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IT IS POSSIBLE: MAKING THE IDEAL CHILD CARE REAL



WeVision
EarlyEd

“What we cannot
imagine cannot
come into being.”

—bell hooks

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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



The pain points around child care and the visions for an ideal child care system are the same at the core.

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.

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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



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.

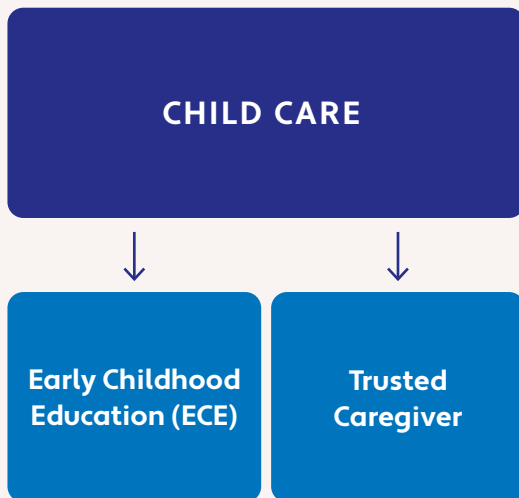
Early childhood education (ECE) is a specific child care option that focuses on supporting and documenting child and program outcomes, typically outside the child’s home. ECE’s aims go far beyond keeping children safe while the adults in their families work or attend school. These programs intentionally 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

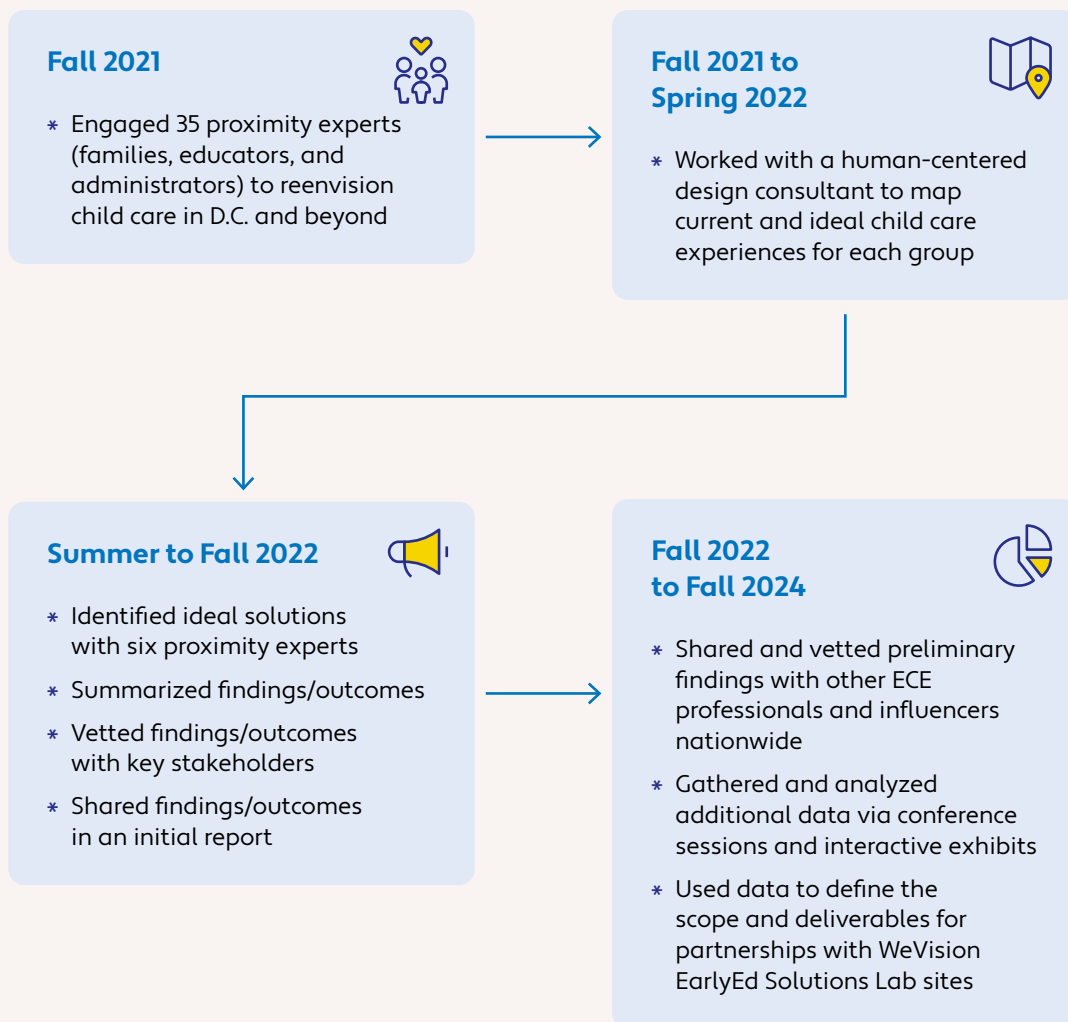
- * Florida Association for the Education of Young Children (FLAEYC) Annual Conference, October 2023, Orlando, Florida

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





SECTION

2

PUTTING TODAY'S CHILD CARE IN CONTEXT

Taking the advice offered during the convening of national policy influencers, we are not devoting significant time and attention in this report to “loving the problem.” →



The child care crisis in America is long-standing and well documented. We share only some key statistics here to underscore its urgency and help explain the types of solutions this report is recommending.

When announcing our \$100 million investment in early childhood in July 2024, our foundation noted that American families, especially those with young children, cannot equitably access the resources they need to support their children during this critical developmental period. The lack of access to quality child care, skyrocketing costs, and inadequate pay and support for educators leave families with too few options and put countless parents—especially women—on the sidelines of our economy.



The child care crisis in America is long-standing and well documented.

Black and brown communities, in particular, bear the brunt of these impacts, deepening inequities that are only set to worsen with time. These critical issues were prominent when we launched WeVision EarlyEd in D.C. in 2022, and they continue to resonate across the country.

HIGH NEED AND INADEQUATE SUPPLY

The state of child care was precarious before the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, a 2018 study from the Center for American Progress found that 50% of U.S. families live in communities defined as child care deserts—areas with so few providers or available child care slots that they do not have enough child care capacity to meet the needs of families.²

The child care sector suffered significantly as a result of the pandemic, with many programs closing and others struggling to stay open to



serve the needs of essential workers. More than one-third of child care jobs—370,000 jobs in total—were lost from February 2020 to April 2020. The historic \$24 billion federal child care stabilization program, which Congress approved as part of the 2021 American Rescue Plan Act, helped more than 225,000 providers nationwide—or more than 8 in 10 licensed child care centers—and affected as many as 10 million children.³ When that program expired in September 2023, it was expected that more than 70,000 child care programs could close and about 3.2 million children could lose their spots in a child care program.⁴



The child care sector suffered significantly as a result of the pandemic.

Other studies have documented the trouble parents continue to have finding child care. The National Women’s Law Center released an analysis of Census Household Pulse Survey data in May 2024. It found that the share of respondents with children under 12 years old in their household who lacked child care increased from 17.8% to 23.1% between fall 2023 and spring 2024 in states without significant additional

“The need for increased child care access and quality have never been more important, and the child care industry has never been more fragile.”

—THE HECHINGER REPORT

state funding to support the child care sector.⁵ Over the past two years, at least 11 states and the District of Columbia have dedicated significant new state funding to grants to child care providers, programs to support their child care workforces, or other solutions that directly support providers.

UNEVEN QUALITY AND LIMITED OPTIONS

A 2022 article from The Hechinger Report noted: “The need for increased child care access and quality have never been more important, and the child care industry has never been more fragile.”⁶ Standards and regulations that define

child care quality vary across and within states. These regulations also vary by setting or building type (homes, centers, or schools). This variation, coupled with insufficient public funding to incentivize quality, puts quality child care out of reach for most families. Calls to deregulate child care are increasing⁷ even as early childhood experts continue to point out the harm and costs associated with deregulation.⁸

Child care policies also have limited families by not supporting and honoring trusted caregivers as a publicly funded, quality, and valid child care option. A 2024 report from Capita stated: “Our external child care system of licensed child care, preschool, etc., could be considered a ‘visible’ child care system—but our economy and society depend heavily on the ‘invisible’ system of child care provided by parents at home (as well as family, friends, and neighbors).”⁹

HIGH COSTS

Nationwide, the average annual cost of care rose to \$11,582 per child in 2022, according to Child Care Aware of America’s 2023 annual report. It costs upward of \$18,000 per year for center-based care in high-cost-of-living areas such as parts of Massachusetts, California, New York, New Jersey, and Washington state. D.C. continues to have the most expensive child care in the country, at \$25,480 per year for an infant in center-based child care and \$23,431 per year for a toddler in center-based child care. In 2022, the average price of care for two children exceeded average housing costs in three of the four regions—Midwest, Northeast, and South. Also, the average price of child care for two children exceeds annual in-state university tuition in all four regions.¹⁰

LOW PAY AND CHALLENGING WORKING CONDITIONS

The ECE workforce is overwhelmingly women (97%) and disproportionately women of color (38%). Too many early childhood educators working in child care make rock-bottom wages and have subpar benefits and working conditions.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2023, child care workers earned an average annual income of \$32,070, or \$15.42 per hour. The median hourly wage for child care workers in May 2023 was \$14.60, with the lowest 10% of child care workers earning less than \$10.79 per hour and the highest 10% earning more than \$20.80 per hour.¹¹

INCREASED BUT INSUFFICIENT GOVERNMENT INVESTMENTS

According to the Center for American Progress, the past decade has seen a significant increase in attention on the United States’ ongoing child care crisis. In a 2024 timeline of federal legislation over the past decade, it notes: “Families with young children have long been subject to the insufficiency of the nation’s fragile child care system, and they continue to face barriers to finding, accessing, and affording high-quality care options. Yet only in recent years has child care received broad national attention as a key policy priority.”¹²



The past decade has seen a significant increase in attention on the United States’ ongoing child care crisis.

The Center for Early Learning Funding Equity stated in a 2024 report: “We found that our nation invests far less per child in the years before kindergarten than in the K–12 years, and it spends even less on infants and toddlers than on preschool-aged children. This comparison is not meant to argue against further investment in school-aged children or to imply that enough public dollars are spent on K–12 education. Instead, it is meant to highlight the degree to which our country is missing the opportunity to invest in our youngest children’s development—an investment research shows will pay dividends down the road. Access to high-quality learning opportunities matters every bit as much at age two as it does at age nine.”¹³



SECTION

3

PROXIMITY EXPERTS ENDURING THE CURRENT

PAIN POINTS, RISKS, AND COMPROMISES

Consider the everyday stories we heard from our initial group of proximity experts, which were backed up by the data we collected at numerous conferences and events. →



Image courtesy of National Association for Family Child Care

Administrators are trying to maintain consistent quality and manage businesses with very low margins. Educators are working from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m., juggling multiple responsibilities ranging from teaching to serving lunch to supporting families. Families are struggling to find a quality program that's a good fit for their children—particularly those children with special needs—not to mention affordable and convenient to their homes and workplaces.



Families are struggling to find a quality program that's a good fit for their child.

These families, educators, and administrators face similar pain points. All enter the system with anxiety, manage to survive along the way, and exit the system with worry. Am I choosing what is best for my child or just making do with what I can find or afford? When will I get off the waitlist? Did I waste my time as an early childhood educator earning poverty-level wages when I could have been working less and earning more elsewhere? Can I continue

The Current Experience

- * Community is strength
- * Math that “doesn’t add up”
- * Inconsistent quality
- * Fragmented information
- * Trade-offs and risks
- * Lack of work/life balance
- * Mistrust
- * Confinement with limited options
- * Time and resource scarcity
- * Constant regulatory changes
- * Top-down regulations
- * Too many hats/roles
- * Difficulty making child-centered and quality-centered decisions
- * Fragmented and inequitable
- * Advocacy only for self

to sacrifice my well-being and still be a good educator? Was it worth it, as an administrator, to pay monthly bills with my credit card to keep my ECE program open? How will I support myself when I retire?

Similarities Across States

We received similar data from proximity experts around the country. The following is a sample of the insights gleaned from the two largest professional conferences. Through the interactive exhibit, we surveyed 829 attendees at the NAEYC Annual Conference in November 2022 and 439 attendees at the NAFCC Annual Conference in July 2023. There were more similarities than differences across data collected at these and other gatherings, but we saw slight variances in how ECE professionals responded.

Consider the data collected on pain points/ what makes it hardest to support child growth and development. All NAFCC respondents (administrators, educators, and those in other roles) ranked “doing too many different jobs/ wear too many hats” as their top pain point. The same was true for administrators and those in other roles at the NAEYC conference. However, educators at the NAEYC conference ranked low pay as their top pain point.

“I experienced hard times looking for the right child care provider. I was faced with choices I didn’t want to make.”

