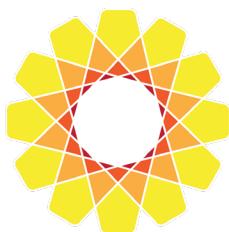
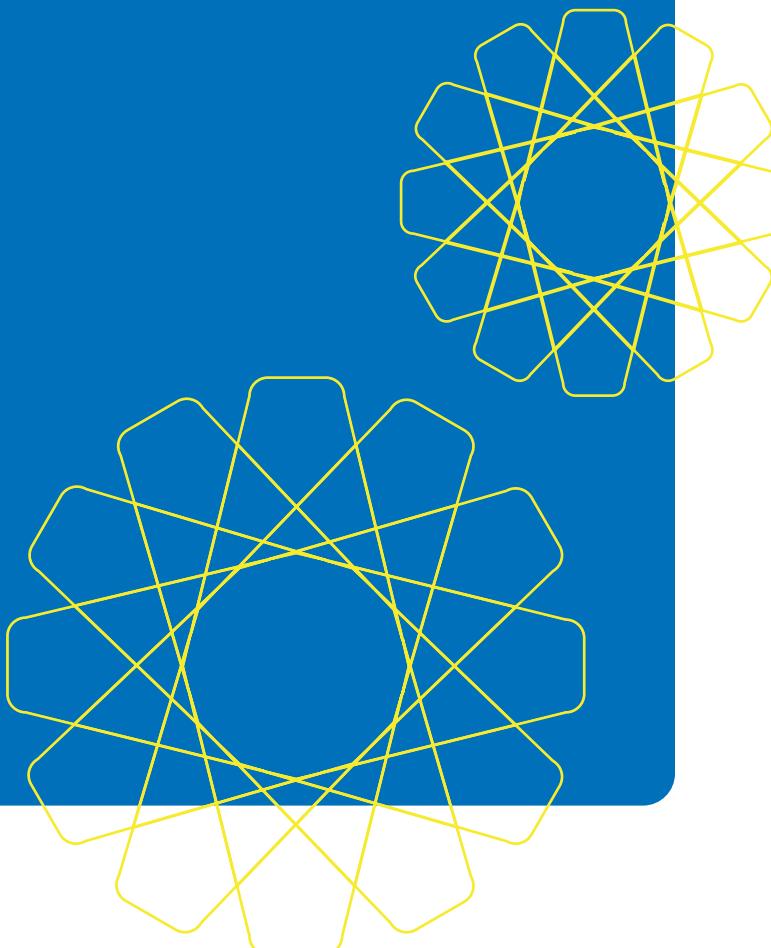


Making the Ideal Real: How Child Care Can Work Better for Everyone

November 2022



WeVision Early Ed

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Introduction: A Chance to Get It Right

Washington, D.C., has a chance to do what no other American jurisdiction has done: get child care right. The District of Columbia has much to celebrate. It already has invested generously in a universal public pre-kindergarten (pre-K) system for 3- and 4-year-olds that is the [most comprehensive in the nation](#).¹ And the [Birth-to-Three for All DC Amendment Act](#),² passed in 2018, sets the stage for a universal child care system and has paved the way to raising early educators' pay significantly. At this moment, thousands of early childhood educators are eligible to receive significant salary stipends to help narrow the wage gap between them and educators in public schools. D.C. lawmakers and government agencies are moving ahead as we eagerly wait for their federal counterparts to invest in child care as a public good for all. None of this progress would be possible without the advocates who have banded together over time to make this happen.

But child care in D.C. still does not work well for everyone. Not for the thousands of young children (infants and toddlers especially) who are in underfunded child care programs in licensed centers or homes. Not for the early childhood educators who are barely making a living wage. Not for program administrators who are trying to meet quality standards on shoestring budgets. And not for all the families that pay more for child care than for any other household expense, including in many cases rent or mortgage payments. This report is for them and their counterparts in every corner of America who are navigating the same challenges.

The sky isn't falling in D.C. But it's not as bright as it could be – or should be – given all our resources.

Getting child care right in D.C., or in other states for that matter, requires shifting our mental models (including biases about race, gender and class) about how we view child care – what it is, who needs it, which children it should serve,

who should pay for it, what programs should be offered and where, who should be accountable for what, who governs it, and so on.

Thankfully, D.C. policymakers, influencers and practitioners already have done much of this hard work. They have begun to replace outdated thinking with transformative thinking based on the science of early learning and child development. With this report, we hope to build on this cutting-edge work – both to further strengthen D.C.'s current system and to serve as a model for the rest of the country.

This isn't your typical policy report. Although it points to a policy direction, writing policies is not our intent, our role or our starting point. With help from Catapult Design, we convened and listened closely to a cross-section of families, educators and administrators who 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 used their insights to identify the gaps between what is (current pain points) and what should be (the ideal). Then we asked ourselves and others, What is standing in the way of closing these gaps? The answer that emerged: outdated mindsets about child care. Before further tweaking policies, we first need to reshape our mental models about what is possible. Our old thinking and prevalent narratives keep us from making the ideal child care system real. Abandoning outdated thinking for commonsense solutions can transform child care. Specifically, we must:

- **Rethink when learning begins** in order 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 programs are affordable for families and educators can make a living wage.
- **Rethink quality** by setting baseline standards for all early childhood education programs.
- **Rethink governance and decision-making** to take advantage of the expertise of families, educators and administrators.

This rethinking includes honestly addressing the racist, sexist and elitist biases that continue to stand in the way of meaningful progress.

Again, D.C. already has done much of this work. The challenge now is for us to finish the job in the District and serve as thought partners to other states and federal policymakers.

That's where the Bainum Family Foundation comes in. We are a philanthropic foundation with a deep commitment to early childhood. We know we cannot merely name the issues, put Band-Aids on the problems and hope transformative change magically happens. We have a much broader responsibility to support systems change and test ideas with communities that are leading the way. We already have started this work, with early childhood investments of more than \$40 million in D.C. alone over the past seven years.

Our next generation of funding extends what we already are doing with the formation of an Ideal Solutions Lab, backed by \$6 million in initial

funding, to work with partners throughout the District as we jointly explore how their innovative ideas might work in practice. We also will work with advocates and national influencers to unpack and promote transformative narratives that pave the way to a more equitable and effective child care system here in D.C. and across the country.

Writing a report is easy. Continuing to align policies, narratives and practices with our evolved mental models, with all the messiness of the real world, is hard. Our foundation will be there every step of the way and will regularly share what we are learning with the early childhood field and the broader public.

Making the ideal real is right in front of us. But it is going to take collective ownership and leadership. We'll need to set aside some of our old ways of doing business. We must test new solutions. Most important, we'll need to keep children, families, educators and program administrators at the center of our work. They deserve no less.

David Daniels
CEO and President
Bainum Family Foundation

Marica Cox Mitchell
Vice President of Early Childhood
Bainum Family Foundation

Clarifying Our Terms

Terms to describe the care and education of young children are often used interchangeably but actually mean different things. When we use these terms in this report, this is what we mean:

CHILD CARE is the umbrella term used to describe situations in which caregivers (beyond a child's parents or immediate guardians) are responsible for the care and development of young children. These caregivers can be a family member (e.g., a grandparent) supporting a child in the child's home or the family member's home; a trusted community member (e.g., individual, organization or organized network) supporting a child; a nanny or au pair, often living with the family; or caregivers supporting a group of children in a setting outside the child's home (e.g., a center-based or home-based program).

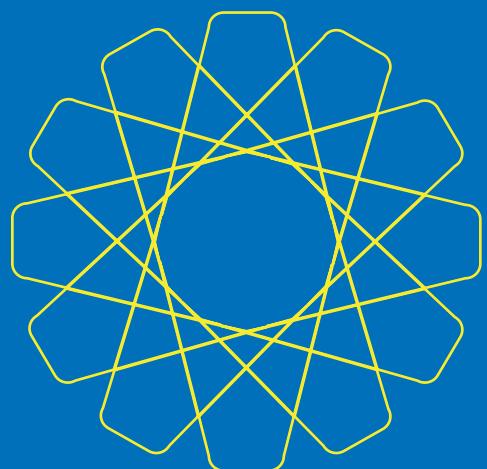
EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION (ECE) is a specific child care option that focuses on supporting and documenting child and program outcomes, typically outside the home. ECE's aims go far beyond keeping children safe while the adults in their families work or attend school. It intentionally supports the cognitive, physical, social and emotional development of young children through learning facilitated by early childhood educators with industry-recognized credentials and postsecondary degrees.

