



MARCH  
2025

# IT IS POSSIBLE: MAKING THE IDEAL CHILD CARE REAL

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



WeVision  
EarlyEd

“We set out to do something that families with young children and early childhood experts in America have asked for: get child care right.”



For more than a decade, the Bainum Family Foundation has invested deeply in early childhood—the critical period from birth to age 5 that shapes a child’s learning, behavior, and health for life. **In late 2021, we set out to do something that families with young children and early childhood experts in America have asked for: get child care right.**

We launched WeVision EarlyEd in our hometown of Washington, D.C.—the community we know best and where we have built trust. D.C. has made significant strides toward providing and publicly funding a range of early childhood services that families with young children and the adults who care for them need to grow and thrive. It offered a great foundation on which to build.

## Clarifying Our Terms

- \* **Child care** is the umbrella term describing situations in which families, caregivers, and/or early childhood educators are responsible for the care and development of young children for a significant portion of a day.
- \* **Early childhood education (ECE)** is a specific child care option that focuses on supporting and documenting child and program outcomes, typically outside the child’s home. These programs intentionally support the cognitive, physical, social, and emotional development of young children through early childhood educators with industry-recognized credentials.
- \* **Trusted caregiver** is a specific child care option that is used to describe when a child or a small group of children are nurtured by a family member, a trusted community member, or a nanny or an au pair (often living with the family).
- \* **Proximity experts** is a term we generated to describe the families, early childhood educators, and program administrators who provided the data and expertise to guide the direction of this initiative.

We first convened a cross-section of families, educators, and administrators that manage, work within, or use D.C.'s child care system every day. We wanted to better understand their experiences, concerns, and needs—and use that understanding to deepen our role as a supporter of community-led systems change. We expanded our learnings by soliciting input from hundreds of early childhood education (ECE) professionals from across the country at various conferences and meetings. We also reviewed research reports and monitored headlines for news about child care, and we convened 50 leading child care policy influencers to explore how child care policy issues are currently articulated and addressed.

**Through this process, we learned that while communities have unique contexts and circumstances, the pain points around child care and the visions for an ideal child care system are the same at the core.** And while we see increased (albeit still insufficient) public investments by states and local communities, they cannot make the ideal child care real without substantial and sustained state and federal funding. **For these reasons, we quickly**

**shifted our focus from local to national. Through WeVision EarlyEd, we intend to seize the moment and the momentum to make the ideal child care real.**

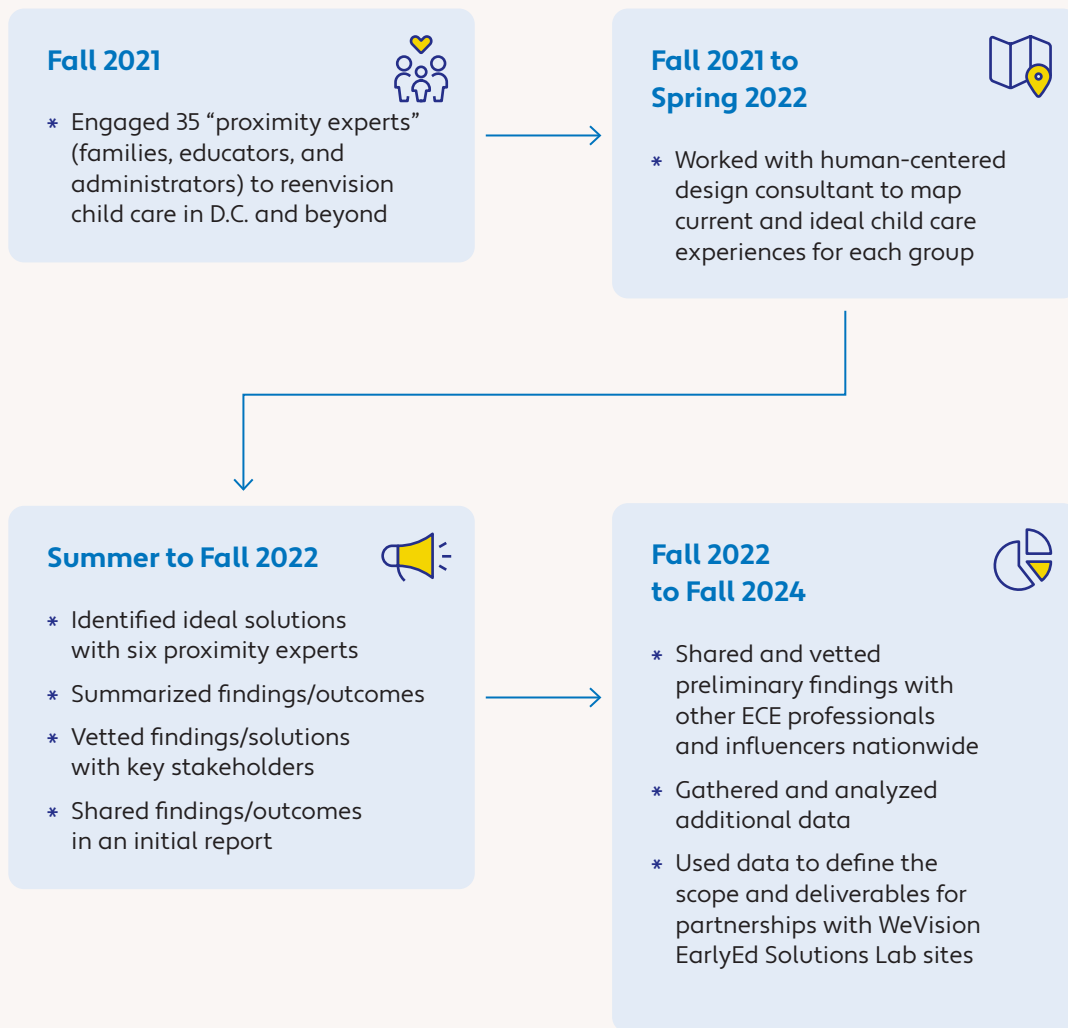
In July 2024, our foundation announced a five-year, \$100 million commitment to early childhood nationally. This funding will provide grantees and partners with the stability they need to meet the needs of young children and their families while advancing transformative narratives and policy solutions to pave the way toward a more equitable and effective child care system across the U.S. We will be there every step of the way and will share what we are learning with practitioners, advocates, lawmakers, families, and the broader public.