—PARENT

Image courtesy of National Association for Family Child Care

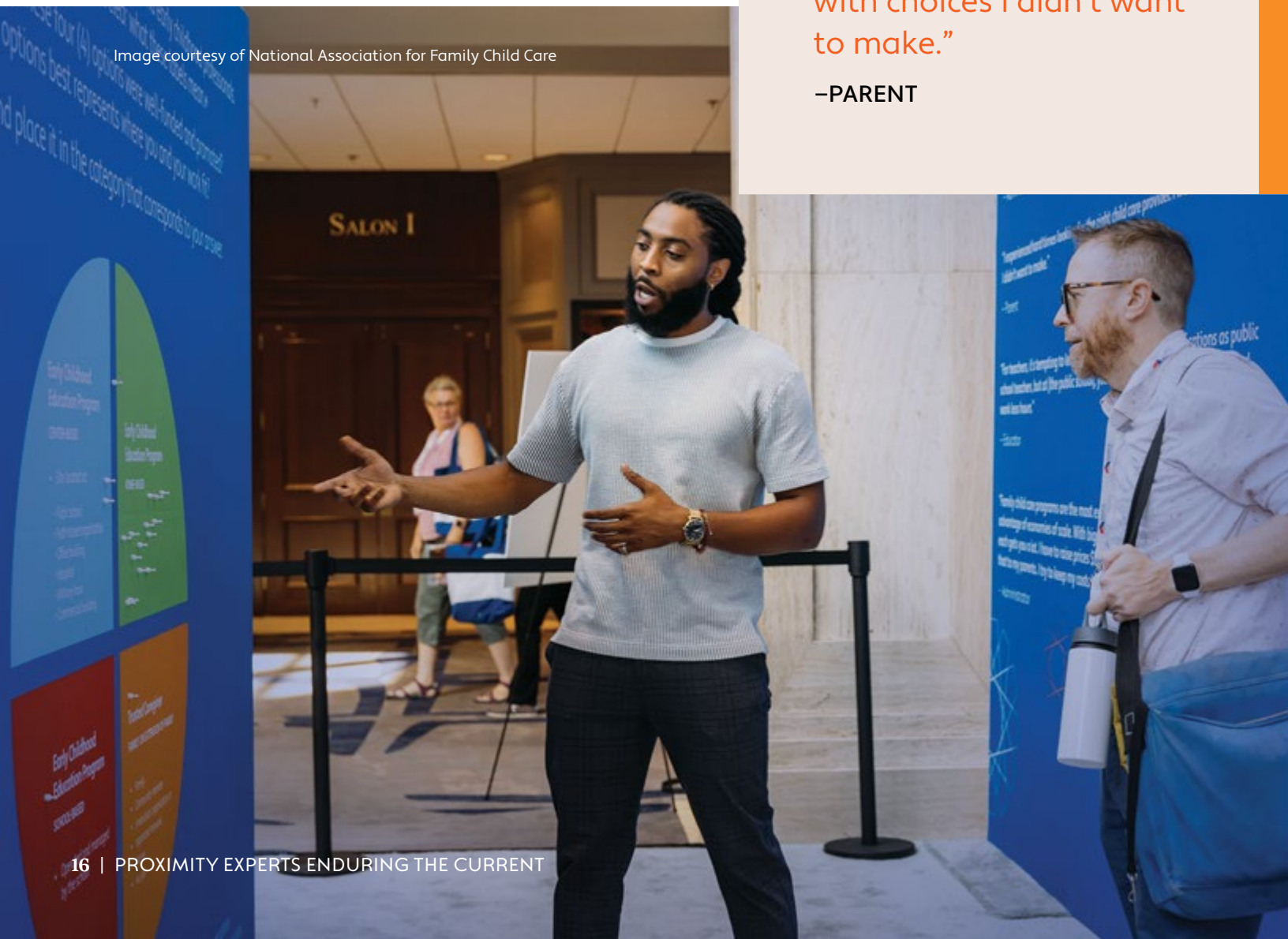


FIG. 3

The Current Experience

Educators, families, and administrators all have:

- * Similar journeys
- * Similar pain points
- * Similar compromises



FIG. 4

Pain Points, Ranked by Role

1 = Highest Pain Point

	NAEYC 2022 ANNUAL CONFERENCE			NAFCC 2023 ANNUAL CONFERENCE		
	Administrator	Educator	Other Role	Administrator	Educator	Other Role
Don't have the energy/close to burning out	4	3	4	4	4	4
Doing too many different jobs/wear too many hats	1	2	1	1	1	1
Pay is too low/can barely meet my basic needs	3	1	3	3	2	3
Program budget is too tight/can't get staff and resources the children need	2	4	2	2	3	2



SECTION

4

PROXIMITY EXPERTS ENVISIONING THE IDEAL

THRIVE, GROW, AND EVOLVE


Families, educators, and administrators spend the bulk of their time working within the confines of the existing child care system. →



The same is true for professional advocates, government agency staff, policymakers, and philanthropic organizations. We all have been patching up the current system because reimagining it has been an unaffordable and seemingly unattainable luxury.

The WeVision EarlyEd initiative is designed to challenge us all—particularly those with the most privilege and influence. It challenges the “it is what it is” mentality to instead address “what it should be.” WeVision EarlyEd pushes us to step resolutely into the future and claim it. It provides the gathering spaces, tools, and time that are needed to define the ideal system and prepare to make the ideal real.

Imagine a system that supports families, educators, and administrators every step of the way—all in support of each child’s healthy

 **WeVision
EarlyEd**
pushes us to step
up resolutely into
the future and
claim it.

The Ideal Experience

- * Child-centered
- * Quality-centered
- * Math that “adds up”
- * Appropriate resources
- * Simple and streamlined processes
- * Connected to public schools
- * Viable choices
- * Collaboration
- * Easy access to information
- * Quality drives regulations
- * Fair
- * Decentralized regulations
- * Seat at the table
- * Fewer hats
- * Constructed by the people in the system
- * Unified language/shared vocabulary
- * Advocacy for self and others
- * Adult well-being

development. We know what these experts want from a child care system that works and adds up for everyone. They told us.

WHAT FAMILIES WANT

Families most want viable and quality options. They want to be able to choose care from a family member, a trusted caregiver in their community, and/or an ECE professional in a regulated program (home-based, center-based, or in a school). They want options that meet their child’s needs, are affordable, and are in a neighborhood close to home or work. They want a system that helps them understand their child care options so that they can find the right fit. In their ideal scenario, information is clear and accessible, describing each option. Regardless of the option(s) families choose, all families receive (direct or indirect) funding and support.

They imagine a system where quality ECE programs, based on established industry standards, are accessible to all families that want them. Drawing from this baseline of quality

options, families select the program that meets their more individualized needs.

Partnerships between families, trusted caregivers, and early childhood educators are a priority. They share information about each child’s development and plan intentional experiences based on this information. Materials help families support their children’s learning at home. Families

have multiple opportunities to share information and meet with other families. Educators provide regular feedback on each child’s progress, and administrators communicate changes

(such as closings) in a timely way. Transitioning from child care (ECE or trusted caregiver) to elementary school is a seamless process.

Bottom line: Families are trusted and treated like the full-fledged educational partners they are.



Families are trusted and treated like the full-fledged educational partners they are.

FIG. 5

The Ideal Experience

Educators, families, and administrators all want:

- * Similar journeys
- * Similar focus on child growth and development



WHAT EDUCATORS WANT

Educators want consistent support, fair compensation, and a clear path for advancement and growth. They want to be healthy (physically and mentally) and fully prepared to support the individual needs of children and families. They want to be able to support child outcomes that are rooted in the science of child development.

They imagine a system that supports educators every step of the way. To start, they are responsible for meeting the professional standards and code of ethics of the job they are seeking. In return, they have the professional autonomy to focus on child outcomes. To help educators prepare, they receive financial support for debt-free college education, practical work experience, and opportunities to discuss the job and professional practice with knowledgeable practitioners. Targeted support is provided to recruit and retain educators who reflect the racial, cultural, gender, and linguistic identities of the children and families they serve. Certification and job application processes are clear, streamlined, and user-friendly. Roles are defined so that educators and administrators are aligned on expectations from the beginning.

Once on the job, educators are fairly compensated, reflecting their qualifications and experience, and receive benefits such as health care, paid time off, and retirement plans. Programs have measurable goals and performance indicators that are child centered

and profession led. There is plenty of time for collaboration, thinking, and planning across and between educator teams. Educators routinely collaborate with professionals from other disciplines, such as mental health specialists, speech-language pathologists, and early interventionists,



Educators have multiple opportunities to grow.

to meet the needs of young children. Educators regularly share progress reports with administrators and families, and they have access to relevant information on the children in their classroom. A work schedule takes educators' well-being into account so that they can maintain a more reasonable work/life balance and are healthy enough to provide quality care during this critical phase of human development.

Educators also have multiple opportunities to grow. Mentors and networks of peers provide much-needed expertise and advice. Certification levels are tied to experience and quality delivered, encouraging administrators to prioritize educator training. Educators can seamlessly move among program type and age group without unnecessary restrictions. Promotions, including out of the classroom if they choose, are based on merit and competence. And staff have a voice in policy decisions affecting their work. **Bottom line: Educators are treated like the professionals they are.**

WHAT ADMINISTRATORS WANT

Administrators want help at the front end of establishing their programs, clearer facility licensing rules, more flexible regulations, and more opportunities to partner with peers to share services, such as accounting and facilities management. They want the math to add up (simply put, for business revenues to meet or exceed costs and expenses) so they can support their staff, ensure consistent quality, build community partnerships, and respond to families.



They want the math to add up so they can support their staff, ensure consistent quality, build community partnerships, and respond to families.

They imagine a system that supports administrators in launching their program, with a streamlined process that provides training, mentors, clear guidelines, and access to clear criteria for how to develop a quality program. They know about best practices, so they can incorporate them into their program design plan from Day one. Administrators have the knowledge and funding needed to complete the licensing process, which is more centralized to help expedite the paperwork and similar logistics. Startup timelines are flexible; for instance, a center that ultimately might be serving 20 infants won't be required to have 20 cribs on-site on Day one.

Administrators have a solid understanding of both child development and business practices. If not, they have access to or can afford to hire staff or consultants with the expertise they need. Additional resources (e.g., accounting support) help them set up and manage the business. The expectations for quality are realistically aligned with the actual costs, including occupancy, payroll, equipment, and supplies. A financial analysis helps verify whether a new ECE program is financially viable and can attract outside capital to fund the project. They can easily access information about fundraising opportunities available through banks and community business centers (debt services), investors (financial equity), foundations (grants), or landlords (tenant improvements). Community fairs help them recruit both educators and families. Contractors, architects, and experts from regulatory agencies help them navigate areas they may not be familiar with, such as facilities management.

Some of these resources are provided through peer groups such as professional associations, groups of administrators working together to forge partnerships with vetted vendors, and contractors, which might result in cost savings through economies of scale and shared services. Administrators position their programs as one-stop shops to connect families and staff with community and government services. **Bottom line: ECE administrators get the kind of support that is commonplace in other publicly funded sectors of the economy.**

Similarities Across States

We received similar feedback from proximity experts around the country as we asked them to expand on the human-centered design data and dream big.

Through the interactive exhibit, we engaged 829 attendees at the NAEYC Annual Conference

in November 2022, 439 attendees at the NAFCC Annual Conference in July 2023, and 292 attendees at the FLAEEYC Annual Conference in October 2023. Here are three sets of data that deepened our understanding; they are helping us make ideal child care more concrete and demonstrate that the ideal is possible.

Image courtesy of National Association for Family Child Care



Quality and Accessibility

Respondents at all three conferences were asked to prioritize the top three elements of the ideal child care system out of five choices. NAEYC and NAFCC attendees—the majority of whom work in ECE programs—selected funding to ensure quality, compensation to attract competent and diverse

staff, and all families having access to quality child care options. FLAIEYC respondents—the vast majority of whom identified as educators—included better work schedules with paid time off as one of their top three items. For proximity experts, the ideal child care combines both quality and accessibility.

FIG. 6

Top Three Elements of the Ideal Child Care System

1 = Top Element

	NAEYC 2022 ANNUAL CONFERENCE	NAFCC 2023 ANNUAL CONFERENCE	FLAIEYC 2023 ANNUAL CONFERENCE
Rules and regulations that make sense	-	-	-
Quality child care options for all families	3	2	-
Funding to cover the real cost of quality ECE	2	1	2
Compensation that attracts and retains competent and diverse staff	1	3	1
Better work schedule with paid time off	-	-	3

Identity, Clarity, and Coherence

When asked to identify where respondents would fit if the future child care system had four clear and well-funded options, the majority selected

ECE centers and homes. Nearly 11% of the 264 respondents at the NAFCC conference selected the trusted caregiver option, compared to 1.5% of 432 respondents at the FLAEEYC conference.

FIG. 7

Where Do You Fit?

NAFCC Annual Conference, July 2023

10.9%

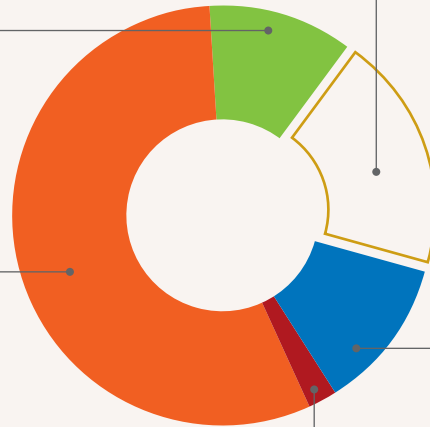
Trusted Caregiver
(Stay-at-Home Parent, Family Member, Nanny, Au Pair, Community Member)

55.5%

Early Childhood Education Program: Home-Based

2.3%

Early Childhood Education Program: School-Based



19% of respondents,

particularly those with systems-level roles or those providing professional development services, selected a combination of these options

11.6%

Early Childhood Education Program: Center-Based

FIG. 8

Where Do You Fit?

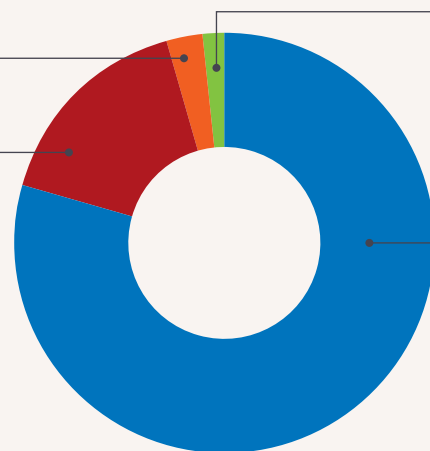
FLAEEYC Annual Conference, October 2023

2.7%

Early Childhood Education Program: Home-Based

16.3%

Early Childhood Education Program: School-Based



1.5%

Trusted Caregiver
(Stay-at-Home Parent, Family Member, Nanny, Au Pair, Community Member)

79.6%

Early Childhood Education Program: Center-Based

Working Conditions and Well-Being

When asked to select one scheduling option (out of three possible) that would help improve the well-being of ECE professionals in order for them to better support young children,

most respondents at the FLAEYC and NAFCC conferences wanted time away from the classroom to be a part of their full-time schedule. However, fewer respondents were willing to work longer hours to make this possible.