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 individuals working in out-of-home settings. 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 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 and, in some cases, supporting other families. Typically, in human-centered design work, they would be referred to as product "users." To us, they are much more than that.

Clarifying Our Scope

- **WeVision EarlyEd focuses on the birth-to-5 child care system.** 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. This WeVision EarlyEd report does not fully capture the nuances and history of this complex system.
- **WeVision EarlyEd is not a policy blueprint.** Our partners are the experts who develop and implement policy and advocacy strategies, and we provide the resources they want and need to be successful. They create policy blueprints.
- **WeVision EarlyEd is a catalyst for making the ideal child care real – as defined by families, educators and administrators.** It can be used to guide necessary conversations and test ideal solutions.
- **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 ages 0–8, and we have disproportionate power and privileges in this landscape. We acknowledge that as funders we cause harm when we do not center equity.



The Human-Centered Design Process

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, in order to inform decisions and solutions about new policies, processes and services that impact their lives.

We worked closely with Catapult Design, which brought together a diverse group of 35 educators, administrators and families from across the District to discuss their current challenges and reimagine a system that would work for all. The centerpiece of Catapult's human-centered design approach is to capitalize on users' lived experiences and use that wisdom to reimagine what is possible.

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 Bainum Family Foundation organized an in-depth recruitment effort, working closely with

practice and policy partners in the District. 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, 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 core team of five 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. The Bainum Family Foundation staff did not participate in any of the focus group discussions.

Details about the process can be found in the Appendix.



The D.C. Context

Each year, close to 9,000 babies³ are born in our nation's capital. Families will spend their waking hours ensuring they are loved, cared for, thriving and launched on their learning journey. Like all families, they will start even before their baby's birth to ensure their child has the opportunity to achieve their full potential. These families live in communities and neighborhoods where they want to feel safe, connected and supported. Many will work to find available resources and supports, including access to comprehensive child care.

Washington, D.C., has invested more per capita in early education than any state in the United States. In 2008, universal public pre-K became available for all 3- and 4-year-olds, regardless of their family income or neighborhood. With investments totaling more than [\\$248 million annually, or \\$19,288 per student](#),⁴ the District ranks first in the nation in access to pre-K for 3- and 4-year-olds. The program operates 6-1/2 hours per day during the traditional school calendar year. In 2020, [84% of D.C. 4-year-olds and 64% of 3-year-olds](#)⁵ were enrolled.

In 2018, responding to calls from advocates about the lack of support for infants and toddlers, the DC Council passed the Birth-to-Three for All DC Amendment Act of 2018. The law recommends fully funding child care so no family pays more than 10% of their income on child care for infants and toddlers, improving compensation for early childhood educators, and creating new positions to assist child care business administrators with licensing. The plan also calls for strengthening pre- and postnatal support for mothers; expanding mental, physical and nutritional health programs; and increasing parenting and family support. While \$16 million was allocated in fiscal year 2020 to fund the plan, estimates to fully fund the plan are at least [\\$500 million over 10 years](#).⁶

Additionally, D.C.'s child care subsidy reimbursement rates⁷ are among the highest in the country, paying \$20,000–\$25,000 a year per infant and \$14,000–\$17,000 per year per preschooler. The city also collects employer taxes for a mandatory [paid family leave](#)⁸ program that, among other things, provides eight weeks of benefits so families can bond with a new child. Decades of successful advocacy made these wins possible.

The bottom-line reality is that the investments since 2008 made our public pre-K system (for 3- and 4-year-olds) the envy of the nation. Yet the District's child care system, like those across the nation, has startling gaps. This report addresses some of the remaining gaps and inequities in the system – and the many thousands of young children still left behind.



Enduring the Current

PAIN POINTS, RISKS AND COMPROMISES

Consider the everyday stories we heard. Administrators are trying to maintain consistent quality and manage businesses with very low margins. Educators are working 7:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m., juggling multiple responsibilities from teaching to serving lunch to supporting families. Families are struggling to find a quality program that's a good fit for their child, particularly those children with special needs – not to mention affordable and convenient to their homes and workplaces.

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? 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 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 child care center open? How will I support myself when I retire?



The Current Experience

Educators, families and administrators all have:

- Similar journeys
- Similar pain points
- Similar compromises

The Journey:

Enter
with
angst



Manage
and
survive



Exit
with
angst

The Current Experience

- Community is strength
- Math doesn't add up
- Inconsistent quality
- Fragmented information
- Tradeoffs 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

"I still don't know how to voice my concerns. I had a terrible experience with my first son, and I did not know how to voice that complaint. I still have no idea how to do that."

– Parent

"I ran into someone I used work with the other day at the store and [found out she'd] left [the field]. She got burned out. It's so common. She was happy now but missed it. Not enough is done to prevent burnout."

– Administrator

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

– Parent

"For teachers, it's tempting to leave because you have the same qualifications as public school, but at DC Public Schools, you could make three times the money and work less hours."

– Educator

DATA FROM OTHER SOURCES

Between 2015 and 2020, the District had an average of 44,913 children under the age of 5.⁹ Forty-seven percent of these children were Black, 27% were white and 17% were Latinx. Of the children under 5 living in poverty during this same time period, 36% were Black, 14% were Latinx and fewer than 1% were white.

In addition, the public pre-K system does not serve every 3- and 4-year-old or any of the District's infants and toddlers (ages 0–2). As the District robustly funded one part of the system, it left behind other parts of the system. Consider the data that supports this assertion:

- **Uneven quality.** Of the 27,000 center-based child care slots and nearly 800 slots in family child care homes,¹⁰ only 11,892 of those slots are in centers and homes that participate in the District's Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), and just 1,983 slots are at the highest level of quality. Fewer than 100¹¹ of the 385¹² (roughly 25%) licensed center-based programs (but 100%¹³ of those operated in spaces managed by the federal General Services Administration) have voluntarily sought out and earned accreditation from the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). Center-based programs participating in the Pre-K Enhancement and Expansion Program (PKEEP)¹⁴ have to earn national accreditation from an approved body to be eligible, but their counterparts in DC Public Schools and DC Public Charter Schools (which together account for 92% of the enrollment) do not have to be accredited. Quality is unclear and inconsistent. Fewer than 10¹⁵ of the 105¹⁶ licensed child care programs in home settings have voluntarily sought out and earned accreditation from the National Association for Family Child Care (NAFCC). Here, too, quality is unavailable, inconsistent and optional, largely depending on what families and the government are willing to pay for. There are minimal incentives (and heavy financial risks in some cases) for program administrators to meet quality standards.

- **High costs.** Child care costs in the District¹⁷ are the highest in the United States, according to a survey conducted by Care.com. Too many families pay more for child care than for other basic necessities such as housing and still don't have real options; they have to settle for what is convenient and affordable. Families in D.C. pay on average \$419 per week, or close to \$22,000 per year, which is 85% higher than the national average.

Too many child care administrators have to absorb basic business expenses, such as building maintenance, equipment and supplies, and don't have the economies of scale in their small programs to properly compensate early childhood education professionals. Families cannot afford to pay more, and public child care financing doesn't cover these expenses.

- **Low pay and challenging working conditions.** Too many early childhood educators working in child care make rock-bottom wages with subpar benefits and working conditions. The median compensation for an early childhood educator in the District is \$15.36 per hour (around \$32,000 per year)¹⁸ – in a city with a median household income of \$90,842,¹⁹ according to the U.S. Census, and one of the highest costs of living in the country. The new DC Pay Equity Fund²⁰ will help address this issue, but it is too early to understand the impact.

D.C. is, in essence, a tale of two cities. We have made the most sizable investments and boldest policy moves in the nation. Yet accessible, affordable child care remains out of reach for far too many families, and early childhood educators' compensation and working conditions don't come close to matching the value we know high-quality ECE offers children, families and society. That's a problem within our reach to solve, and whatever solutions are developed in D.C. can help inform similar efforts across the country.