While communities have unique contexts and circumstances, the pain points around child care and the visions for an ideal child care system are the same at the core.



FIG. 1

## Our Process





# ENDURING THE CURRENT, ENVISIONING THE IDEAL

Families, educators, and administrators expressed that they face similar pain points. All enter the child care system with anxiety, manage to survive along the way, and exit the

system with worry. Imagine instead a system that supports them every step of the way—in pursuit of each child’s healthy development—allowing all parties to grow, evolve, and thrive.

FIG. 2

## The Current Experience

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

## The Ideal Experience

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

## 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 close to home or work. They want a system that helps them understand their options so they can find the right fit. They imagine a system where quality ECE programs, based on established industry standards, are accessible to all who want them. In this ideal, partnerships between families and early childhood educators are a priority; they share information about each child's development and plan intentional experiences based on this information. **Bottom line: Families are treated like the full-fledged educational partners they are.**

## 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. **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 business revenues to meet or exceed costs and expenses) so they can support their staff, ensure consistent quality, build community partnerships, and respond to families. They imagine a system that supports them 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. **Bottom line: ECE administrators get the kind of support that is commonplace in other publicly funded sectors of the economy.**

Imagine instead a system that supports all parties every step of the way—in pursuit of each child's healthy development—allowing them to grow, evolve, and thrive.