FIG. 9

Preferred Scheduling Option

NAFCC Annual Conference, July 2023 (491 respondents)

In-and-out schedule; four days in the classroom and one day to work on other responsibilities	36.6% (180 respondents)
Monthly paid day off; one mental health day off each month, with full pay	34.6% (170 respondents)
Four-day workweek; working longer hours for a shorter workweek	28.7% (141 respondents)

FIG. 10

Preferred Scheduling Option

FLAEYC Annual Conference, October 2023 (469 respondents)

In-and-out schedule; four days in the classroom and one day to work on other responsibilities	40.7% (191 respondents)
Monthly paid day off; one mental health day off each month, with full pay	42.6% (200 respondents)
Four-day workweek; working longer hours for a shorter workweek	16.6% (78 respondents)

Staffing for Education and Administration

The split was pronounced when conference attendees were asked to identify their education and administration staffing priorities in an ideal child care system. NAEYC respondents

consistently highlighted the need for full-time teachers and assistant teachers, while NAFCC respondents expressed the greatest need for grants and development staff. The results varied by role for FLAIEYC respondents.

FIG. 11

Additional Staff Needs in the Ideal Child Care System

1 = Most Important

	NAEYC 2022 ANNUAL CONFERENCE			NAFCC 2023 ANNUAL CONFERENCE			FLAIEYC 2023 ANNUAL CONFERENCE		
	Administrator	Educator	Other Role	Administrator	Educator	Other Role	Administrator	Educator	Other Role
Full-Time Teacher/Assistant Teacher	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	1	3
Special Education Teacher/Coordinator	2	2	3	5	-	-	3	2	1
Mental Health Specialist	3	3	2	4	3	5	1	3	2
Grants and Development Staff	4	4	4	1	1	1	4	4	4
Finance or Business Manager	-	-	-	3	5	3 (tie)	-	-	-
Administrative Support	5	-	-	-	-	3 (tie)	5	-	5 (tie)
Family Engagement Specialist	-	5	5	-	4	-	-	5	5 (tie)
Community Outreach Manager	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Quality Improvement Specialist	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Staff Scheduling Associate	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-



SECTION

5


IT IS POSSIBLE: MAKING THE IDEAL REAL

The simple truth is there's nothing stopping us from moving full speed ahead in our efforts to generate much-needed change in our child care system. →



SHIFTING OUR MINDSETS TO SHIFT THE SYSTEM

We took all that we learned from educators, administrators, and families and asked ourselves: What is keeping us from creating the ideal system? We reflected on our decade of investments in early learning. We listened keenly to our partners—from Florida to Ohio to D.C.—and pored over the wisdom they have shared. We learned more about how complex systems change over time and the history of how we ended up with the system we have.

 **Our outdated mindsets are helping to hold the current child care system in place.**

Our answer: Outdated mindsets are helping to hold the current child care system in place. We are stuck in a system in which our often-invisible mental models are outdated and

Changing our child care system will require two things of us:

- * **Shifting outdated mindsets that have held this persistent problem in place**
- * **Demonstrating that the ideal is possible right now**

don't match the current realities for families and practitioners. It's time to rethink everything about the system itself, including what child care is, who should be served, who should pay, how we should define quality, and how we should make decisions. The role of WeVision EarlyEd is to help provide the gathering spaces, tools, and time needed for some of these mindset-shifting conversations and rethinking to occur.

WHY DEAL WITH MINDSETS?

The policies and systems we create are derived from our prevalent mindsets. These mindsets reflect our beliefs, biases, values, relationships, and perceptions of power. In our urgency to make change, we often do not have the time or resources to take a hard look at our mindsets. We focus on the surface level of change by tweaking policies and funding streams. Surface-level changes can happen quickly and are more concrete. They can improve conditions for some but will not shift or transform a system. For that, we must dive deeper.

Outdated mindsets have always stalled transformative change, often when we were inches away from the child care ideal.

It was the mindset that universal child care would incentivize women (white women in particular) to work outside their homes when they should be at home taking care of their children—not solely the lack of public funding—that made President Richard Nixon veto the Child Development Act of 1971.¹⁴ Fifty years later, it was the mindset that a fully publicly funded system would give the federal government too much control and families limited options that bifurcated key early childhood policy influencers when the Build Back Better legislation failed to advance through Congress in 2022.¹⁵

It is these mindsets—with an infusion of racial, class, and gender bias—that currently fund child care as though it is a pathologized intervention solely for “those kids” (Head Start) or a labor penalty for “welfare queens” (child care subsidy) rather than a more universal support for the benefit of broader society. It is mindsets that shame some families for wanting to be their infant’s primary caregiver but normalize the use of au pairs and nanny shares in other households. Policy influencers’ unwillingness to devote time

🤝💛 **Outdated mindsets have always stalled transformative change, often when we were inches away from the universal child care ideal.**

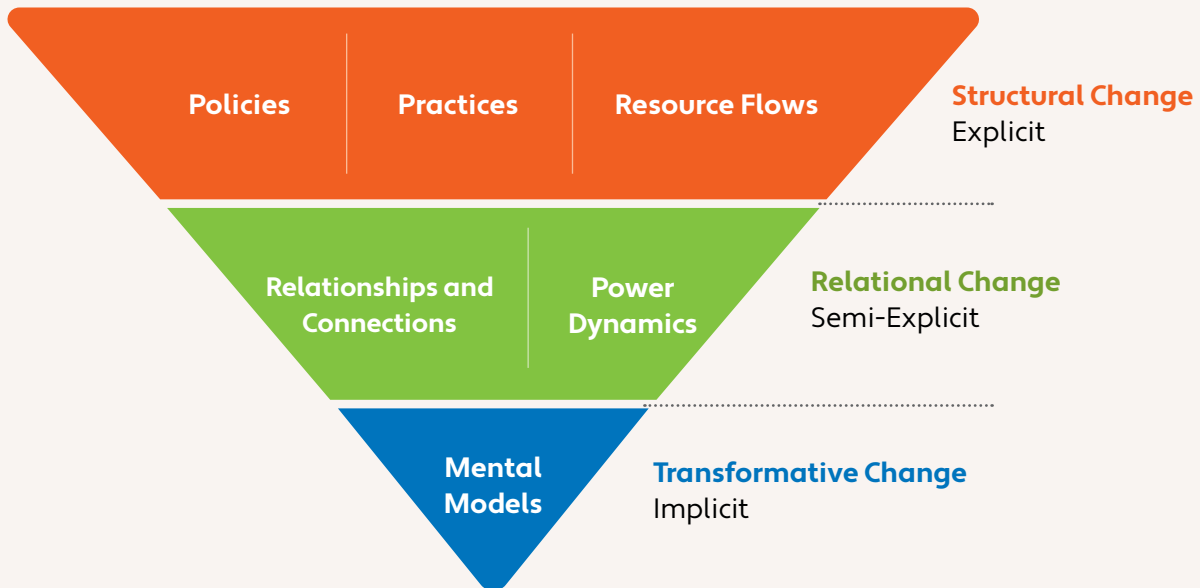
and resources to unpacking these mindsets helps hold the current system in place, even though there is some cross-partisan support for accessible, affordable child care for all.

Consider our current child care challenge from the perspective of a well-known systems change model (see Figure 12 on Page 31). Six interdependent conditions typically play a significant role in holding a social or environmental problem in place. These conditions exist with varying degrees of visibility to players in the system, largely due to how explicit, or tangible, they are made to most people.¹⁶ Least visible are the mental models, defined as habits of thought or deeply held beliefs and assumptions and taken-for-granted ways of operating that influence how we think, what we do, and how we talk. Critical to note is that mental models, the only implicit (i.e., least visible or explicit) condition of systems change, also have the greatest potential for transformative change.



FIG. 12

Six Conditions of Systems Change



WHAT CORE SHIFTS SHOULD WE ADVANCE?

Outdated thinking will not give us policies that are aligned with what families, educators, and administrators (which we call proximity experts) want to see in the ideal system. The core shifts we propose can guide us as we trade the outdated thinking that holds the current system in place for the transformative thinking that can help create a more effective and equitable system. These core shifts can help us build on the current momentum—locally and nationally. This is the trade that the proximity experts are asking policymakers, government leaders, philanthropic organizations, the media, and other policy influencers to make. This is a fair trade.

- ① **Rethink when learning begins**, to recognize the crucial importance of children’s early development.
- ② **Rethink who needs child care**, making quality options available to all families.
- ③ **Rethink what child care costs and who pays for it**, so that options are affordable for families and educators can make a living wage.
- ④ **Rethink quality**, by right-sizing regulations, aligning to baseline standards, and increasing family and professional autonomy.
- ⑤ **Rethink governance and decision-making**, to respect and benefit from the expertise of families, educators, and administrators.

Rethink When Learning Begins

FIG. 13

Rethink When Learning Begins

OUTDATED MINDSET

- * Learning begins when young children start elementary school.

- * Child care work is all about making sure children are fed and aren't hurt. Any adult can do this job.

TRANSFORMATIVE MINDSET

- * The neuroscience is clear. The first five years of life, particularly the first three, are the most important in human development. These years are the basis of all future development and learning.
- * Young children, including infants, are capable of highly complex thinking.
- * Given what we know about how children develop from birth to age 5, we invest early in the people, services, and programs that support child development and learning.
- * Every young child has a right to child care.

- * Well-prepared and well-compensated early childhood educators are distinct because they are formally prepared, are competent, and can be accountable for what it takes to plan and implement intentional experiences that support children's learning and development—providing more than what we have historically called “day care” services.
- * Advancing early childhood educators as a more organized and supported profession does not diminish the important role that trusted caregivers (e.g., stay-at-home parents, family members, nannies, and other community members) can play in supporting children's growth and development. Conversely, elevating the importance of trusted caregivers should not diminish advancing early childhood educators as a more organized and supported profession.

BIAS CHECK

Note and avoid affirming the following biases when unpacking this shift: Women are better suited for supporting young children than are men, so they must stay out of the job market to raise their children. Work done mostly by women, and particularly Black and brown women, lacks intellectual, emotional, and physical complexity and should not cost as much as work done in other industries where women are underrepresented. Young children are simply the property of their parents and do not have their own rights.

OUTDATED MINDSET

The prevailing mindset is that real learning and development begin in elementary school: kindergarten (age 5) or pre-K (ages 3–4). That is when “school” starts. Child care or ECE is about “watching the little kids” so the adults in their families can work or attend school.

Because the prevailing mindset is that child care or ECE is mainly babysitting, many assume that those serving the youngest children (ages 0–2, in particular) have a simple job that doesn’t require much skill. They are basically hired to keep the children safe, serve them lunch, change their diapers, and maybe occasionally play with them. How hard can that be, especially since they love children? In this hierarchy, pre-K and kindergarten teachers are next highest in the pecking order, followed by elementary school, middle school, and high school teachers, the true superstars of the K–12 system by comparison. Related, those serving young children in home settings are treated with much less respect than

their peers working in centers. The “best” early childhood educators are in the public schools, working alongside elementary school teachers.

A 2024 report from the U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory on the Mental Health & Well-Being of Parents found that “[m]any parents and caregivers feel undervalued for prioritizing parenting over employment—whether that means choosing to be a full-time parent or managing the many work trade-offs involved in being an employed parent.”¹⁷

As a result of this outdated thinking, we have created a tiered system in which the youngest children get the most limited and most expensive care, while the early childhood educators and other adults working with infants and toddlers are the lowest paid; not surprisingly, turnover is very high. This is especially true for Black and brown early childhood educators,¹⁸ who are the most stigmatized and penalized because racist policies and practices have positioned child care as undervalued work done by Black and brown women. Even within the child care industry,



Black and brown women earn less than their white counterparts and are more likely to be in the positions that earn the lowest wages.¹⁹

In this system, a college degree or an industry-recognized credential doesn't matter for your status, compensation, or benefits. The lack of public funding, especially for those serving infants and toddlers in their homes, means that professionals must sacrifice their well-being and use their own resources if they want to deliver high-quality programs. Holding on to this outdated thinking is costly. Most families can only afford programs or caregivers that keep their children relatively safe while they go to work. As a result, most families lose the opportunity to build their children's foundational cognitive, social, emotional, language, and physical skills. And early childhood educators are woefully undervalued and under-compensated.

TRANSFORMATIVE MINDSET

The first five years of life, particularly the first three, are the most important in human development. These years are the basis of all future development and learning. Young children are capable of highly complex thinking and learning. The interactions, comfort, care, stability, and intentional learning experiences young children have, even as babies, establish a lifetime trajectory. And while it is possible to make up for deficits in later years, it is difficult and costly.

In an ideal system, families can select child care options, including trusted caregivers, that keep their children safe and maximize the opportunity for learning and development in these most formative years. As for early childhood educators, they do love children. But they also need to be

respected and valued for the essential work they do every day that is based on the science of early learning. For instance, in 2000 the National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine released a groundbreaking report, "Neurons to Neighborhoods,"²⁰ that documents the importance of early childhood care and education. In 2015, the two groups published "Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation,"²¹ which makes the case that the benefits of ECE are only realized by hiring early childhood educators with professional knowledge, skills, and competencies.

Given what we know about how children develop from birth to age 5, we must invest early in trusted caregivers, educators, and programs that support child development and learning.

If these aren't reasons enough, we know that all of society benefits when investments are made starting at birth. Economists estimate child care contributes up to a 13% return²² on investment and \$99.3 billion annually to the U.S. economy.²³

A 2023 report from the Council for a Strong America revealed that the nation's infant-toddler child care crisis costs \$122 billion in lost earnings, productivity, and revenue every year.²⁴ We all reap the benefits from a society that invests in child care for young children and are impacted by the economic loss.



We must invest early in trusted caregivers, educators, and programs that support child development and learning.



Rethink Who Needs Child Care

FIG. 14

Rethink Who Needs Child Care

OUTDATED MINDSET

- * Government-funded child care is mainly an intervention for “those kids”—Black, brown, and white children experiencing extreme poverty or trauma.
- * Family child care needs are the same. They just want to make sure their children are fed and aren’t hurt. Any type of child care will do.
- * If we invest in preschool for 3- and 4-year-olds, our work is done.

TRANSFORMATIVE MINDSET

- * Most families—regardless of income, employment status, race, gender, or geographic location—want access to high-quality experiences to support their child’s development from the earliest years.
- * Funding for child care is available to all families that need support.
- * Families select a child care option based on what their child needs and the experiences they want for their child. Some families want to provide this support themselves. Others want a trusted relative or community member to do it. Still others want support from competent early childhood educators. All these families should have access to public funding to support their preferred option.
- * Access to quality early childhood experiences is as critical for infants and toddlers as it is for 3- and 4-year-olds.