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 have all been patching up the current system because reimagining it has been an unaffordable and seemingly unattainable luxury. **This 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 address more of the “what it should be.”** WeVision EarlyEd pushes us to step 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 development. We know what these experts want from a child care system that works and adds up for everyone. They told us.

The Ideal Experience

Educators, families and administrators all want:

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

The Journey:

Enter
with
supports

Grow
and
thrive

Evolve

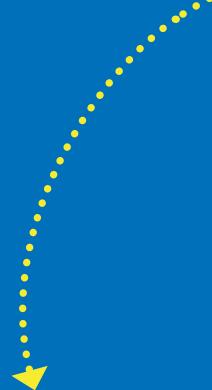


WHAT FAMILIES WANT

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 licensed program (home based, center based or in a school). They want options that meet their child's needs, are affordable and are located 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.

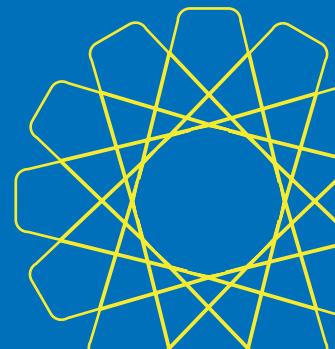
They imagine a system where quality ECE programs, based on established industry standards, are accessible to all families who want them. Drawing from this baseline of quality options, families select the program that meets their more individualized needs. Regardless of the option(s) families choose, all families receive (direct or indirect) funding and support.

Once a child is enrolled in a program, partnerships between families and early childhood educators are a priority. Families and early childhood educators share information about each child's development and plan intentional experiences based on this information. Educators provide regular feedback on each child's progress, and administrators communicate changes (such as closings) in a timely way. Materials help families support their children's learning at home. Families have multiple opportunities to share information and meet with other families. Entering an ECE program at the front end and then transitioning out to DC Public Schools and/or public charters for pre-K or kindergarten is a seamless process. Bottom line: Families are treated like the full-fledged educational partners they are.



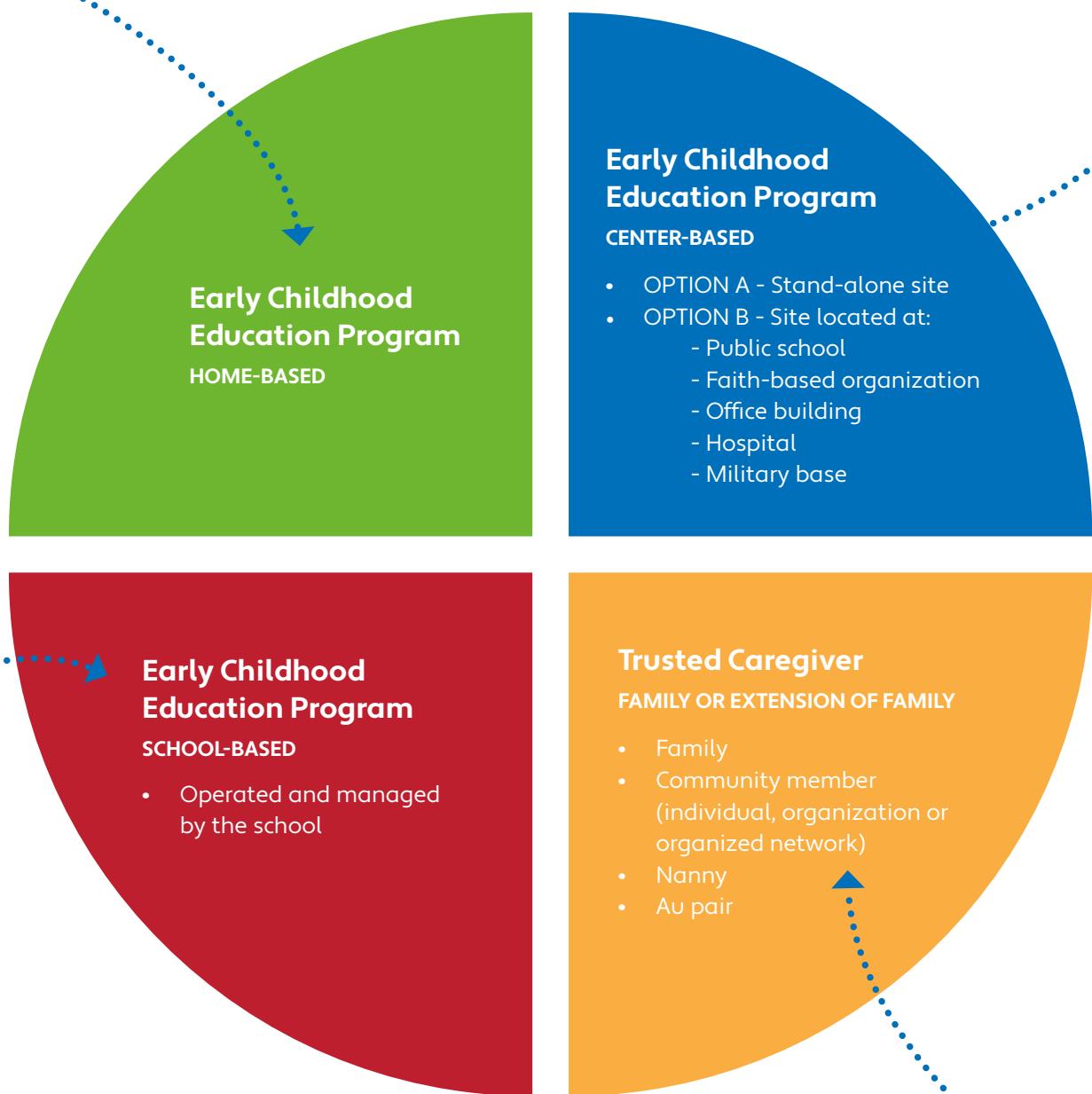
The Ideal Experience

- Child-centered
- Quality-centered
- The math adds up
- Appropriate resources
- Simple and streamlined processes
- Connect 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



ENVISIONING THE FULL SPECTRUM OF CHILD CARE OPTIONS

Families want a range of funded and accessible child care options so they can make informed decisions based on their individual needs. This is an illustration of 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. Facility licensure expectations vary based on the scope of services and other factors.





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're 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 like health care, paid time

off (PTO) 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, 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 are able to 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) 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.



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 eight years of investments in early learning. We listened keenly to our partners – from Florida to Ohio to D.C. – and pored over the wisdom they've shared. We learned more about [how complex systems change](#)²¹ over time and the history of how we ended up with the system we have.

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 don't match the current realities for families and practitioners. It's time to rethink everything about the system itself: what child care is, who should be served, who should pay, how we should define quality and how we should make decisions. Our role is to help provide the gathering spaces, tools and time that are 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 universal child care ideal. It was the mindset that universal child care would incentivize women (white women in particular) to work outside their home 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](#).²² Fifty years later, it was the mindset that a fully publicly funded system would give the 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.



It is mindsets – with a swirl of racism, elitism and sexism – that currently fund child care like 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 and resources to unpacking mindsets helps to hold the current system in place, even though there is some bipartisan support for accessible, affordable child care for all.

