keeping children safe while the adults in their families work or attend school. These programs intentionally support the cognitive, physical, social, and emotional development of young children through experiences facilitated by early childhood educators with industry-recognized credentials and postsecondary degrees. ECE programs can be based in a variety of settings or buildings—home businesses, schools, and community spaces such as commercial buildings, stand-alone centers, and churches. At a baseline, ECE programs must meet facility licensing (mostly facility safety) and industry-recognized standards of quality (mostly child experience and early learning).

Trusted caregiver is a specific child care option that is used to describe when a child is or a small group of children are nurtured by a family member (e.g., a parent, a grandparent, or another relative) in the child’s home or the family member’s home; a trusted community member (e.g., individual, organization, or organized network); or a nanny or an au pair, often living with the family. At a baseline, trusted caregivers must meet families’ caregiving expectations and comply with state and federal laws that protect the welfare of children.

Day care is a common term for out-of-home care, but it does not account for the complexity involved in ensuring the development and learning of young children, nor does it pay the appropriate respect to the identity of ECE professionals. Thus, it is not a term we will use in this report as a substitute for child care or ECE.

Proximity experts is a term we generated to describe the families, early childhood educators, and program administrators who provided the data and expertise to guide the direction of this initiative. These experts have specialized knowledge and lived experiences with the child care system. They spend most of their week making sure young children are supported.

FIG. 1 Child Care System



CLARIFYING OUR SCOPE

- * WeVision EarlyEd focuses on the birth-to-5 child care system in the United States. This myopic focus is intentional but does not minimize the role that other interrelated systems and services play in supporting child development and family well-being.
- * This child care system is complex and nuanced. It has been shaped by a long history of systemic racism, sexism, and elitism that has negatively impacted nearly all young children, families, educators, and administrators in the child care system, and especially those who are Black, Latino, and Native American and those for whom English is not their first language. This report acknowledges but does not fully capture the nuances and history of this complex system.
- * WeVision EarlyEd provides policy guidance to support the work of policy experts who inform, develop, and/or implement policy solutions. The WeVision EarlyEd Policy Essentials are five crucial policy considerations that will move us toward child care public policies intentionally

designed to make the ideal child care system real. This guidance is rooted in data from proximity experts and the WeVision EarlyEd mindset shifts.

- * WeVision EarlyEd is a catalyst for making the ideal child care real—as defined by the families, educators, and administrators who know the children in their care and the impact of child care policies best. It can be used to guide necessary conversations, test ideal solutions, and make bold policy changes.
- * WeVision EarlyEd holds the Bainum Family Foundation accountable for supporting young children and families. We acknowledge that as early childhood funders, we are part of the complex landscape that affects children aged 0–8, and at times we have disproportionate power and privileges in this landscape. We acknowledge that as funders we cause harm when we do not center equity in our work. We commit to holding ourselves accountable for practicing what we preach and for demonstrating that the ideal child care system the proximity experts have asked for can be made real, right now.





Image courtesy of National Association for Family Child Care

OUR DATA SOURCE

WeVision EarlyEd is built on the specialized knowledge and lived experiences of proximity experts—the families, early childhood educators, and program administrators who use or work within the child care system. We worked diligently to be clear about what they want in the ideal system. We gathered data and insights from them in two ways.

Data From Proximity Experts via Human-Centered Design

We launched WeVision EarlyEd based on data gathered from 35 families, educators, and administrators (drawn from a pool of 170 applicants) in D.C. A human-centered design consultant, Catapult Design, worked with the proximity experts for five months to map their “journeys”—both their current experience with the child care system and their ideal experience, reimagining a child care system that would work for all.

Then we identified the core shifts in public thinking needed to make their ideal child care experiences a reality, while also working with a subset of proximity experts to identify the practical solutions we wanted to test first.

Human-centered design is the problem-solving process of understanding the lived experiences, as well as the context of the people and communities in a current system, to inform decisions and solutions about new policies, processes, and services that impact their lives.

(Additional details about human-centered design and this part of the process can be found in Appendix A.)

Data From Proximity Experts via Conference Sessions and Interactive Exhibits

Building on the data from D.C., we sought other opportunities to share and pressure-test our initial findings and to collect additional

data from proximity experts nationwide. We hosted briefings and facilitated sessions; we also collected data from more than 2,000 early childhood professionals using an interactive WeVision EarlyEd conference exhibit. The conferences we attended include:

- * National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) Annual Conference, November 2022, Washington, D.C.
- * National Association for Family Child Care (NAFCC) Annual Conference, July 2023, Atlanta, Georgia

- * Florida Association for the Education of Young Children (FLAEYC) Annual Conference, October 2023, Orlando, Florida

We quickly learned that across the country, child care pain points are similar, and so is the ideal. That’s why WeVision EarlyEd is a national effort committed to making the ideal real, in D.C. and beyond.

(See Appendix B for a list of the conferences, meetings, and events attended from late 2022 through 2024.)

FIG. 2

Our Data Collection Process