BIAS CHECK

Note and avoid affirming the following biases when unpacking this shift: Families can receive child care support only if they commit to getting off public assistance or working in low-wage/high-needs industries. Only wealthy parents (primarily white and women) are and prefer to be stay-at-home parents.

OUTDATED MINDSET

The prevailing mindset is that public funding for child care is only an intervention for “those families” and “those children” who need to be “fixed.” “Those children” include children living in historically marginalized communities, children of the racialized “welfare queen” who must work or go to school to get off public benefits, and children of families that occupy society’s low-wage jobs.

In this system, the majority of families don’t have real options. They are constrained by where they live and where they work, by how much they earn, and by the availability and affordability of programs and caregivers. They often have difficulty navigating the system, understanding their options, and being confident they’re finding the best fit for their child. Without a range of viable options, many families don’t have much choice. This is particularly true for families with young children with special needs. The relative down the street or child care center around the corner might not be the preferred option but may be the only option. That’s true for most families.



The majority of families don’t have real options.

While research has shown families across all demographics know what high quality looks like, it is almost always out of reach. When the trifecta occurs and families can make accessibility, affordability, and quality all align, there is often a waiting list for those programs. Stories abound about families putting their infants on a list (or multiple lists) before birth, only to be offered a slot months, or even years, later.

Family choices are more limited when it comes to infants and toddlers, because ECE programs and trusted caregivers are even scarcer and more expensive than child care for 3- and 4-year-olds. And for families that prefer that a parent or close relative stay home during a child’s early years, this is seldom an option.

Many states and cities have made major investments in pre-K for 3- and 4-year-olds, but these investments have unintentionally gutted the remainder of the child care market or increased the cost of infant and toddler care. In states where center-based settings are included in public pre-K funding, per-pupil spending is often lower than that for their public-school counterparts. In many instances, this is because the school district takes an administrative fee that reduces the amount allocated to programs, or public schools have other sources of funding for expenses that center-based settings must cover on their own. Thus, large-scale investments in pre-K are just the beginning of a systemwide solution.

In addition, the government reimbursement for child care varies by funding source. Child care subsidy funding is almost always lower per child than public pre-K funding. Child care programs that receive subsidy funding care for children all day and all year and yet don’t have the benefit of the public-school facilities infrastructure to draw on. In addition, subsidy reimbursement rates for supporting young children with special needs do not cover the costs of the additional resources these children need to thrive. This reimbursement variation also exists among Head Start, Early Head Start, and child care subsidies.

On top of this, even within the same system and funding stream, reimbursement rates vary. For example, in the D.C. child care subsidy system, center-based programs receive more per day for infants than do home-based programs.²⁵

Holding on to this outdated thinking is costly in several ways. Federal child care subsidy is only available based on income eligibility for the most economically marginalized families. Families needing these supports are penalized and ridiculed. In addition, pathologized interventions such as these always come with excessive, inefficient layers of additional bureaucracy.²⁶ Consider the minimal paperwork needed for anyone to get a public library card versus all the hoops low-income families must jump through to qualify for child care, which include endless lines and long forms that check on

everything from income to immigration status. As a result, we are paying for more bureaucracy when we should be paying for more services.

The lack of availability and affordability disproportionately burdens women across all income levels. As of December 2021, the civilian workforce participation rate for prime-age workers (aged 25–54) was 75% for women compared to 88% for men, and women were much more likely to participate²⁷ part-time. It is widely documented that access to child care is the highest barrier to female workforce participation. The lack of adequate quality child care perpetuates women’s underemployment and slows the economy. This was borne out dramatically during the pandemic, when in December 2020 women accounted for all the job losses in the United States.²⁸

TRANSFORMATIVE MINDSET

Full-day, full-year child care options are available to all families with children from birth through age 5. Families have options that align with their needs and values—regardless of income, race, gender, or geographic location. Many want to find early childhood educators to support their child’s development on a daily basis. Others want the flexibility to stay at home to care for their children. Some prefer a trusted

community member to serve as their primary child care provider. Quality child care also allows these adults to work, open businesses, or go to school—contributing to society as taxpayers and productive citizens.

ECE programs have the funding to recruit and retain competent, diverse, and well-compensated educators who consistently implement the standards and codes of their profession. ECE programs are affordable and in a convenient location for families to access near home or work. All families that need and want family members or trusted community members to serve as their primary child care provider have financial assistance to secure this support.

Finally, policy considerations are made in the context of the full birth-to-5 system. Financing, governance, structures, and operations center the needs of families, educators, and providers across the entire system rather than by age group.

If we make this transformative shift, ECE programs and other options will be more accessible and available to all families—regardless of where they live or how much money they make. All families, not just the eligible few and not just those with access to public pre-K, will have options. Mothers, in particular, will have more opportunities to work outside the home if they wish.



Rethink What Child Care Costs... and Who Pays for It

FIG. 15

Rethink What Child Care Costs... and Who Pays for It

OUTDATED MINDSET

- * Government funding should only support a few families, with fewer options and under extreme conditions.
- * Child care costs what families can afford.
- * Child care is the family's responsibility. If families can't afford child care, they shouldn't have kids.
- * Why should I have to pay for this? My kids are grown.

TRANSFORMATIVE MINDSET

- * Government funding should provide wider access to child care supports and include options based on what families and young children need.
- * Child care done right is costly, much more than what most families can afford and what the government currently supports.
- * Because society shares the benefits of quality child care, it also should share the costs—just like it supports other public goods (public schools, roads, libraries, parks, etc.).

BIAS CHECK

Note and avoid affirming the following biases when unpacking this shift: Low-income families should not have children they cannot afford. Using public funding to support child care will create more “welfare queens.” Child care wouldn't cost society so much if mothers (and white mothers, in particular) didn't enter the job market.

OUTDATED MINDSET

“We invest 85% less per year on children before they enter kindergarten than after.”²⁹ The prevailing mindset is that support for child care mainly benefits the family, largely because it allows family members to work outside the home. So, paying for it should be the family’s responsibility. If families can’t pay for child care or can’t afford to stay home with their children, they shouldn’t have children. Many say: “It’s not my kid. I’ve already raised my kids—this is now someone else’s problem. I am on a limited income, and my taxes shouldn’t go to solving other people’s child care issues.” Bottom line: The thinking is that families should get access only to programs they can afford. In turn, that means the options and quality of child care are capped by what families can pay.

Holding on to this outdated thinking is costly in three major ways. First, families foot most of the bill for child care, and the burden can be crushing. Although the weight is heavier for families earning low wages, even wealthier families are affected. In 33 states and D.C., for instance, a year of infant care³⁰ is more expensive than a year’s tuition at an in-state college. In Washington, D.C., the average annual cost for infant care is 27% more than the average rent in the city. At that price, it would eat up nearly 30% of the median family income.


Second, child care quality and availability are uneven and scarce, particularly for families earning low wages. According to the Center for American Progress’ report on the availability of child care, more than half the population lives in neighborhoods classified as “child care deserts.”³¹ The percentage is higher in rural communities and communities with large Black and brown populations. To the extent the public invests at all in child care, the subsidy helps families pay for support only if they promise to get off public assistance; the support is punitive and pathologizing.

Third, because child care workers are grossly under-compensated, programs are unable to attract and retain skilled staff, contributing

to skyrocketing turnover in child care programs. Child care workers earn, on average, \$13.22 per hour nationally,³² and nearly half are eligible for government assistance. Not surprisingly, child care workers and early childhood educators move to higher-paying sectors when they earn industry-recognized credentials and degrees. Those with bachelor’s degrees in early childhood education earn the lowest lifetime pay. Those who stay, largely Black and brown women, must sacrifice their well-being to do so, and many are no longer willing to make that sacrifice. These gender and racial inequities are rooted in the history of the field. The situation is also dire for trusted caregivers who lack government funding and provide unpaid labor.

TRANSFORMATIVE MINDSET

As discussed in Core Shift 2, all families should be able to select the child care options that meet their needs. Given the many benefits described previously, we should start thinking about child care as part of the nation’s public infrastructure, no less essential than K-12 schools, playgrounds, libraries, fire stations, roads, bridges, and other public works. Child care done right is costly, much more than what most families can afford and what the government currently supports. And we should start paying for it in the same way, with many more public dollars.

 In a transformed system, we all share the burden because we all will benefit.

In a transformed system, we all share the burden because we all will benefit. Funding for ECE programs should cover the true cost of providing such care. These cost estimates include full occupancy costs, furniture and equipment, professional services (accounting, human resources, legal, etc.), supports for children with special needs, and professional salaries and benefits for early childhood educators. Families that choose a trusted caregiver should also receive financial support.

Rethink Quality

FIG. 16

Rethink Quality

OUTDATED MINDSET

- * Quality is complex, and government systems should decide what quality looks like. After all, they are paying for it.
- * Deregulate child care to reduce cost and increase the supply of child care options.
- * Families do not have quality measures, expectations, and accountability systems.

- * Quality in ECE settings is optional (mainly for those who can afford it) and variable (depending on the setting and provider).
- * Every community, funder, and government agency should define quality its way.

- * The primary purpose of quality ratings and assessments is to rank and penalize ECE programs. Why should I have to pay for this? My kids are grown.

- * It's a buyer-beware system in which families should figure out the nuances of industry quality when selecting an ECE program.

TRANSFORMATIVE MINDSET

- * Accountability for the quality of child care should be streamlined and appropriate for the two clear and distinct child care options: trusted caregivers and ECE programs.
- * Families have expectations of care that should be legitimized and respected.

- * Quality in ECE settings is the floor of the system, not the ceiling.
- * There are industry-recognized standards for quality ECE, aligned to the science of child development and created and overseen by early childhood professionals.
- * Industry-recognized standards are continually assessed and updated to support practitioner competence and remove bias.

- * The primary purpose of quality ratings and assessments is to inform planning and document progress at all levels—individual, program, and system.

- * Families should receive assurances that a baseline set of industry-recognized standards for quality ECE are met in all settings—center-based, home-based, or school-based options.
- * Families, like all consumers, will add their individualized metrics to a floor of baseline quality and competence.

BIAS CHECK

Note and avoid affirming the following biases when unpacking this shift: Quality is a luxury, and only families with higher incomes and their children deserve to have access to quality experiences and options. Families earning low wages, especially Black and brown families, do not know what is best for their children.



OUTDATED MINDSET

The prevailing mindset is that the best way to increase quality is to design the perfect rating system. Over the years, ECE professionals have had to navigate multiple rating systems, each emphasizing different qualities. Some systems are duplicative and remeasure basic health and safety standards, some focus more on adult-child interactions, and some weave in the measurement of other supports such as access to home visiting. Each state creates its own quality rating and improvement system. There is no common baseline.

Over the past two decades, we have spent billions of dollars to develop and maintain rating systems. Those funds would have been better directed toward sustainable solutions focused primarily on attracting and retaining a competent and effective workforce. Governments are constantly changing quality measurement tools based on the latest research, leadership changes, product marketing, and other trends. Each government funding stream identifies its own quality measure and quality score. It is not unusual to have a program leveraging three government funding streams, meeting three sets of quality standards, and receiving quality monitoring visits, sometimes months apart.

Furthermore, most government systems have outsize roles in developing quality rating

systems and outsize expectations for what the systems can produce based on what they are willing to spend. Unlike other sectors, where the professionals and practitioners in the field (along with their professional membership organizations) are relied on for their expertise and given autonomy to work within their scope of practice, governments often unilaterally determine the measures of child care quality and then require programs to fit within those measures. Educators and administrators might be asked for feedback at some point, but they never codesign the system.



Governments often unilaterally determine the measures of child care quality and then require programs to fit within those measures.

Government systems sometimes clone (or disregard) profession-led accreditation standards to create their own. In some extreme instances, such as in California and Florida, there are more than three separate rating systems operating within one state. And Maryland,³³ for example, created both its own state accreditation system and a rating system. The relevance of profession-led national accreditation standards and accredited programs declined as government-funded rating systems grew. In addition, new

accreditation systems were developed by program owners to rate themselves.

Moreover, the rating systems are not used to help early childhood educators grow as professionals but instead have become high-stakes accountability systems that often determine the level of government reimbursement. For example, programs receiving Child Care and Development Block Grants funding get more money for higher ratings.

Worse, once these systems are created, public spending never aligns with the system's expected measures and outcomes. We have Maserati expectations, but Chevrolet spending. Spending on quality is never baked into the system's baseline financing. Instead, programs might receive one-time bumps from "quality set-aside" dollars or one-time bonus checks for their staff (who otherwise are grossly underpaid).

As noted earlier, calls to deregulate child care are increasing even as early childhood experts continue to point out the harm and costs associated with deregulation.

TRANSFORMATIVE MINDSET

Safety and quality matter. Accountability for the quality of child care should be appropriate for the two clear and distinct child care options: trusted caregivers and ECE programs. Regulations should be right-sized and aligned to industry standards.

At a baseline, trusted caregivers must meet families' caregiving expectations and comply with state and federal laws that protect the welfare of children.

At a baseline, ECE programs also must meet facility licensing (mostly facility safety) and industry-recognized standards of quality (mostly child experience and early learning). Measuring quality ECE is complex, and every tool includes some degree of bias and subjectivity. No single tool measures everything that is important. Government systems can measure quality by leveraging, not supplanting, industry-

recognized quality standards and accompanying accountability systems developed by and for the ECE profession.

Adherence to these professional standards and guidelines is the baseline expectation for all programs, not an aspirational, out-of-reach goal that most programs can never afford to meet with current levels of funding. In turn, professional standards and accountability systems are more responsive to the profession, families, and government agencies; are agile enough to reflect new knowledge; minimize bias; and reduce administrative burden. Governments allocate more funding to incentivize quality than to measure quality. To do this, governments measure the actual cost of care (not what the market can bear) and base subsidy supports on those rates—aligning the system's inputs with its expected outcomes. Rather than investing around the system to improve quality, investments are made directly into the system by professionally compensating early childhood educators and ensuring program administrators have the operating supports they need to run efficient and effective businesses.