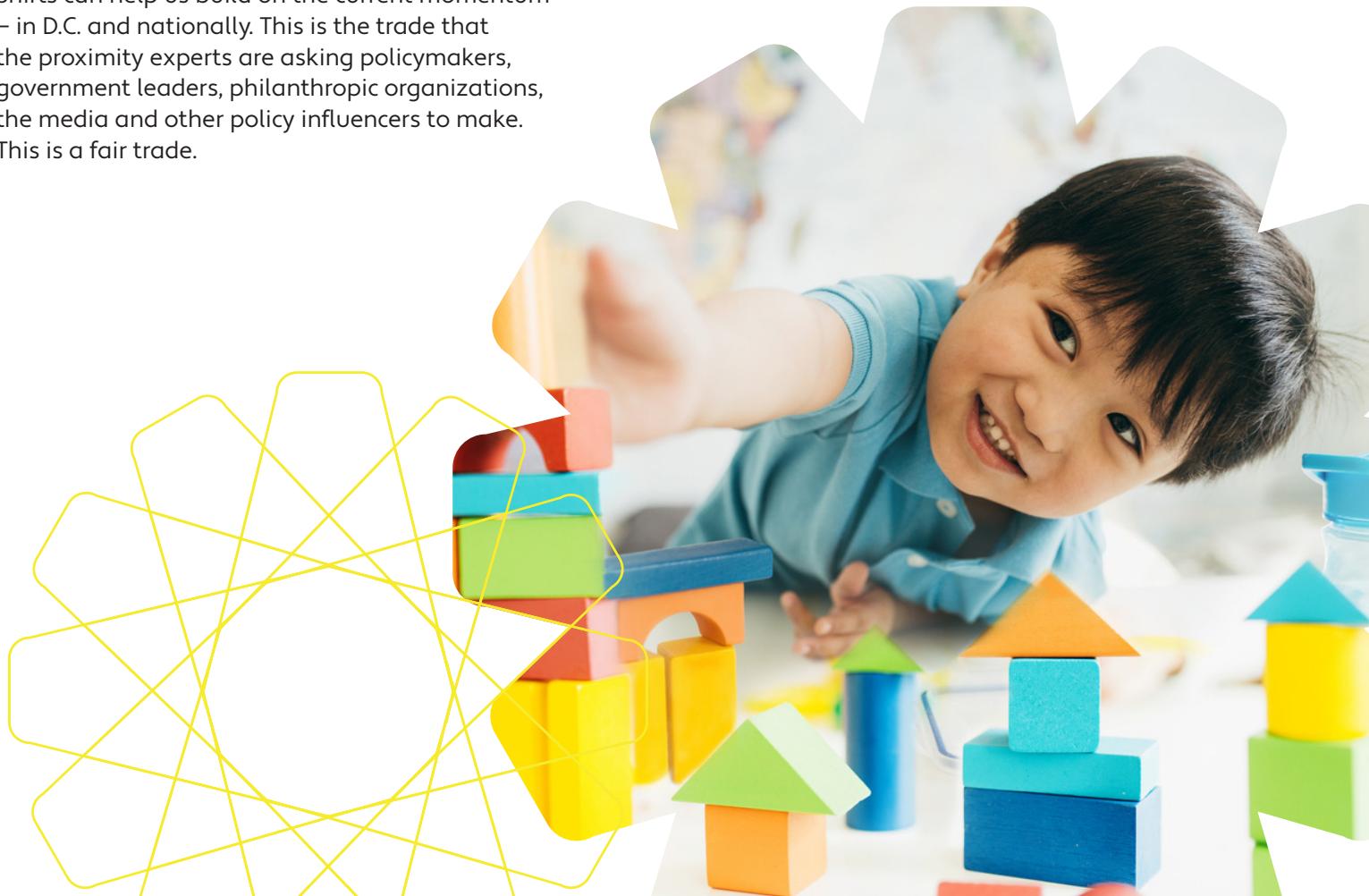
WHAT CORE SHIFTS SHOULD WE ADVANCE?

Outdated thinking will not give us policies that are aligned with what families, educators and administrators (whom 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 – in D.C. 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.

CORE SHIFTS

1. **Rethink when learning begins** in order 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 quality programs cost and who pays for it** so that quality options are affordable for families and educators can make a living wage.
4. **Rethink quality** by setting baseline standards for all early childhood education programs.
5. **Rethink governance and decision-making** to take advantage of the expertise of families, educators and administrators.



Core Shift 1: Rethink When Learning Begins

Outdated Mindset

- Learning begins when young children start elementary school.

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 development and learning that benefit everyone – children, families and society.
- 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 early care and education.

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

- Well-prepared and well-compensated early childhood educators are competent in what it takes to plan and implement intentional experiences that support children's learning and development – providing more than what we've called "day care" services.



BIAS CHECK

Note and avoid affirming the following racist, elitist and sexist ideologies 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 property of their parents and do not have their own rights.

Administrators, educators and families understand the importance of the early years. The outdated child care system needs to catch up.

Much of D.C.'s current early child education system frustrates **Berna Artis**, who leads the School for Friends preschool near Dupont Circle in Northwest D.C. But what upsets her most is that she and her colleagues are not treated as professional educators. She points out that several of her colleagues in the WeVision EarlyEd project have master's degrees, many have bachelor's degrees, and others have associate degrees or child development associate (CDA) credentials – or are working toward them.

"I've been in this field for 22 years, 16 as the head of school, and it's harmful and disappointing that policymakers, the media and even some people in the field have this day care mentality about the work. They don't realize how damaging this language is," Artis says. "We choose to work with very young children. You shouldn't have to work only with older children to be considered a teacher. We all are early childhood educators, not day care workers."

When the pandemic hit in 2020, **Alina Buzamat** had to stop giving music lessons and take a job at the Child Development Center, which mostly serves children of federal employees. "I love their curiosity, their interest in learning, and observing how their minds work. I get to see theory in practice every day. Plus, they're so cute and adorable," she says of her students.

But she is disappointed by the field's many injustices – the low pay, crazy hours and minimal benefits, including no summer break and only two weeks of vacation a year. "The pay is horrible compared to what we do. The teachers are young, energetic and smart. They care so much. But you can't survive. It's a crazy amount of work for a small reward."

Ebony Coward, a mother of three, appreciates how her 4-year-old is benefiting from his current child care program. "The teachers are beautiful. It's very clean. They have COVID rules. They are great communicators," she says. They send her photos five times a day, documenting her son's many activities. He is learning everything from counting to controlling his emotions to brushing his teeth. She appreciates the art and the homework. "I love the high expectations and the customer service, how they treat the children. They value my child." She also loves how the center celebrates holidays – extravagantly, with many activities, creative costumes and "fun for the whole family." "My son and I feel seen."

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.

Because the prevailing mindset is that child care or ECE is mainly babysitting, many assume that those serving the youngest children (ages 0 to 2, in particular) have a simple job that doesn’t require much skill. They’re 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.

As a result of this outdated and racialized 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,²³ 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.**²⁴

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

and emotional, language, and physical skills. And early childhood educators are woefully undervalued and undercompensated.

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 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 (NRC) and the Institute of Medicine (IOM) released a groundbreaking report, “*Neurons to Neighborhoods*,”²⁵ 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*,”²⁶ 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 educators and programs that support child development and learning. These well-prepared and well-compensated early childhood educators can plan and implement intentional experiences that support children’s learning and development. Excessive turnover rates drop, early childhood educators have the resources to earn more accessible industry-recognized credentials and postsecondary degrees, children have stability, families have peace of mind, and employers have access to a wider labor force.

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% return**²⁷ on investment and **\$99.3 billion annually to the U.S. economy.**²⁸ We all reap the benefits from a society that invests in high-quality ECE.

Core Shift 2:

Rethink Who Needs Child Care

Outdated Mindset

- Government-funded child care is mainly an intervention for “those kids” – Black, brown and white children in income eligible households.
- Families just want to make sure their children are fed and aren’t hurt. Any adult can do this job.
- 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.
- Child care is universally accessible, for all children.
- 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. Others want support from competent early childhood educators. All these families should have access to public funding to support their preferred option.
- Access to high-quality early childhood experiences is as critical for infants and toddlers as it is for 3- and 4-year-olds.



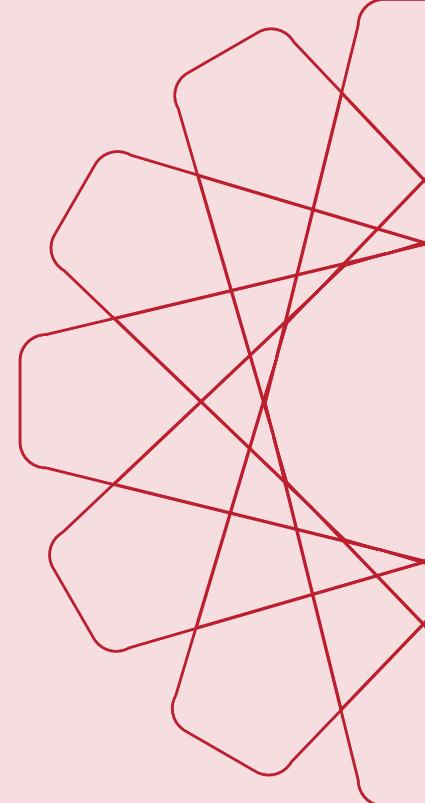
BIAS CHECK

Note and avoid affirming the following racist, classist and sexist ideologies 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.

Families with young children, across all neighborhoods, want child care support. The type of support may differ.

Tynisha Wright, a mother of three (15, 7 and 3), knows firsthand the importance of supporting families in making good child care choices for their children. Providing better information and resources to families has become her lifework. “I found my niche and I love it,” Wright says in discussing her current job at the Congress Heights Family Success Center. She helps families navigate multiple issues, from paying rent to finding a job. Her dream is to train staff all over the city to help families. “There should be resources all over the city to assist families. We need more parent advocates to help advise parents on anything they need to know,” such as paying rent, applying for food stamps, getting a Social Security card, finding affordable medical insurance, and identifying the right school and early childhood center. “There should be assistance programs in every school and day care center,” Wright says.

One immediate priority is for the city to host an early childhood education fair, similar to the MySchoolDC events for public schools, which would help introduce families to the wide range of available options and guide them in identifying the best fit for their child. Like many parents, Wright found her son’s current program through word of mouth.



J.P. Coakley’s Two Birds center is in the Tenleytown neighborhood of Northwest D.C. Unique among ECE providers, Two Birds also offers WeWork-like shared office space for adults and weekend programming from speech therapy to soccer, hence the company’s name. “We wanted to kill two birds with one stone for families,” says Coakley.

Families receive regular photos and updates via Brightwheel, an app that helps them monitor their child’s daily experience. Coakley and his business partner would like support to open additional centers serving even more families.

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 who 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.

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 D.C. 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 early childhood programs and 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 for a child’s first six months to a year, this is almost never 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 have to 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. For example, in D.C., pre-K funding for 3- and 4-year-olds is almost \$3,000 more per child than child care subsidy funding for the same age group. Moreover, pre-K funding covers only the traditional school day (6-1/2 hours) and school year (180 days); by contrast, child care programs that receive subsidy funding care for the children all day and all year and don’t have the benefit of the public school facilities infrastructure to draw on. In addition, the D.C. child care subsidy reimbursement rate for supporting young children with special needs does not cover the costs of the additional resources these children need in order 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 up to \$17.66 more per day²⁹ for infants than do home-based programs.

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.³⁰ 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: endless lines and long forms that check on everything from income to immigration status. As a result, we’re 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 (ages 25 to 54) was 75% for women compared to 88% for men, and women were much more likely to participate³¹ 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 losses³² in the United States.

TRANSFORMATIVE MINDSET

Full-day, full-year child care options are universally 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. Early childhood programs are affordable and in a convenient location for families to access near home or work. All families who 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 age group 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.



Core Shift 3:

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 universal 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

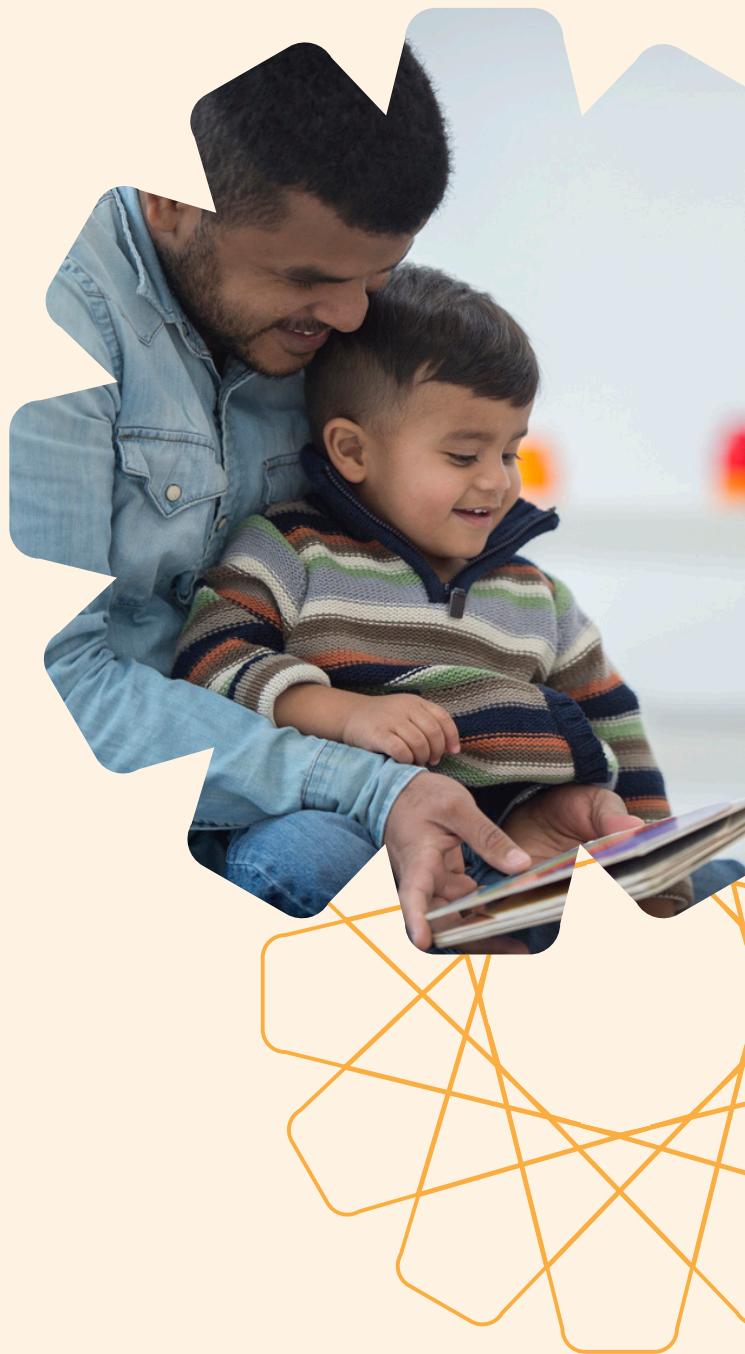
Note and avoid affirming the following racist, classist and sexist ideologies when unpacking this shift: Low-income families should not have children they cannot afford. Using public funding to support child care will create more "welfare queens." Child care wouldn't cost society so much if mothers,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

Administrators told us the finances don't add up; expenses outweigh incomes. This is true for larger and smaller programs alike.

J.P. Coakley, co-founder of Two Birds in the Tenleytown neighborhood in Northwest D.C., recognizes what a critical role access to business and funding resources has played in building his business: startup funding of \$300,000 from the D.C. government in 2017; families that can pay \$30,000 a year and not ask for a refund even when the center closed early in the pandemic; an MBA and extensive business experience, which help him stay on top of costs, his No. 1 priority; and outside investors and board members who also understand the finances – including the ex-CFO of WeWork International.

But even Coakley says D.C.'s ECE system "doesn't add up" for his program. For example, even though tuition is comparatively high, Two Birds still has to rely on grants to supplement revenues. The D.C. center regularly loses students to DC Public Schools and public charters at ages 3 and 4, when the public school year begins. Few families are willing to pay private tuition for pre-K at Two Birds when DCPS and public charters offer it for free. From a financial perspective, these are the students that centers want to retain because they can help shoulder the business expenses that the infant and toddler classrooms can't carry on their own (1:4 staffing ratio for infants and toddlers vs. up to 1:10 for older children), Coakley says.

"Early childhood education has to be thought of as a public good," he says, "and not starting at age 3, but at birth." He adds, "We'd never think of cutting corners on other public services, whether it's maintaining an aircraft carrier or funding a local fire department. But we do that with early education all the time. At least policymakers are talking about this now. That's a big shift in the last two years."





Violeta Chirino, who runs the Semillitas Early Learning Center near the U Street Corridor in central D.C., has multiple roles: overseeing programming; hiring, training and retaining staff; and managing the finances (mainly wages and rent) and legal affairs (mainly compliance with local regulations). “It’s a lot. I can’t even estimate how many hours a week I work for the center. All the time,” she says.