When we make these kinds of shifts, early childhood educators have common foundational guidelines for quality. Families using the trusted caregiver option would be respected for their expectations of care. Families and taxpayers can trust and assume that industry-recognized quality standards are the norm for ECE programs. Professional preparation programs can equip graduates to meet baseline expectations of practice, at a minimum. Administrators can afford built-in resources, incentives, and accountability protocols to ensure that baseline standards are consistently met. Quality is easier to understand, straightforward to attain, and created and overseen by early childhood professionals who know the work best. Programs can then build on this baseline to offer families specialized options.

Rethink Governance and Decision-Making

FIG. 17

Rethink Governance and Decision-Making

OUTDATED MINDSET

- * Policymakers know best. They make all the decisions about funding, programming, standards, and the like. The views of educators and families are an afterthought.
- * Government agencies are singularly responsible for the competence of practitioners.

- * Public support for child care is a gift, and the fact that it is hard to navigate is just the price that families, educators, and administrators must pay.
- * Government systems must be cumbersome because they are accountable for public dollars.

TRANSFORMATIVE MINDSET

- * Government systems rely on professional standards and codes that are established and held by the ECE profession, just as they do with other professions (plumbers, nurses, doctors, architects, dental assistants, etc.).
- * Families know and can communicate their needs and the needs of their children. Government systems rely on the expertise of families.

- * The bureaucracy should serve those who depend on it: families, educators, and administrators. No one benefits from excessive paperwork and unrealistic rules.
- * Government systems can be accessible, supportive, and accountable for public dollars.

BIAS CHECK

Note and avoid affirming the following biases: Governance and decision-making hierarchies in the current child care system have nothing to do with the biases rooted in our nation's social, political, economic, and educational structures.

OUTDATED MINDSET

The prevailing mindset is that government officials and lawmakers are the experts and have all the answers and the power; after all, they are responsible for providing resources that their communities need and for enforcing regulations to protect the public from harm. They have a stewardship responsibility for taxpayer dollars and must withstand public scrutiny. To the extent policymakers need additional input, they turn mostly to academics and think tank staffers. Or they offer one or two public comment/input sessions once a plan has been hatched.

It is also assumed that public support for child care is a gift; the fact that the system is clunky and hard to navigate is just the price that families, educators, and administrators must pay. This is amplified when the system is designed to make families meet income thresholds and the like to receive support. Government systems must be cumbersome because they are accountable for public dollars, and we must prevent people from cheating the system.

This outdated thinking hurts the field in several ways. Top-down policies often ignore the practical realities of everyday implementation, neglect the voices of those who are closest to the system, and make assumptions about the system that are often not true because of the lack of proximity to those who are actually experiencing the system. Many of these mandates are complicated, making it even more difficult for them to be implemented well.

By contrast, other industries center the experiences of their users more. The human-centered design experience, for instance, has transformed patient care, hospitality services, and retail customer experiences. Companies are responding to their stakeholders. Governments and the social services field seem to be the



It [also] is assumed that public support for child care is a gift.

exceptions to this otherwise universal rule: Listen closely to your customers and adjust your products and services accordingly.

TRANSFORMATIVE MINDSET

Proximity experts have lived experience and/or professional knowledge; they have unique expertise in what will—or will not—work in the real world. They have a meaningful voice in crafting new policies and practices.

Families have expectations of care that include being respected and seen as a part of the child care accountability system. When regulating ECE programs, government agencies leverage, not supplant or dismiss, the guidelines and systems established by the profession—just as they do with other professions, from architecture to nursing, from plumbing to midwifery.

Leveraging and building upon that which is available is a recognition that the ECE profession is not a blank slate. It comes with guidelines and systems that include, but are not limited to, Early Learning Program Standards (and accompanying accreditation), Code of Ethical Conduct, Professional Standards and Competencies of Early Childhood Educators (and accompanying accreditation), Advancing Equity in Early Childhood Education, and the Child Development Associate (CDA) credential.

A broad-based group of nonprofit organizations (Power to the Profession) published a detailed blueprint³⁴ for such a shared governance system in spring 2020. The Power to the Profession task force provided this recommendation.

“The voice at the forefront of implementation must be the early childhood profession. As federal, state, and local governments and agencies move forward to implement the Task Force recommendations, they must engage regularly and meaningfully with the ECE profession, ensuring that early childhood educators who work with children every day have a central role in shaping the present and future of their profession.”

DEMONSTRATING THAT THE IDEAL IS POSSIBLE

The proximity experts whose experiences and knowledge have shaped and are guiding this initiative made one thing clear at the very beginning: We must use their insights to make the ideal child care real. Elevating the many pain points of the current child care system without actively moving toward the ideal would be a waste of their time and expertise. We agree.

Since the launch of WeVision EarlyEd, proximity experts have urged us to do more than pilot small tweaks—which, frankly, was our original thinking. Had we done so, we would have found ourselves focused on micro innovations rather

than true systems-level change. That could have reinforced the existing system rather than reimagining it. Policy influencers, such as lawmakers and full-time advocates, also urged us to make the proximity expert ideals less philosophical and more concrete.

In the end, we opted to partner with and support 22 child care sites as Solutions Lab sites. These sites represent all of America—rural, urban, and suburban locations—and include both ECE programs and trusted caregivers. We have asked them to do what it takes, starting from where they are now, to make the ideal as real as possible in every aspect. In other words, dream big and do it all.

So, what does this “WeVision-ed” future look like in reality?



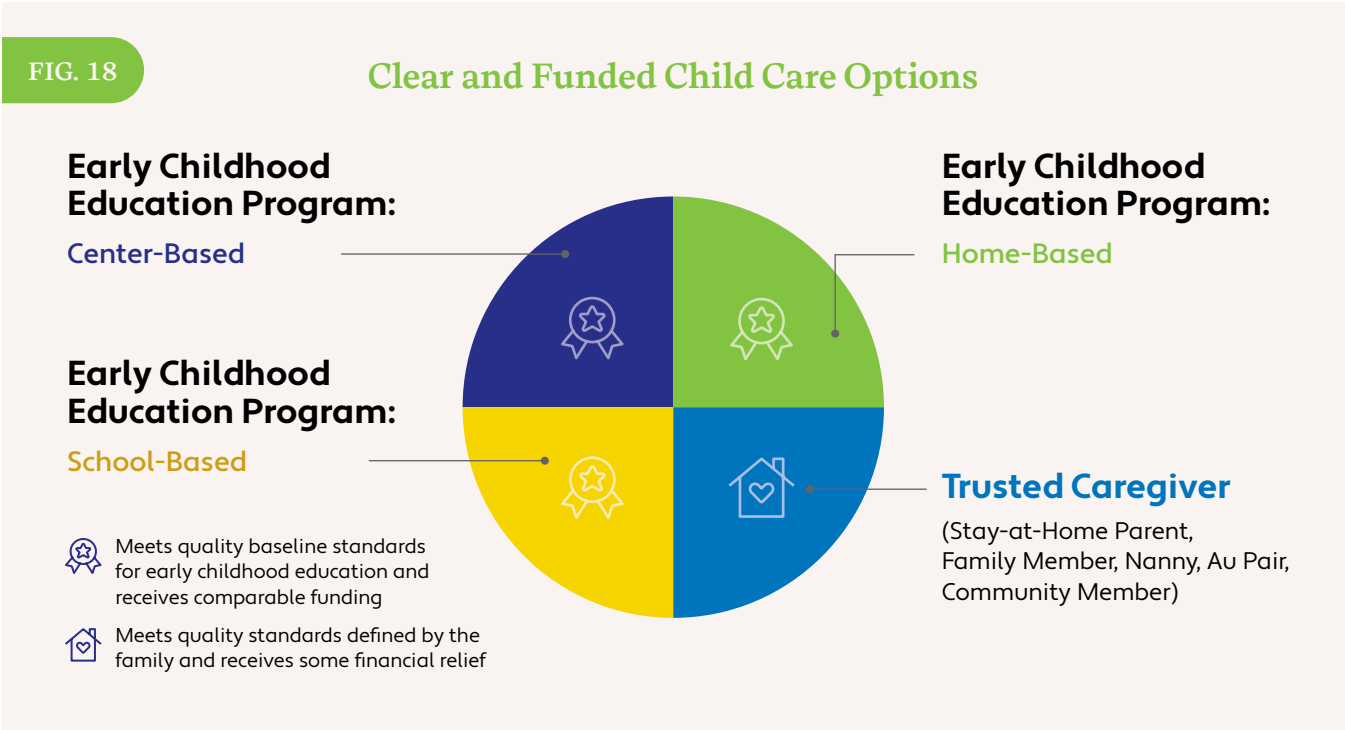
1. Families Can Have Clear and Funded Child Care Options

Families want a range of clear options so they can make informed decisions based on their individual needs. This graphic illustrates what these options could look like in the ideal system. WeVision EarlyEd participants did not use these exact terms, but their ideas are captured here.

- * **ECE programs** (regardless of their setting type, specialty, or philosophy) are implemented by intentionally prepared and competent early childhood educators who are accountable for meeting industry-recognized standards of practice defined by their professional associations and government agencies.
- * **Trusted caregivers** are individuals who work under the direct auspices of families without significant oversight from ECE professional associations and government agencies. Trusted caregivers can include a stay-at-home parent, family member, community member, co-op, off-the-grid educator, retired educator, nanny, or au pair.

“Clear and funded” is an essential part of the message. “Clear” means the available child care options would be easy for families to identify and evaluate, so they can ultimately making a decision based on what is most appropriate, accessible, and affordable for them. Quality would be more consistent across and within states.

“Funded” refers to funding from government entities (federal, state, and local) to support the affordability and sustainability of all child care options, including trusted caregivers and stay-at-home parents. It is in our society’s best interests to ensure that all children are given a strong start during those critical early years and a firm foundation on which to build. In addition, publicly funded child care options will increase labor participation and strengthen the economy. This support would enhance child care quality across the board and make more options available and affordable to all families.



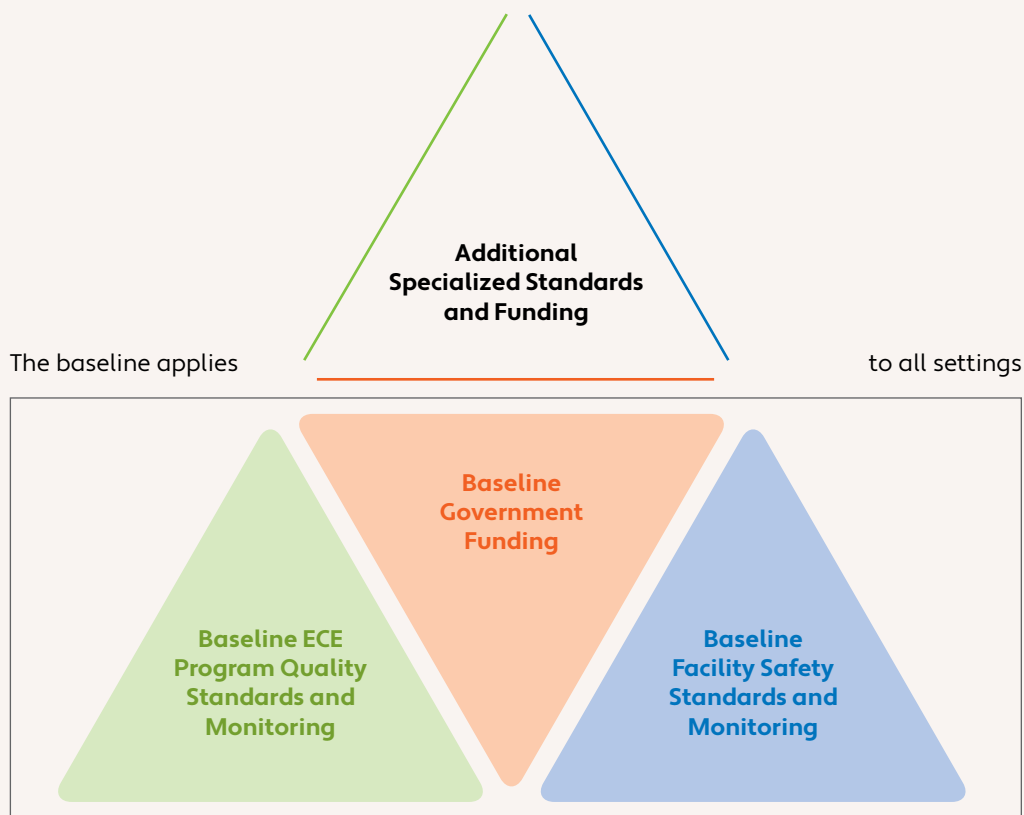
2. Regulations Governing ECE Programs Can Be Streamlined and Right-Sized

All ECE programs, regardless of government funding source, geographic location, and building type (i.e., home, center, or school), can be supported to meet baseline ECE program quality

standards and facility safety standards, at a minimum. Beyond the baseline, other specialized standards and funding can be added.

FIG. 19

Build the Quality Baseline



Those most responsible include:

- * Industry-recognized ECE professional associations
- * Federal, state, and local government programs
- * Government regulatory agencies

3. Child Care Policies Can Be Designed To Make the Ideal Real

Public funding and policies must be designed and reengineered. Below, we are offering a new resource that can guide advocates and policymakers at all levels of government. The WeVision EarlyEd Policy Essentials are

five crucial policy considerations that will move us toward child care policies that are intentionally designed to make the ideal child care system real.

FIG. 20

WeVision EarlyEd Policy Essentials

- 1** Funding for child care should support the needs of families and the development of young children from birth through age 5.

This policy essential recognizes that the first five years of life—and particularly the first three—is the most important phase in human development. Early learning lays the foundation for all future learning.

This policy essential challenges the notion that only learning experiences that occur when children are old enough to attend school matter.
- 2** Funding for child care should be available to all families that need support, regardless of income, employment, status, employer, race, gender, religious affiliation, or geographic location.

This policy essential recognizes that most families with young children need some level of child care support.

This policy essential challenges the notion that child care supports should only be provided for extreme cases, such as during a public health crisis, if families earn poverty-level wages, or when employment is mandated.
- 3** Funding for child care should support two clear care options: ECE programs and trusted caregivers (stay-at-home parents, family members, nannies, other community members, etc.).