Chirino is especially passionate about ensuring the survival of smaller centers and home-based care, which offer unique, nurturing environments that many families and children value. But she knows that families can’t pay any more than they currently are. Increased public investment would help both families and school leaders like her. She is working a second job in order to get health care benefits.

Debbie Berhane is juggling several jobs besides caring for her two sons, ages 18 and 5. She operates a family child care home, works at a nonprofit that provides direct services to people with disabilities, and manages her own two rental properties.

Berhane wasn’t planning to run Titi’s Happy Hearts but had to take over the family child care home in February 2019 when her mother died suddenly. “Closing wasn’t an option. We had families who were counting on us. Many had been with my mother for years. What were we supposed to do?” Berhane asks.

Berhane says she is glad to pay comparatively generous wages and benefits, including family leave. “We never did it for the money.” But she resents how the cost burden falls so heavily on providers. “We shouldn’t be subsidizing the care of children by keeping our rates low. But the real cost of child care is a burden too heavy for parents to fully cover. So, what do we do? Either operate on razor-thin margins or close the program and find another way to support the community,” she says.

Increased public investment would help Berhane not only stay in the field but also expand her practice. She earned her bachelor’s degree from Temple University, majoring in business and minoring in entrepreneurship, and would like to open more home-based centers.

OUTDATED MINDSET

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 low-income families, even wealthier families are affected. In 33 states and D.C., for instance, [a year of infant care³³](#) 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 low-income families. 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](#)."³⁴ The percentage is higher in rural communities and communities with large Black and brown populations, such as the District. 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 undercompensated, 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](#),³⁵ and nearly half are eligible for government assistance. Not surprisingly, child care workers or early childhood educators move to other 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.

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. ECE 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. Families pay no more than 7% of their household income for child care services. Public investment funds the remainder. ECE programs are reimbursed for the true cost of quality, not limited by what families can afford. 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.

Moreover, incentives don't discriminate against smaller providers and/or those serving the youngest children. Smaller programs are given the option to retain some autonomy and merge to share expenses when that makes sense for them. Government agencies and private funders support centralized networks or anchor programs that reduce the cost and burden of sustaining small programs. These improvements help a diversity of programs flourish, giving families more options for where to enroll their children and educators more options for where they want to work and which programs and approaches they want to use. Competent educators work with our youngest children because we can afford to pay them competitive wages.

Core Shift 4:

Rethink Quality

Outdated Mindset

- 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 ECE programs.
-
- It's a buyer-beware system in which families should figure out the nuances of industry quality when selecting a program.
-
- Quality is complex, and government systems should decide what quality looks like. After all, they are paying for it.
 - Spend more on building rating systems than on resources programs need in order to improve and sustain quality.

Transformative Mindset

- Quality child care 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.
 - Families, like all consumers, will add their individualized metrics to a floor of baseline quality and competence.
-
- Quality should be easy to understand, straightforward to attain, and created and overseen by early childhood educators (the professionals) who know the work best.
 - Prioritize the funding of programs, not rating systems.



BIAS CHECK

Note and avoid affirming the following racist, classist and sexist ideologies 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. Low-income families, especially Black and brown families, do not know what is best for their children.

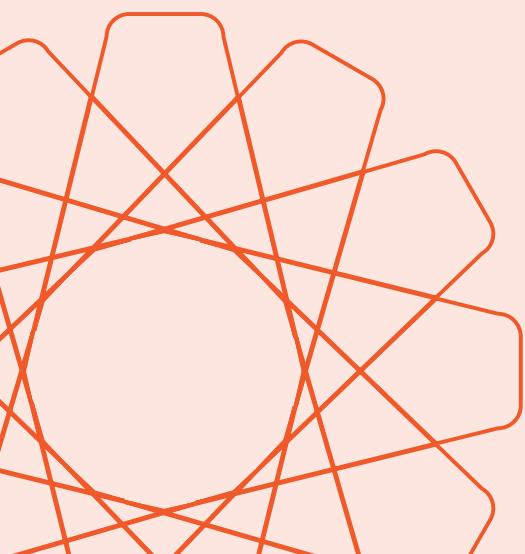
Families and educators know and want quality. Families struggle to find it, and educators sacrifice too much to provide it.

Ebony Coward, a mother of three (11, 7 and 4), also knows what she wants. Among her priorities is better assessment of child care providers. “Having degrees is one thing, but I also would like them to look at [providers’] cleanliness, honesty and trustworthiness,” she says. She points out that licensing requirements for hair salons are higher than they are for ECE centers.

She also would welcome more flexible schedules, including the possibility of 24-hour centers to accommodate single moms like her. Like many, Coward struggles to juggle all of her responsibilities – including working, shopping, doing laundry, volunteering at her daughter’s school, and handling all the many daily chores involved in mothering three young children in three different schools. It would help to have a quality system that rewards programs that support busy parents like her.

Sheree Pendleton, a mother of two children (4 and 2), wants programs to focus on meeting the needs of all children, not just those who are behind. She worries that many programs focus only on basic skills, geared to the children who are far behind academically and behaviorally. She wants schools to provide more programming for children who are ready for more challenges. “Day care and elementary school offer lots of resources to those who are struggling, but rarely to kids who are excelling,” she says.

She says her oldest daughter, for example, had met all the standards by October and still had several months of school to go. Pendleton understands that many kids are behind because of COVID. “I know the school is doing the best it can, but I don’t want to pause my child’s development.” She said she and her husband try to supplement with activities at home, “but we are not teachers.” She thinks it would help if providers did a better job of spelling out learning expectations year by year.



Lamont Turner loved his work as a preschool lead at a local program. He liked the rigorous play-based program, the nurturing environment and the focus on social-emotional learning. He liked being the only man on the 35-person staff. Parents and colleagues appreciated that he tended to be firmer with the kids. “Past parents were always saying, ‘Ask for Lamont.’” He says there was a waiting list for his classroom.

On the other hand, there is much that Turner doesn’t like about the field: the long hours, in a classroom all day from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. with only a lunch break; the low pay; no winter or summer breaks. He takes a week off at Christmas and around his birthday to help rejuvenate himself.

As much as he loved the job, Turner left recently for a new position at a program in Northwest D.C. with better pay, more holidays and the chance to build his professional portfolio. Turner is hoping to become an administrator and possibly start his own program someday. “There’s no opportunity for growth in the classroom,” he says. Increased public investment in ECE would help keep educators like Turner in the classroom and the field.

Visit the “[Expert Voices](#)” section of the WeVision EarlyEd website to hear more from the proximity experts about their journeys with the child care system.

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 like 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.

Further, most government systems have outsized roles in developing quality rating systems and outsized 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 co-design the system.

Government systems sometimes clone (or disregard) profession-led accreditation standards to create their own. In some extreme instances, like in California and Florida, there are more than three separate rating systems operating within one state. And Maryland,³⁶ for example, created both its own state accreditation system and a rating system. NAEYC accreditation for early learning programs, the oldest and largest profession-led accreditation system, contributed to this power imbalance by being too static in a dynamic sector and not addressing the inequities its elite “gold standard” brand reinforced in such an underresourced sector. As government-funded rating systems grew, NAEYC accreditation numbers dwindled. 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 (CCDBG) 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).

TRANSFORMATIVE MINDSET

Transformation begins by recognizing that 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 will measure quality by leveraging, not supplanting, a consistent set of baseline standards and accompanying accountability systems developed by and for the 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 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 on quality. Families and young children have greater access to a consistent and expected level of quality based on industry standards. Families and taxpayers can trust and assume that baseline quality standards are the norm. Professional preparation programs prepare 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 off this baseline to offer families specialized options.

Core Shift 5: Rethink Governance and Decision-Making

Outdated Mindset

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

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.
-
- 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.
-
- 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 racist, classist and sexist ideologies: 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.

Educators, administrators and families have expertise.

"So many professionals have given their lives to this work already. Now we professionals need to claim our power and be at the table when policies are being made."

– Administrator



"I hope that we can finally see some change, real change where there's teacher voice. There is advocacy work. There is recognition of the field itself as a profession, not just in words but actually in practice, and the importance of early childhood education and the work we are doing with the children, with the families and with one another as educators — it is so critical. It lays the foundation."

– Administrator



"I love being on the front lines but think I can make more of a difference as an advocate. I want to help teachers find their why, to deal with their burnout — or avoid it altogether."

– Educator



"We need to get more parents to participate and learn how to work together to help kids. I'm trying to be the change I want to see."

– Parent



"Using my talent and know-how would be better for everyone ... How can we change things so that someone can be active and effective in child care while having their own life too?"

– Administrator

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 also is 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 in order to receive support. Government systems must be cumbersome because they are accountable for public dollars, and we have to 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 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.

When regulating, 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 blueprint³⁷](#) 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 early childhood education 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."

We Start Now: Testing Practical Solutions From the Ideal System

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

In addition to creating time and space to rethink outdated mindsets and advance transformative mindsets, we will test some practical solutions the experts identified. The Bainum Family Foundation already has earmarked \$6 million for testing ideal solutions and plans to do more. We will support proximity experts as they test assumptions, experiment, and learn from both successes and failures. We will partner with government agencies to assess and adjust regulations and policies, if needed. We hope that our colleagues in philanthropy can do the same with the resources they have right now.

We will begin by exploring two solutions.

1. Quality-Centered Workplaces

Early childhood education professionals do complex work that is emotionally, physically and intellectually demanding. Compared to K-12 educators, educators in the child care system are poorly paid, work longer days without seasonal breaks, and have schedules that include less time for planning, professional development and personal care. These professionals must be supported to do their jobs well. Their competence and well-being are the most important ingredients for quality but often the least funded. Solutions to be tested may include:

- Flexible scheduling patterns
- Additional days of professional development and well-being breaks
- Larger teaching teams to allow educators to take breaks while still providing the staffing coverage and stability young children need
- Expanded staff roles to reduce the burden on administrators, who are wearing too many hats to be effective
- Expanded staff roles to support educator competence and effectiveness
- Weekly planning time both for individual educators and teaching teams

2. Early Childhood Education Microsites

Small, isolated child care businesses are too frail – financially and operationally – to offer consistent quality and services. They also place a heavy cost and administrative burden on program owners/administrators and staff. Because of this, WeVision EarlyEd will explore new business models that increase the sustainability and quality of smaller programs. This will include leveraging the capacity and resources of large programs to support the growth and sustainability of smaller programs while at the same time maintaining their independence and increasing their revenue. Actions could include:

- Leveraging co-habited and low-rent real estate spaces like public schools, hospitals or apartment buildings
- Co-creating new franchise models

In exploring these solutions, we will be careful not to disrupt secure and consistent relationships with young children or present families with unpredictable schedules.

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 system.

This report focuses 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 illustrates the strengths and gaps in that system. However, the Core Shifts and the overarching system issues they address could have been about any community in the United States. Wherever you are, we are eager to partner with you. If you also are 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.

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 (Twitter, 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/thinking 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.

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 (Twitter, 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/thinking 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.

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 (Twitter, Instagram and LinkedIn).
4. Work alongside your grantees and colleagues to review and rethink the outdated mindsets/thinking 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.

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 (Twitter, 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/thinking 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.

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 (Twitter, 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/thinking that keep the status quo in place. Promote the more transformative mindsets/thinking 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:

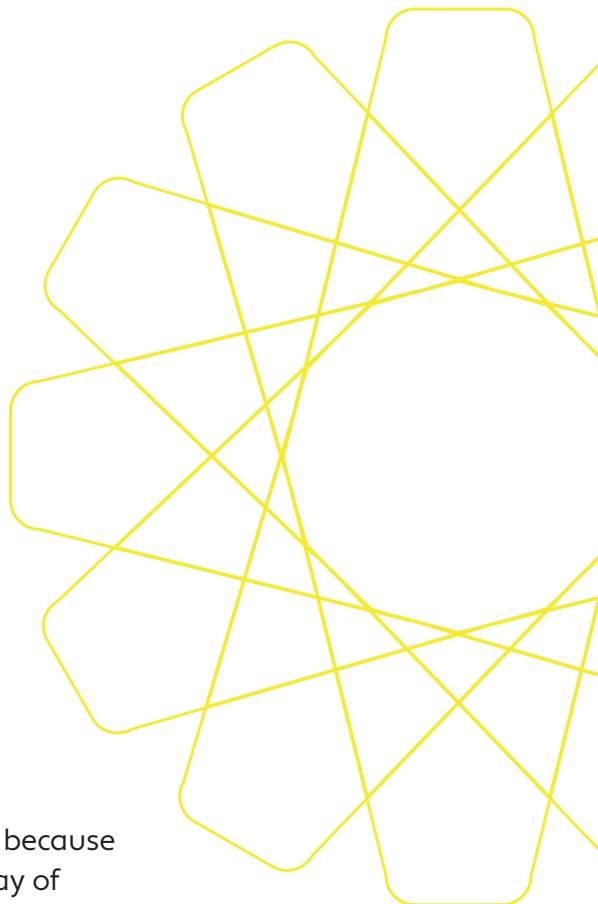
1. [Sign up](#) to follow and inform this project.
2. Share and discuss this report with your network.
3. Follow WeVision EarlyEd on social media (Twitter, Instagram and LinkedIn).
4. Work alongside colleagues to unpack and rethink the outdated mindsets/thinking that keep the status quo in place. Promote 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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First, tremendous thanks and appreciation to the families, educators and administrators (our proximity experts) who shared their experiences and futuristic thinking. We are grateful for their trust, time and expertise. Their ability to (we)envision a more effective and equitable child care system while simultaneously navigating the current system (amid a global health pandemic) drives this initiative and deepens our commitment to making the ideal real.

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American Academy of Pediatrics, DC Chapter

AppleTree Institute

Bright Beginnings

Briya Public Charter School

Children's Law Center

Children's National Medical Center

Community of Hope

D.C. Family Child Care Association

D.C. Hunger Solutions

D.C. Policy Center

DC Action

DC Directors Exchange

DC Early Learning Collaborative

DC Fiscal Policy Institute

DC Head Start Association

District of Columbia Association for the Education of Young Children

District of Columbia Public Schools - Early Childhood Education Division

Educare DC

Fair Budget Coalition

Jews United for Justice

Martha's Table

Mary's Center

MedStar Georgetown University Hospital

Multicultural Spanish Speaking Providers Association

National Children's Center

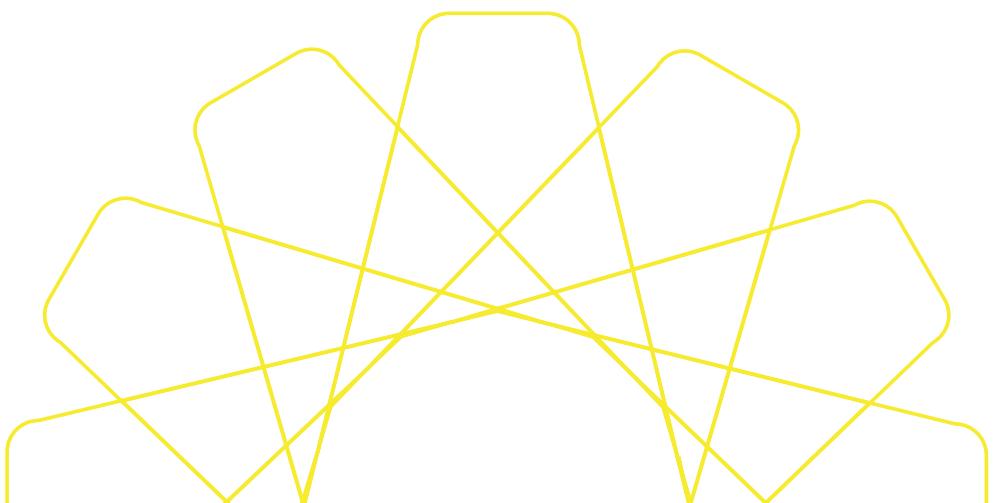
Office of the State Superintendent of Education - Division of Early Learning

SPACES in Action

The Aspen Institute

United Planning Organization

Venture Philanthropy Partners



This type of (we)visioning work requires precedent, boldness and wisdom. We are grateful for the continued guidance we have received from these distinguished early childhood advocates. Not only do they show up consistently for young children, but they also ensure that there is a robust and diverse pipeline of advocates who are well-prepared to do the same.