 - * Funding for ECE programs should cover the true cost of providing such care.
 - * Families that choose a trusted caregiver should receive financial support.

This policy essential recognizes that child care costs—like the costs of playgrounds, libraries, and elementary schools—should not solely be the family’s responsibility or burden. Government funding should support the two main options families want, trusted caregivers and ECE programs, which are both valid. And further, government should support the true cost of providing ECE (inclusive of facility maintenance, adequate workforce compensation, quality materials, and more).

This policy essential challenges the notion that all families want the same type of child care support or that one child care option is better than the other.

WeVision EarlyEd Policy Essentials (continued)

- 4** Child care governance and accountability should be shared with families, ECE professional organizations, and government agencies to reduce undue administrative burden for families and ECE programs while maintaining adequate safety and quality.

This policy essential recognizes that many parties have a role to play in governing safety and quality regulations, and those roles must be streamlined to be cost-effective and implemented well. It also legitimizes family expectations of care and industry-recognized standards.

This policy essential challenges the notion that ignoring safety and quality regulations will reduce cost or that duplicative and conflicting regulations from different agencies will increase safety and quality.

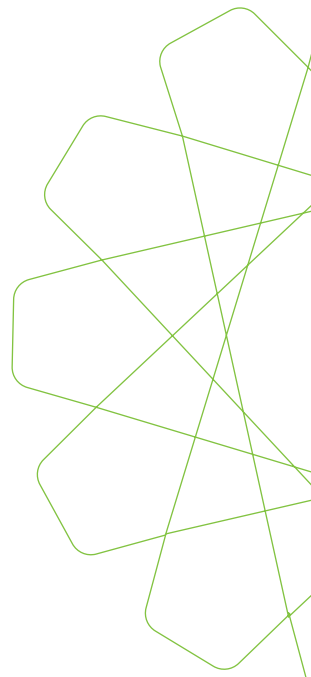
- 5** Accountability for the quality of child care should be appropriate for the two clear and distinct child care options: trusted caregivers and ECE programs. Regulations should be right-sized and aligned to industry standards.

At a baseline, trusted caregivers must meet families' caregiving expectations and comply with state and federal laws that protect the welfare of children.

At a baseline, ECE programs must meet facility licensing (mostly facility safety) and industry-recognized standards of quality (mostly child experience and early learning).

This policy essential recognizes that accountability for government funding matters, but it must be appropriate and right-sized for the two clear child care options.

This policy essential challenges the notion that accountability for government funding must be unduly burdensome and prescriptive for practitioners and families.





WeVision EarlyEd Solutions Lab sites and partners connected and shared early insights during a two-day gathering in February 2025.

4. Solutions Lab Sites Provide Evidence and Inspiration

The Bainum Family Foundation has committed significant resources to support WeVision EarlyEd Solutions Lab sites across the country. We are demonstrating, in a tangible and practical way, that the ideal child care as defined by proximity experts can be made real—right now. Their ideal is within reach.

WeVision EarlyEd Solutions Lab sites include both child care options—ECE and trusted caregivers. They are diverse in location, history, families, and children served, and in their business structure. (See figures on pages 51–55.) Accountabilities for the partnership are clearly defined.

Mutual Accountability

Rooted in data from proximity experts and in alignment with the core mindset shifts and policy essentials, Solutions Lab sites are funded and held accountable for:

- * Supporting the growth and development of young children birth through age 5
- * Operating within the scope of the child care option they select—ECE programs (e.g., ECE-center, ECE-home) or trusted caregivers (e.g., stay-at-home parents, family members, nannies, other community members, etc.)
- * Supporting child care affordability for families regardless of income, employment, employer, race, gender, religious affiliation, or geographic location
- * Meeting quality standards and adhering to government regulations in a manner that is appropriate and right for each child care option
 - At a baseline, trusted caregivers must meet families' caregiving expectations and comply with state and federal laws that protect the welfare of children
 - At a baseline, early childhood education programs must meet facility licensing (mostly facility safety) and industry-recognized standards of quality (mostly child experience and early learning)
- * Determining an appropriate annual cost per child formula for providing the child care option they select
 - Families that choose a trusted caregiver should receive financial support
 - ECE programs should cover the true cost of providing such care, including compensating competent early childhood educators
- * Sharing data and lessons learned to advance and inform child care research, policy, and practice

In turn, the Bainum Family Foundation is held accountable for:

- * Providing the autonomy, agility, and accountability WeVision EarlyEd Solutions Lab sites need to innovate and make the ideal real
- * Providing stable and consistent funding to WeVision EarlyEd Solutions Lab sites for at least five years
- * Creating peer learning and sharing opportunities for WeVision EarlyEd Solutions Lab sites
- * Identifying partnerships to deepen impact and sustainability
- * Supporting complementary projects that are paving the way to making the ideal child care real on a large scale
- * Amplifying data and lessons learned from solutions lab sites to advance and inform child care research, policy, and practice

WeVision Solutions Lab Sites and Partners/Intermediaries

This inaugural cohort of 22 sites spans diverse geographic locations and child care options.

FIG. 22 **Solutions Lab Sites and Partners/Intermediaries**

SOLUTIONS LAB SITES	STATE(S)/DISTRICT	CHILD CARE OPTION
AdventHealth for Children West Lakes Early Learning Center	Florida	ECE-Center
Brynmor Early Education & Preschool, Lorton Location	Virginia	ECE-Center
Educare DC – Deanwood Campus Location	District of Columbia	ECE-Center
Educare DC – Parkside Location		
Gretchen’s House at HighScope <i>(Funded through HighScope, a Bainum Family Foundation Partner and Intermediary)</i>	Michigan	ECE-Center
Operation Child Care Project	Florida, Virginia	Trusted Caregiver
Semillitas Early Learning Center	District of Columbia	ECE-Center
Smart Start of Transylvania County <i>(Funded through Home Grown, a Bainum Family Foundation Partner and Intermediary)</i>	North Carolina	Trusted Caregiver
Toledo Day Nursery	Ohio	ECE-Center
United Planning Organization – Davis Elementary School Location	District of Columbia	ECE-Center
United Planning Organization – Randle Highlands Early Childhood Education Center Location		

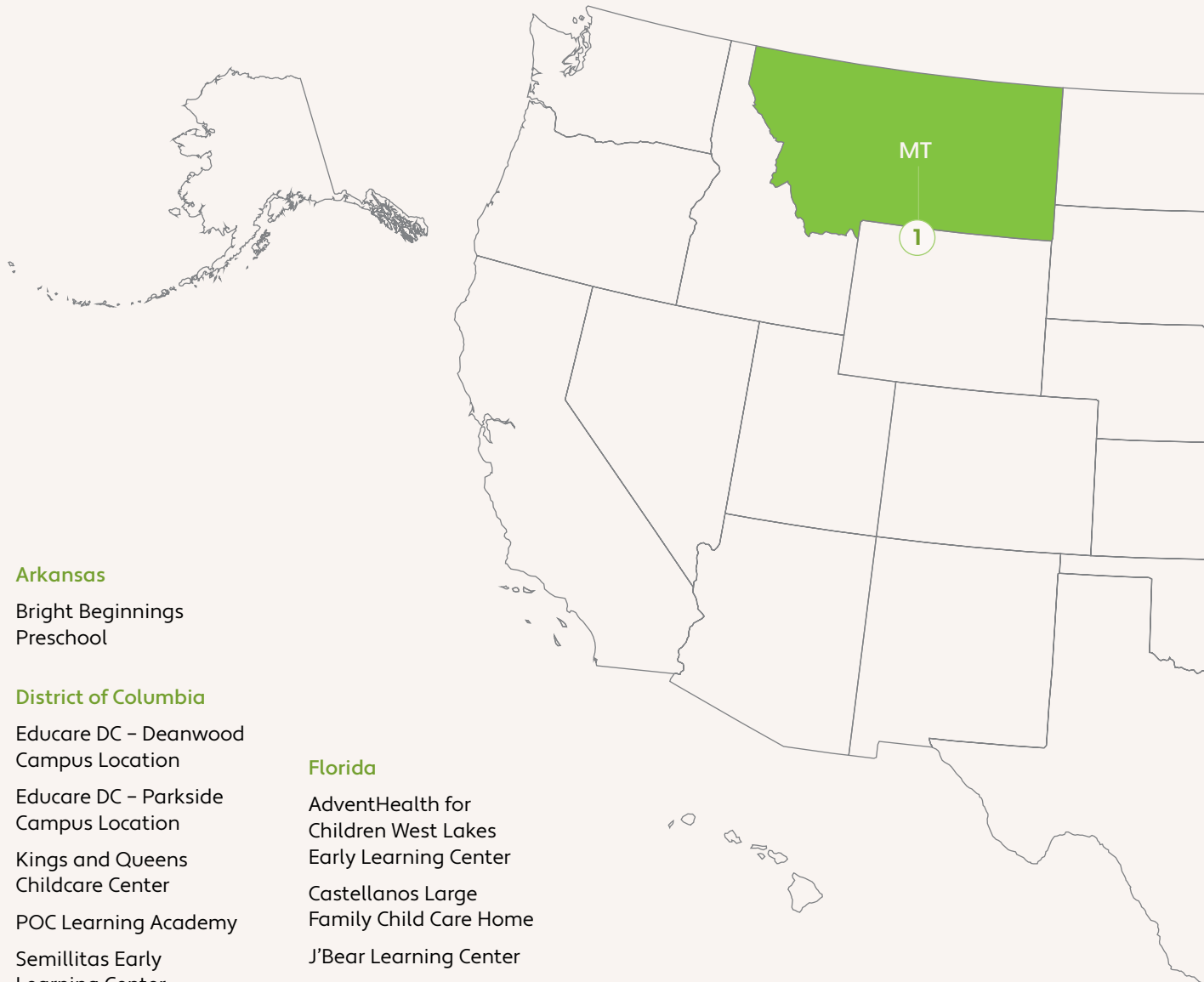
FIG. 22

Solutions Lab Sites and Partners/Intermediaries (continued)

SOLUTIONS LAB SITES	STATE(S)/ DISTRICT	CHILD CARE OPTION
<i>The following sites are funded through the National Association for Family Child Care, a Bainum Family Foundation Partner and Intermediary</i>		
ABC's Childtime	Maryland	ECE-Home
Bright Beginnings Preschool	Arkansas	ECE-Home
Castellanos Large Family Child Care Home	Florida	ECE-Home
Children's Garden	New Jersey	ECE-Home
G & T Daycare Montessori Program	Pennsylvania	ECE-Home
J'Bear Learning Center	Florida	ECE-Home
Journey Preschool	Maryland	ECE-Home
Kings and Queens Childcare Center	District of Columbia	ECE-Home
Munchkin Land	Montana	ECE-Home
POC Learning Academy	District of Columbia	ECE-Home
Precious Moments Family Childcare	Maryland	ECE-Home

FIG. 23

Solutions Lab Sites by State



Arkansas

Bright Beginnings
Preschool

District of Columbia

Educare DC – Deanwood
Campus Location
Educare DC – Parkside
Campus Location
Kings and Queens
Childcare Center
POC Learning Academy
Semillitas Early
Learning Center
United Planning
Organization – Davis
Elementary School
Location
United Planning
Organization – Randle
Highlands Early
Childhood
Education Center Location

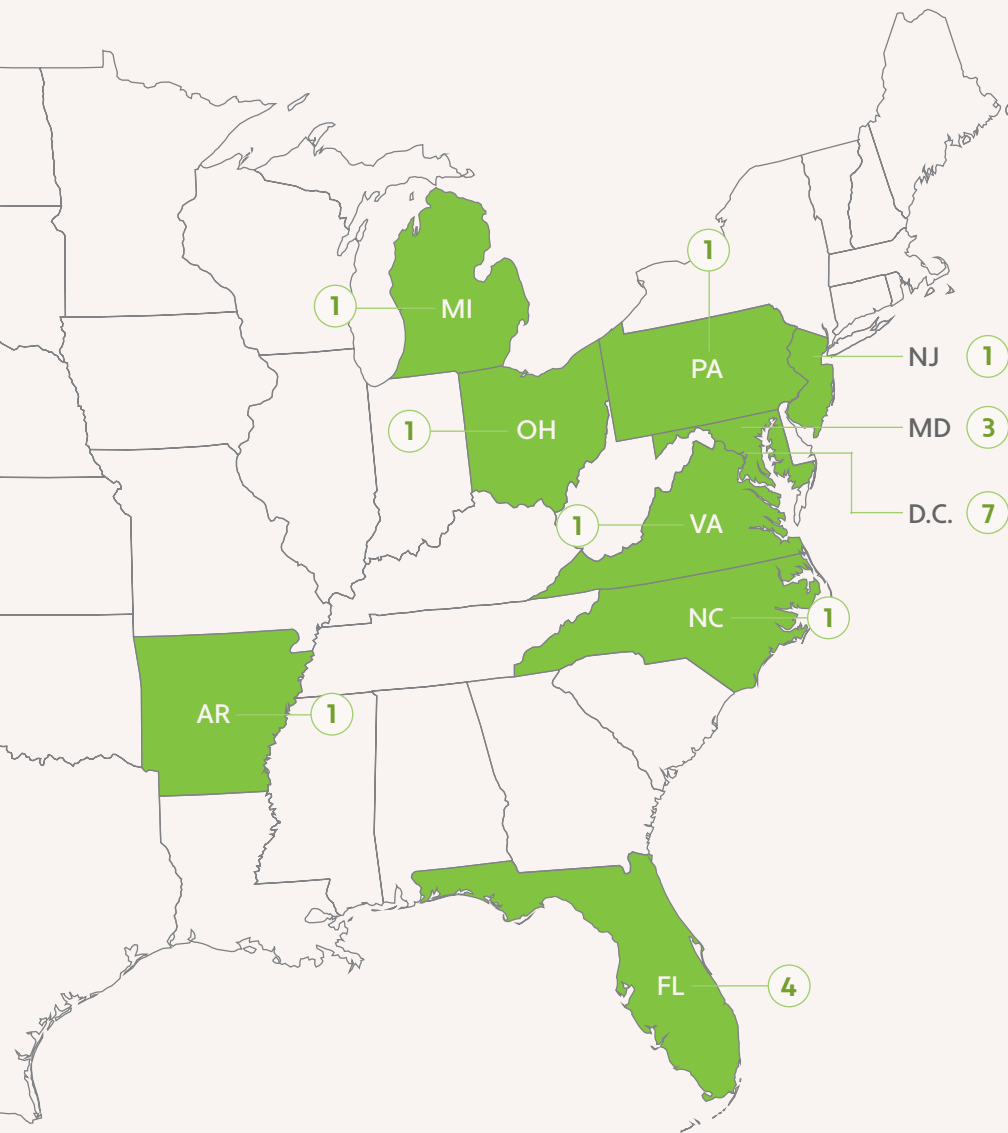
Florida

AdventHealth for
Children West Lakes
Early Learning Center
Castellanos Large
Family Child Care Home
J’Bear Learning Center
Operation Child
Care Project

Maryland

ABC’s Childtime
Journey Preschool
Precious Moments
Family Childcare

= Number of sites per state



Michigan
Gretchen's House
at HighScope

Montana
Munchkin Land

New Jersey
Children's Garden

North Carolina
Smart Start of
Transylvania County

Ohio
Toledo Day Nursery

Pennsylvania
G & T Daycare
Montessori Program

Virginia
Brynmor Early
Education & Preschool,
Lorton Location

5. Early Insights From Solutions Lab Sites

Evaluation and learning are key components of this initiative. However, we are also intentional about ensuring that proximity experts and the WeVision EarlyEd Solutions Lab sites drive the research agenda. WeVision EarlyEd not only challenges outdated mindsets about child care but also challenges outdated and harmful research practices. Too often, rigid research agendas, not informed by the field,

restrict implementation and innovation. As a result, evaluation and knowledge capture will intensify in fall 2025 after all stakeholders codesign an evaluation plan that is ethically grounded and appropriate.