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School Readiness Consulting



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Appendix

CATAPULT DESIGN–BAINUM FAMILY FOUNDATION DESIGN PROCESS

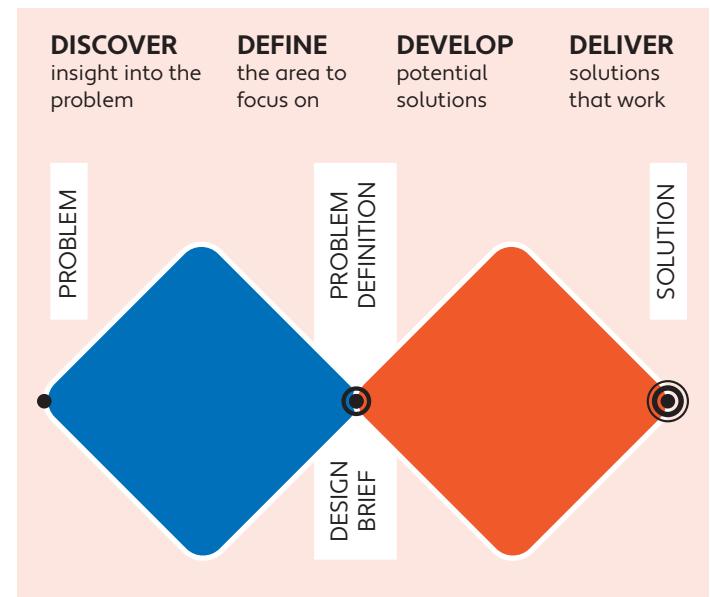
Synopsis of the Community-Driven Redesign Process for WeVision EarlyEd

COMMUNITY-DRIVEN REDESIGN

In partnership with the Bainum Family Foundation, Catapult Design applied a human-centered design (HCD) approach to redesigning the child care/early childhood education system (ECE) system in Washington, D.C. The process brought together a diverse group of educators, administrators and families 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, in order 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. It required having a shared definition of what makes up the community; in this case, it was educators, administrators and families. Leveraging the Double Diamond framework to structure our design process, we worked closely with participants to discover and define the system's current reality, identify the most impactful moments and opportunities for change, and design solutions that systematically shift toward a more equitable future for ECE.



Double Diamond created by the British Design Council

KEY ASPECTS OF HUMAN-CENTERED DESIGN

By applying HCD to imagine an equitable system, we were able to work with participants to identify the in-context challenges that shape ECE and generate a multitude of ideas to build the system the community wants. This participatory approach helps communities:

1. Engage actively in a process that acknowledges their lived experience 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. Co-create 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

USING HCD ACROSS THE PROJECT

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

The **Definition Phase** focused on co-creating the Current and Reimagined Journeys and the Core Components needed to build a new integrated vision with educators, administrators and families. A variety of research methodologies were applied to understand the needs of the community and gain insight into their problems in order to define key areas of opportunity to focus on. Key activities included:

- **Secondary Research** – Pulling existing data from 67 sources (e.g., news articles, academic reports and social media) to identify the key themes in ECE and opportunities to inform further research
- **Ecosystem Mapping** – Visual storytelling of the different perspectives as well as emphasizing the various stakeholders and relationships in the child care system
- **Primary Research** – Gathering new data directly from participants through methods such as interviews and site visits, which was done with 11 ECE participants
- **Focus Groups** – Working closely with 35 educators, administrators and families across four months to build the current journey, identify opportunities, define new concepts and reconstruct a future reimagined journey

for child care in D.C. There was one focus group meeting in November 2021, followed by three in December 2021, three in January 2022, three in February 2022 and three in March 2022 (13 focus groups total)

The **Build Phase** focused on co-creating “provocations” based on participant ideas identified during the Definition Phase and testing these ideas with the community for feedback to develop prototypes that address their unique needs. Key activities included:

- **Co-Creation Activities** – Developing participant ideas and synthesizing them into tools that enabled participants to identify which would drive the biggest systemic changes in the vision for child care. We worked with four of the original participants and recruited two additional ones for this phase
- **Futuristic Provocations** – Feedback given in co-creation activities and ideas from the focus groups was used to build futuristic provocations that pushed the boundaries of what it means to give participants a reimagined child care system
- **Conceptual Prototypes** – Illustrating the transformative and tangible impact of the conceptual prototypes on the child care system through the storytelling of fictional scenarios, conceptual visuals and key aspects representing all the new elements that shape the prototype concept

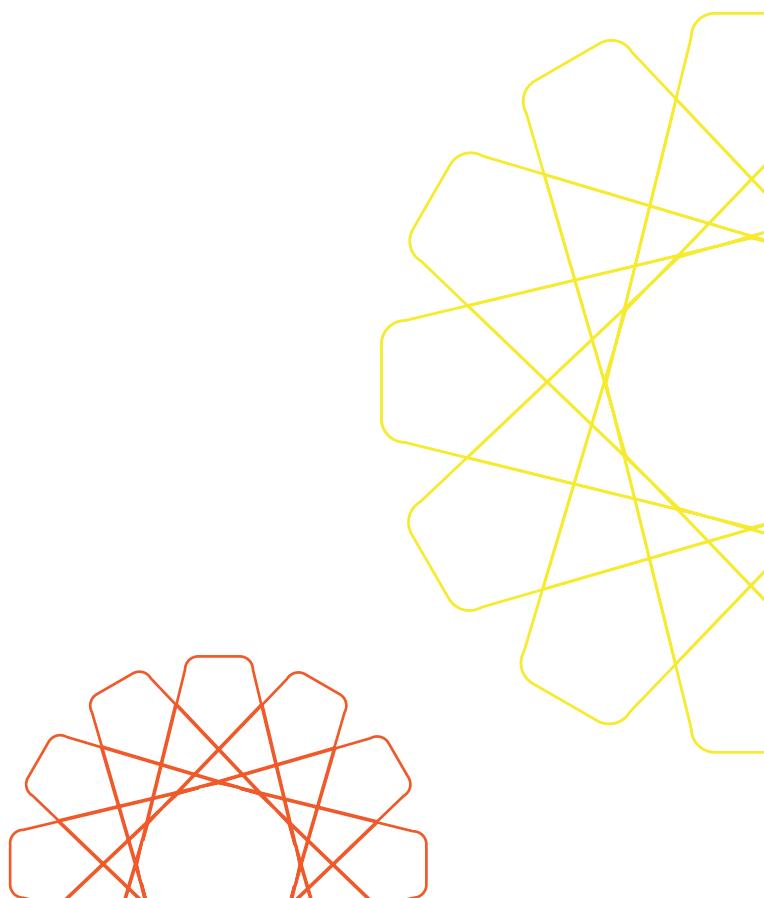
The **Impact Phase** focused on sharing the impact of a new equitable vision through engagements with the broader child care community and exploring tangible steps to bring the vision to reality.

Aside from the prototypes generated, this process also enabled participants to participate in shaping the system, see their experiences reflected in the narrative, and build community and trust across groups of users that connected over the shared goal of envisioning an equitable future for the child care system in D.C.

USING SMALLER USER GROUPS IN HCD

Throughout the HCD process, external designers serve as facilitators and guides – adding their own expertise while keeping the emphasis on the lived experiences of those in the community. To better understand the needs of the community using this process, it is important to leverage smaller subsets of user groups within the Definition and Build phases. Smaller user groups allow for more meaningful nuances and differentiating insights to be gleaned. Those rich nuances, derived from smaller focus groups and one-on-one research interviews, enable the creation of unique solutions within the contexts of the people from the community at the forefront. The output of the work becomes richer itself, allowing new opportunities to emerge that cannot always be understood from larger-scale research methods.

Working closely with a smaller subset of users also allows for a relationship to be built and trust formed, as HCD requires iteration and going back to those same participants who know their context the best. Participants from the community feel empowered because their unique perspectives are valued as designers build on their nuances and capture the future of the system the community members want to see.





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

Visit us at wevisionearlyed.org