In the interim, we are able to share eight early-stage learning and insights.



EARLY INSIGHT

Bifurcating ECE Funding by Age Affects the Stability, Sustainability, and Enrollment at ECE-Centers and ECE-Homes.

Bifurcating pre-K and infants/toddlers into separate systems with separate funding sources and funding formulas shifts enrollment patterns and affects the financial sustainability of ECE programs. We have observed that in most cases, enrollment of 3- and 4-year-olds in ECE-centers and ECE-homes is lower in states/communities where publicly funded pre-K seats in public schools are accessible and readily available to serve most families.

In D.C., which has had publicly funded universal pre-K since 2008, 84% of all 3- and 4-year-old children were served by universal pre-K programs in FY2023. More than 90% of these pre-K-age children are enrolled in public and public charter schools.³⁵ While this increases ECE affordability and accessibility for families, the bifurcation impacts the enrollment and stability of ECE-centers and ECE-homes. ECE-centers and ECE-homes in D.C. have to create a business model that relies mostly on infants and toddlers. WeVision EarlyEd funding helps bolster the enrollment and sustainability of lab sites that are impacted by the age bifurcation of funding streams.

Site Enrollment Data in February 2025

EDUCARE DC, PARKSIDE AND DEANWOOD CAMPUS LOCATIONS



UNITED PLANNING ORGANIZATION, RANDLE HIGHLANDS EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION CENTER LOCATION



SEMILLITAS EARLY LEARNING CENTER



POC LEARNING ACADEMY



A Range of Child Assessment Tools Are Used, but Few Use Child Assessments for Teacher Accountability Purposes.

Administrators and educators in ECE-centers and ECE-homes use a variety of formal and informal assessment tools to document child growth and development. These include the Ages and Stages Questionnaires (ASQ), Ages & Stages Questionnaires: Social-Emotional, Bracken School Readiness Assessment, Devereux Early Childhood Assessment for Infants and Toddlers, Developmental Indicators for the Assessment of Learning (DIAL-3), HighScope COR Advantage, Teaching Strategies GOLD, Work Sampling System, educator observations and documentation, and health screenings.

Most ECE-centers and ECE-homes use child assessment data to inform families and improve and plan experiences for children. Fewer use child assessment data to hold staff accountable for their practice. It is important to note that none of the assessments listed above were designed for accountability purposes.

Here are early insights from ECE-homes.

“I implement authentic and developmental assessment to track children’s growth through daily observations and portfolios that include their work and photographs. I use formative assessments to identify strengths and areas for improvement, and I communicate consistently with families to share progress. Additionally, I review results and adjust curriculum based on each child’s needs, ensuring that all children have adequate opportunities to learn and grow.”

– CASTELLANOS LARGE FAMILY CHILD CARE HOME

“G & T Daycare Montessori program incorporates both formal and informal assessments, allowing the teacher to engage with children, then observe, document, and track each child’s progress over time. This documentation ensures that each child’s learning journey is accurately captured and recorded, with assessments reflecting a holistic view of their development. Through observation-based assessment techniques and individualized interactions, we can effectively monitor progress and implement necessary adjustments or interventions to support each child’s unique learning pathway as they prepare for kindergarten.”

– G & T DAYCARE MONTESSORI PROGRAM

“I regularly compare my observations with the Arkansas Child Development Early Learning Standards and the Arkansas Kindergarten Readiness Indicators. This alignment ensures that my assessments are grounded in established benchmarks, facilitating a comprehensive understanding of each child’s progress.”

– BRIGHT BEGINNINGS PRESCHOOL

Families using trusted caregivers are also assessing their children's growth and development.

“This program is an answer to a prayer for how to connect my compassion for and passion to serve military families, especially young moms, to the real-time needs that exist every day for these special families. [One family I served] has a child with autism. The child hasn't even been diagnosed yet. The parent was unaware of all the services that are available to her

to educate and care for her children. I shared many resources with her, so hopefully she can get the children into VPK (Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten education program) and pre-K. I feel like eventually, I may have talked myself out of a job, but I know there is better for them. We connected through Facebook, and she is still looking for care on the nights I am unable to provide care.”

– TRUSTED CAREGIVER WITH OPERATION CHILD CARE PROJECT



Child Care Options Can Coexist Within a Cohesive System.

Child care options are too varied, fragmented, and hierarchical. These options have identities and perceived value that are shaped by fragmented government funding (Head Start, private pre-K, child care subsidy, public pre-K) and building types (child's home, practitioner's home, school, center).

WeVision EarlyEd Solutions Lab sites are adjusting to operating and coexisting with clear, distinct, and unifying scopes—ECE-home, ECE-center, and trusted caregiver.

“In rural Transylvania County in western North Carolina, we are surrounded by families where a ‘one size fits all’ child care system is not working and hasn’t been for a long time. WeVision has encouraged us to continue the work of giving families options, as every family deserves the right to pick what works best for them and their children. We believe every child in our county has a right to thrive in whatever environment is best suited to them and their families.”

– SMART START OF TRANSYLVANIA COUNTY

“I’m excited to see these solutions unfold and help bridge these divides for a stronger, more unified early education system.”

– POC LEARNING ACADEMY

“Child care options can be more cohesive by fostering collaboration among various providers and stakeholders, ensuring that all services are accessible and equitable. One way to achieve this is by implementing community-based initiatives that encourage partnerships among parents, home-based, center-based, and school-based care and can enhance consistency and quality across the spectrum of child care options.”

– SEMILLITAS EARLY LEARNING CENTER

EARLY INSIGHT

Supporting Affordability for Families Desegregates Child Care.

Studies have found ECE settings to be far more segregated socioeconomically and racially than elementary or secondary school settings.^{36,37} Some ECE-centers and ECE-homes primarily serve families that earn higher incomes, while others primarily serve families that earn incomes low enough to be eligible for government subsidies. To make the ideal child care real, right now, solutions lab sites are required to support

affordability for families that are eligible for publicly subsidized child care as well as those who aren't.

There tends to be more widespread socioeconomic diversity at WeVision EarlyEd Solutions Lab sites than locations that are operating within the confines of the currently segregated child care system.



FIG. 24

Data from United Planning Organization (UPO)

FAMILIES ENROLLED IN JANUARY 2025	WEVISION EARLYED SOLUTIONS LAB SITE UPO – Randle Highlands Early Childhood Education Center Location	NON-WEVISION EARLYED LAB SITE UPO – C.W. Harris Elementary School Location
% of families that earn income that exceeds the eligibility requirement for government subsidies	44%	0%
% of families that earn income low enough to meet the eligibility requirement for government subsidies	56%	100%

A private-pay parent recently lost his job, reducing the family income. He reached out to see if UPO could reduce his child’s tuition so he could keep his child in UPO – Randle Highlands Early Childhood Education Center location. The program was able to offer the family a scholarship. His response:

“Thank you so much for this generous offer. This is incredibly helpful, and we are so thankful for this. I am committed to my daughter’s success in life, and I want the very best for her. I believe that UPO – Randle Highlands is best for her because she has been thriving since enrolling at the center.”

– PARENT, UPO – RANDLE HIGHLANDS EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION CENTER



FIG. 25

Data from Brynmor Early Education & Preschool

FAMILIES ENROLLED IN JANUARY 2025	WEVISION EARLYED SOLUTIONS LAB SITE Brynmor Early Education & Preschool – Lorton Location	NON-WEVISION EARLYED LAB SITE Brynmor Early Education & Preschool – Diplotots Location
% of families that earn income that exceeds the eligibility requirement for government subsidies	90%	100%
% of families that earn income low enough to meet the eligibility requirement for government subsidies	10%	0%

“As a single mother, the WeVision EarlyEd scholarship was a true blessing for our family. I was in the ‘missed middle,’ making too much to qualify for state support but making too little to afford quality care for my child. This scholarship helped bridge the gap and allowed my child to thrive in an incredible environment, which I would not have been able to afford on my own. The generosity of the WeVision EarlyEd initiative has impacted our lives in significant ways, and we are forever grateful for the support. Brynmor did not only provide assistance but also gave my family the peace of mind that we need.”

– PARENT, BRYNMOR EARLY EDUCATION & PRESCHOOL, LORTON LOCATION

EARLY INSIGHT

Families Need Child Care Support—Even Those With ‘Good Jobs.’

As noted previously, WeVision EarlyEd Solutions Lab sites are required to support affordability for families that do not meet the rigid income eligibility requirements needed to access government child care subsidies and Head Start programs. Families that have applied for and/or have access to affordable child care through WeVision EarlyEd Solutions Lab sites include working families with what is perceived as “good jobs”³⁸—a group of families overlooked by outdated child care policies, inadequate funding, and erroneous assumptions about what these families should afford. These overlooked families include those working as public school teachers, police officers, university professors, military personnel, small-business owners, and health care workers.

“To make our program more affordable and accessible for families in our community, we exclusively accept subsidized children, ensuring that families who need financial assistance can receive it. I’d like to explore additional strategies to further support families. Implementing a sliding scale fee structure based on family income could make our program accessible to more families.”

– POC LEARNING ACADEMY

EARLY INSIGHT

Approaches to Affordable Child Care Can Vary.

WeVision EarlyEd Solutions Lab sites are given the autonomy to innovate because they know their families best. With authentic family relations and funding flexibility, they have developed a range of innovative solutions to make child care more affordable for families.

Examples from ECE-Centers:

- * **Toledo Day Nursery** – No family paid child care tuition in November and December 2024. Administrators had observed that families were most stressed during these last months of the year. With this targeted universalism approach, 100% of families received some child care support (universal); those eligible for government subsidies received more (targeted). All of the center’s private-paying families (those not eligible for subsidy) are receiving roughly a 30% discounted rate for child care through the remainder of the year. Scholarships that cover 100% tuition are available for families that have sudden events in their household and need assistance; four families currently are utilizing this scholarship. Toledo Day Nursery staff are receiving 100% discounted child care as an incentive; seven staff members currently employed have children in the program.
- * **Educare DC** – Sixteen families paid 15%–30% of Educare DC’s child care tuition in 2024. These families earned income that exceeds the eligibility requirement for government subsidies.

- * **UPO - Randle Highlands Early Childhood Education Center Location** – Fourteen families paid 0%–5% of UPO’s child care tuition for 11 months in 2024 when this site first opened and was not eligible to receive government child care subsidies. Now, about seven families pay 0%–5% of the annual child care tuition, while the remainder can leverage government subsidies.

- * **Gretchen’s House at HighScope** – Six families paid 15%–30% of Gretchen’s House at HighScope’s child care tuition in 2024. These families were not eligible for government child care subsidies.

- * **Brynmor Early Education & Preschool, Lorton Location** – Twenty-two families with household income that fell between \$69,000 and \$120,000 paid 10% of their household income to cover their child care tuition. There was no additional cost for the three families with multiple children, as they paid the fixed rate of 10% of their household income.

Examples from ECE-Homes:

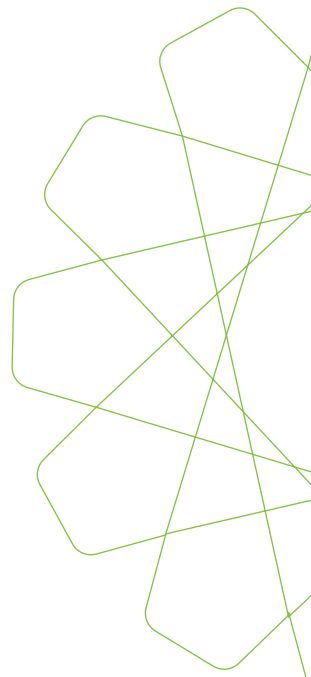
- * **ABC’s Childtime** – Some government-funded child care tuition support is only provided for a portion of a year or a portion of the day. Eligible families will receive seamless tuition support and will not be burdened with the cost of this gap.

- * **J’Bear Learning Center** – Each month, at least one family will receive a free week of tuition by implementing a game or some type of drawing.

- * **Children’s Garden** – Some families that are not eligible for government child care subsidies will receive tuition support through a scholarship program.

Example from a Trusted Caregiver:

- * **Operation Child Care Project** – The first cohort of HomeFront Help included 20 community members to fill the gap in care for the military population in Okaloosa County (Florida), where almost 80% of the population is military affiliated. In the first three months, 42 families accessed safe, quality care that met their unique needs. This represented 408 days of care provided. Operation Child Care Project further supported these families with comprehensive case management services to ensure long-term, sustainable solutions.



Right-Sizing Regulations Boosts Funding for Quality and Affordability.

WeVision EarlyEd Solutions Lab sites are accountable for quality. However, the WeVision EarlyEd initiative did not allocate funding for defining, regulating, and monitoring quality standards. Instead, we are relying on the established industry-recognized standards and accountability systems

selected by each lab site. This streamlined approach allows us to avoid the time, cost, and administrative burden associated with duplicating and supplanting what already exists. The quality cost saving from this lean operation is redirected to families and partner sites instead.

“By giving WeVision EarlyEd Solutions Lab sites the autonomy to select industry-recognized quality standards that best fit their communities, we ensure that resources are directed where they matter most—toward children, families, and early educators. Rather than duplicating regulatory efforts or imposing additional administrative layers, this approach empowers programs to operate with the flexibility needed to uphold high-quality standards while also adapting to the unique needs of their communities. By reducing bureaucratic burdens, we prioritize funding for affordability, accessibility, quality, and program innovation. This reinforces the idea that quality and accessibility can coexist—when programs have the freedom to implement trusted standards, they can focus on what truly matters: delivering enriching early learning experiences, supporting families, and investing in the well-being of educators.”

– DEMETRIA JOYCE, DIRECTOR, STRATEGY IMPLEMENTATION, EARLY CHILDHOOD,
BAINUM FAMILY FOUNDATION

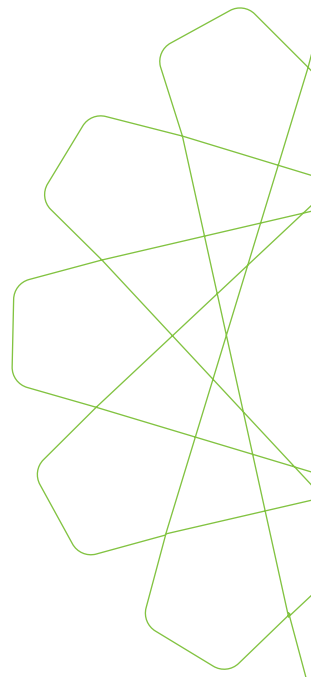
Aligning Educator Qualification Requirements Can Minimize Confusion and Administrative Burden.

ECE-centers and ECE-homes rely on multiple streams of government funding, each with its own educator qualification requirements.

Administrators at ECE-centers and -homes have to ensure educators meet the credential and training requirements of multiple sets of educator qualifications standards, including those required by the following. Some are meeting three distinct sets of standards, while others meet up to six, depending on how the program is funded.

- * Head Start
- * Early Head Start
- * Public Pre-K
- * Child Care Subsidy
- * National Accreditation
- * Facility Licensing

Aligning government regulations with industry-recognized standards can help reduce the regulatory and cost burden. The Unifying Framework for the Early Childhood Education Profession recommends that the industry, regardless of public or private funding source, aligns and moves toward one profession with three distinct and meaningful designations—Early Childhood Educator I, II, III.³⁸





SECTION

6

GET INVOLVED

The WeVision EarlyEd initiative provides an opportunity for all of us, particularly policy influencers, to deepen our understanding of what families, educators, and administrators are experiencing in the current system and what they want and need in their ideal child care system. →



This report initially focused close to home—the District of Columbia. Our inquiries and discussions were with families, educators, and administrators using and working within the D.C. child care system; our data illustrate the strengths and gaps in that system.



The core shifts and overarching system issues identified could be about any community in the United States.

However, WeVision EarlyEd has expanded its scope. The core shifts and the overarching system issues identified could be about any community in the United States. Wherever you are, we are eager to partner with you. If you are also grappling with making the ideal real, reach out! We can provide briefings or presentations on this work and guidance or technical assistance for your community.

LEARN HOW YOU CAN MAKE THE IDEAL CHILD CARE REAL

Educators, Administrators, and Families

- 1 Sign up to follow and inform this initiative.
 - 2 Share and discuss this report with your network.
 - 3 Follow WeVision EarlyEd on social media (Instagram and LinkedIn).
 - 4 Document and share your current and ideal experiences with professional advocates, policymakers, and government agency staff.
 - 5 Join and connect with other advocates. You are not alone.
 - 6 Review and rethink the outdated mindsets/ideas that keep the status quo in place.
 - 7 Promote the more transformative mindsets/thinking described in this report.
 - 8 Vote for political candidates who are committed to making your ideal system more real or consider running for a political office yourself.
-

Policy Advocacy Professionals

- 1 Sign up to follow and inform this project.
 - 2 Share and discuss this report with your network.
 - 3 Follow WeVision EarlyEd on social media (Instagram and LinkedIn).
 - 4 Seek equitable opportunities to learn more about and elevate the current experiences of educators, administrators, and families, and pay particular attention to those who have been historically marginalized because of their race, culture, gender, income, immigration status, and/or abilities.
 - 5 Review and rethink the outdated mindsets/ideas that keep the status quo in place. Promote the more transformative mindsets/thinking described in this report.
 - 6 Build alliances with other policy advocates to advance public policies (with public financing) that can help make the ideal real.
 - 7 Hold government staff and policymakers accountable for reducing pain points and making the ideal system more real.
-

Philanthropic Organizations

- 1 Sign up to follow and inform this project.
- 2 Share and discuss this report with your network.
- 3 Follow WeVision EarlyEd on social media (Instagram and LinkedIn).
- 4 Work alongside your grantees and colleagues to review and rethink the outdated mindsets/ideas that keep the status quo in place. Promote the more transformative mindsets/thinking described in this report.
- 5 Fund or co-fund opportunities to help educators, administrators, and families document and share their current and ideal experiences, and pay particular attention to those who have been historically marginalized because of their race, culture, gender, income, immigration status, and/or abilities.
- 6 Fund or co-fund advocacy organizations (including 501(c)(4) activities, if possible) to advance public policies (with public financing) that can help make the ideal real.
- 7 Fund or co-fund community organizations that can test practical solutions that make the ideal more real.

Policymakers

- 1 Sign up to follow and inform this project.
 - 2 Share and discuss this report with your network.
 - 3 Follow WeVision EarlyEd on social media (Instagram and LinkedIn).
 - 4 Seek opportunities to learn more about the current experiences of educators, administrators, and families, and pay particular attention to those who have been historically marginalized because of their race, culture, gender, income, immigration status, and/or abilities.
 - 5 Review and rethink the outdated mindsets/thinking that keep the status quo in place. Promote the more transformative mindsets/ideas described in this report.
 - 6 Build alliances with other policymakers to advance public policies and financing that can help make the ideal real.
 - 7 Hold government staff accountable for reducing pain points and making the ideal system more real.
-

Government Agency Staff

- 1 Sign up to follow and inform this project.
 - 2 Share and discuss this report with your network.
 - 3 Follow WeVision EarlyEd on social media (Instagram and LinkedIn).
 - 4 Seek equitable opportunities to learn more about the current experiences of educators, administrators, and families, and pay particular attention to those who have been historically marginalized because of their race, culture, gender, income, immigration status, and/or abilities.
 - 5 Review and rethink the outdated mindsets/ideas that keep the status quo in place. Promote the more transformative mindsets/ideas described in this report.
 - 6 Build alliances with other government agency staff to provide programs and services that can help make the ideal real.
 - 7 Document how your team or agency is reducing pain points and making the ideal system more real.
 - 8 Create the conditions needed to test practical solutions that make the ideal more real.
-

Researchers

- 1 Sign up to follow and inform this project.
- 2 Share and discuss this report with your network.
- 3 Follow WeVision EarlyEd on social media (Instagram and LinkedIn).
- 4 Work alongside colleagues to unpack and rethink the outdated mindsets/ideas that keep the status quo in place. Promote the more transformative mindsets/thinking described in this report.
- 5 Create equitable opportunities to help educators, administrators, and families document and share their current and ideal experiences.
- 6 Document how the current and ideal systems impact educators, administrators, and families, and pay particular attention to those who have been historically marginalized because of their race, culture, gender, income, immigration status, and/or abilities.
- 7 Partner with community organizations (including ECE programs) to test practical solutions that make the ideal more real.

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Alina Buzamat

Javi Henry

Rashida Thurston

Graciela Celada

April Jenkins-West

Lori Torres

Maria Cerella

Ronda Lomax

Lamont Turner

Violeta Chirino

Maribel Perez Mancilla

Maria Villagomez

J.P. Coakley

Lawren McCoy

Shirleeta Williams

Ebony Coward

Katrina McCray

Tynisha Wright

Virginia Cruz

Maria Paola Miranda

These **original proximity experts** were able to share their expertise because the Catapult Design team earned their trust and provided a wide array of human-centered design tools to gather their data and insights.

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Angela Hariche

Phumelele Mthimunye

Laura Ramirez

Haleemah Sadiah

Next, we offer our thanks to the many **ECE professionals** and influencers who provided feedback and added their insights to WeVision EarlyEd at conferences and gatherings across the country. (See Appendix B for a complete list of the conferences and meetings attended from late 2022 through 2024.)

We acknowledge the staff at the **Bainum Family Foundation** who shaped this work. From inception to launch, they provided the strategic thinking and project management needed to make this initiative possible. This includes members of our **Early Childhood team**.

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Demetria Joyce

Grace Meiser

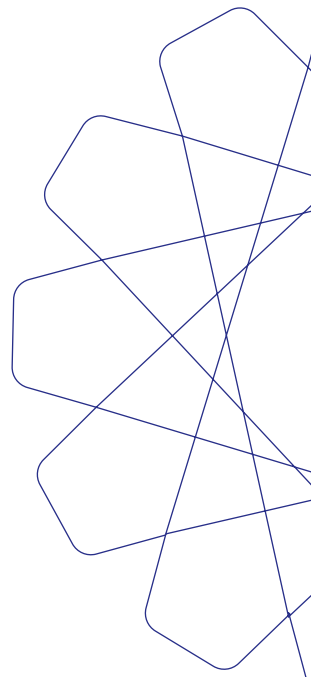
Marica Cox Mitchell

Kiel Smith

Monae Wilmore

Systems-change work requires autonomy, ambiguity, and agility. We are grateful to the **Bainum Family Foundation Board of Directors** for supporting this important work and creating the conditions required to deeply engage in reimagining child care and mobilizing proximity experts and other stakeholders around the necessary change.

Finally, thank you to the **consultants** who worked behind the scenes to bring forward the expertise and lived experiences of families, educators, and administrators.



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APPENDIX A

Community-Driven Design Process for WeVision EarlyEd

In partnership with the Bainum Family Foundation, Catapult Design applied a human-centered design (HCD) approach to reimagining the child care/early childhood education system in Washington, D.C., and beyond through WeVision EarlyEd. The process brought together a diverse group of educators, administrators, and families—our proximity experts—to highlight the challenges of the current system and reimagine one that is equitable for all.

HCD 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. It requires working directly with people in all steps of the design process to solve complex challenges and develop new ideas relevant to their specific context.

Using HCD to redesign the child care system started with surfacing the voices of the community and having those voices drive the process. This participatory approach helps communities:

1. Engage actively in a process that acknowledges their lived experiences and context, empowering them to participate in shaping the future they want to see
2. Draw on existing knowledge and provide feedback on new areas of opportunities for systemic transformation
3. Cocreate prototypes that will enable a more equitable system and deliver long-term impact
4. Challenge existing mental models of how the system should operate that are harmful to the people within the system
5. Inform an integrated experience that illustrates the interconnected experiences of families, educators, and administrators

Catapult Design started by doing extensive background research and then conducted in-depth interviews with 11 D.C. leaders and visited child care programs to better understand the D.C. context. The foundation organized an in-depth recruitment effort, working closely with early childhood partners in D.C. We were committed to capturing a broad diversity of participants from all parts of the city and turned to our partners to drive recruitment.

Of the 170 applicants for the process, we selected 35 to participate in a five-month design phase. A subset of this group participated in a subsequent two-month build phase. We compensated them for their time as the bona fide experts they are. The Catapult Design team included one Spanish speaker and four women of color. Materials were presented in English and Spanish.

In all, Catapult Design conducted 13 focus groups with our 35 participating practitioners and families. Focus group schedules were fluid and responsive to what worked best for the participants. Bainum Family Foundation staff did not participate in any of the focus group discussions.

Spanning more than a year and a half in total, the design process was divided into three phases with key touchpoints.

1. The **Definition Phase** focused on cocreating the current and reimagined journeys and the Core Components needed to build a new integrated vision.
2. The **Build Phase** focused on cocreating “provocations” based on ideas identified during the Definition Phase and testing these ideas with the community for feedback to develop prototypes that address their unique needs.
3. The **Impact Phase** focused on sharing the impact of a new equitable vision through engagements with the broader child care community and exploring tangible steps to bring the vision to reality.

APPENDIX B

Sharing WeVision EarlyEd With Stakeholders Nationally

The Bainum Family Foundation’s Early Childhood team participated in more than two dozen in-person and virtual conferences and meetings between late 2022 (when WeVision EarlyEd was first introduced) and the end of 2024. The goal was to introduce WeVision EarlyEd and to solicit feedback from key early childhood stakeholders across the country. The conferences and meetings were hosted by many organizations, including those listed below. We appreciate their willingness to invite us into their spaces to share our ideas and gather their input.

The Aspen Institute

BUILD Initiative

Child Care Aware of America

Children’s Forum

Early Years (T.E.A.C.H. Early
Childhood National Center)

Florida Association for the
Education of Young Children

Florida Early Learning Consortium

Florida Family Child Care
Home Association

Florida Head Start Association

Focus on Children Conference

Home Grown

Hope Toledo

Hunt Institute

Momentum Early Learning Summit

Montgomery Moving Forward

National Association for the
Education of Young Children

National Association for
Regulatory Administration

National Association for
Family Child Care

National Association of School
Board of Education

National Association of State
Leaders in Early Education

National Workforce Registry Alliance

Ohio Association for the Education
of Young Children

The Children’s Movement of Florida

Think Small

World Forum Conference on
Early Care and Education

“Through WeVision
EarlyEd, we
intend to seize
the moment and
the momentum
to make the ideal
child care real.”



WeVision EarlyEd

**Thank You for Your
Interest in Making
the Ideal Real**

Visit us at wevisionearlyed.org.