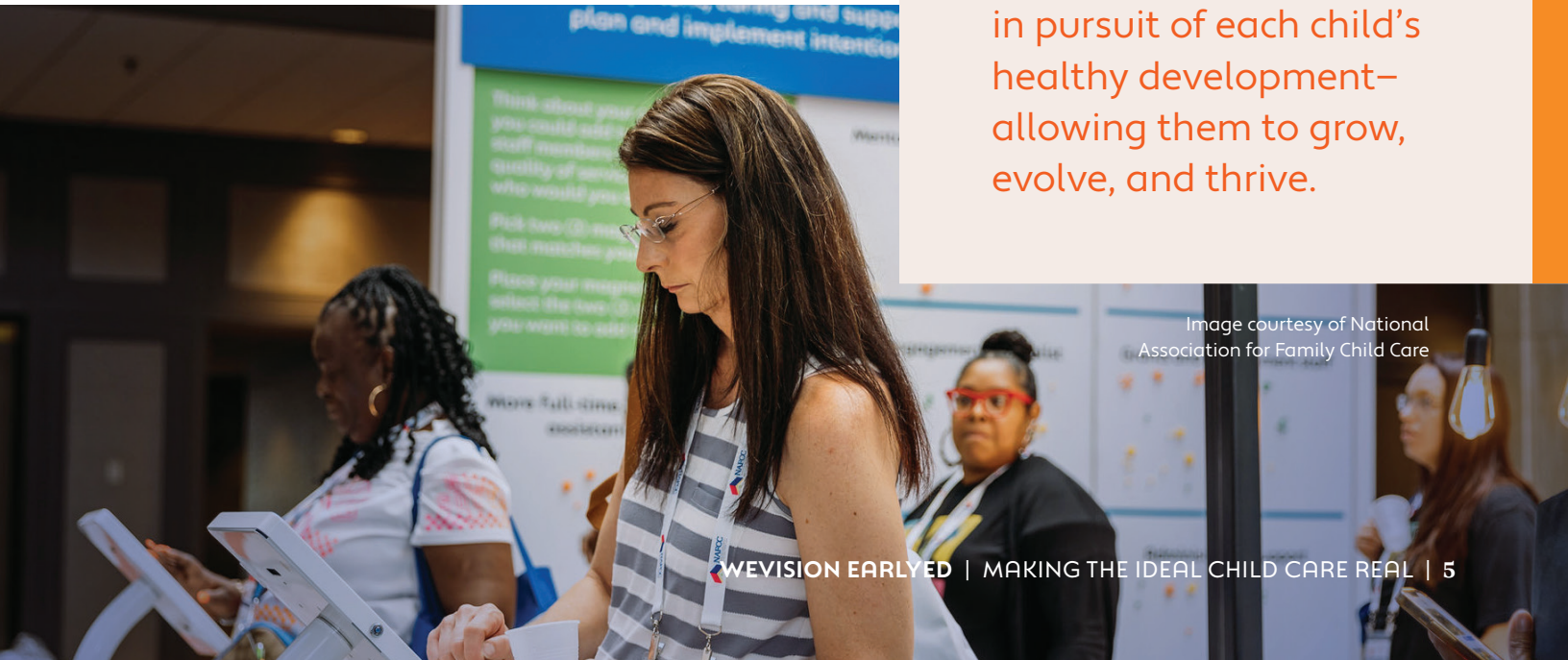


Image courtesy of National Association for Family Child Care



# WE START NOW: MAKING THE IDEAL REAL

There's nothing stopping us from moving full speed ahead in our efforts to generate much-needed change in our child care system. It will require two things of us:

## **1** SHIFTING OUR MINDSETS TO SHIFT THE SYSTEM

We are stuck in a system in which outdated mindsets don't match the current realities for families and practitioners and serve to hold this persistent problem in place. These mindsets reflect our beliefs, biases, values, relationships, and perceptions of power. It's time to rethink everything about the current system. We must go beyond quick, surface-level changes to truly transform it.

WeVision EarlyEd will help provide the gathering spaces, tools, and time needed for some of these mindset-shifting conversations and rethinking to occur. We propose five core mindset shifts that will encourage transformative thinking and give us policies aligned with what families, educators, and administrators want to see in the ideal system:

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



## 2 DEMONSTRATING THAT THE IDEAL IS POSSIBLE—RIGHT NOW

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

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

### 1. Families can have clear and funded child care options

Families want a range of clear options so they can make informed decisions. “Clear” means the available child care options would be easy for families to identify, evaluate, and, ultimately, make a decision based on what is most appropriate, accessible, and affordable for them.

“Funded” refers to funding from government entities (federal, state, and local) to support the affordability and sustainability of all child care options, including trusted caregivers such as stay-at-home parents. It is in our society’s best interests to ensure that all children are given a strong start during those critical early years and a firm foundation on which to build.

Regulations governing ECE programs can be streamlined and right-sized. In the ideal system, all ECE programs, regardless of government funding source, geographic location, and building type (e.g., home, center, school), are supported and expected to meet baseline ECE program quality standards and facility safety standards, at a minimum. Beyond the baseline, other specialized standards and funding can be added. Trusted caregivers, working with families and having greater autonomy, must meet families’ caregiving expectations and comply with state and federal laws that protect the welfare of children.

FIG. 3


### Clear and Funded Child Care Options


Early Childhood Education Program:

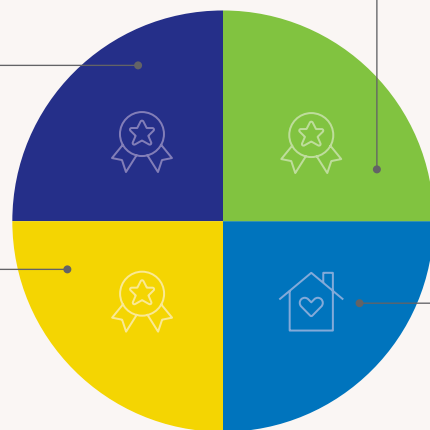
**Center-Based**

Early Childhood Education Program:

**School-Based**

 Meets quality baseline standards for early childhood education and receives comparable funding

 Meets quality standards defined by the family and receives some financial relief



Early Childhood Education Program:

**Home-Based**

**Trusted Caregiver**

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

## 2. Child care policies can be designed to make the ideal real

Public funding and policies must be designed and reengineered. In our full report, we offer a new resource that can guide advocates and policymakers at all levels of government. The “WeVision EarlyEd Policy Essentials” are five crucial policy considerations that will move us towards policies that are intentionally designed to make the ideal child care system real.

- \* Funding for child care should support the needs of families and the development of young children through age 5.
- \* Funding for child care should be available to all families that need support, regardless of income, employment, status, employer, race, gender, religious affiliation, or geographic location.
- \* Funding for child care should support two clear care options: early childhood education programs and trusted caregivers.

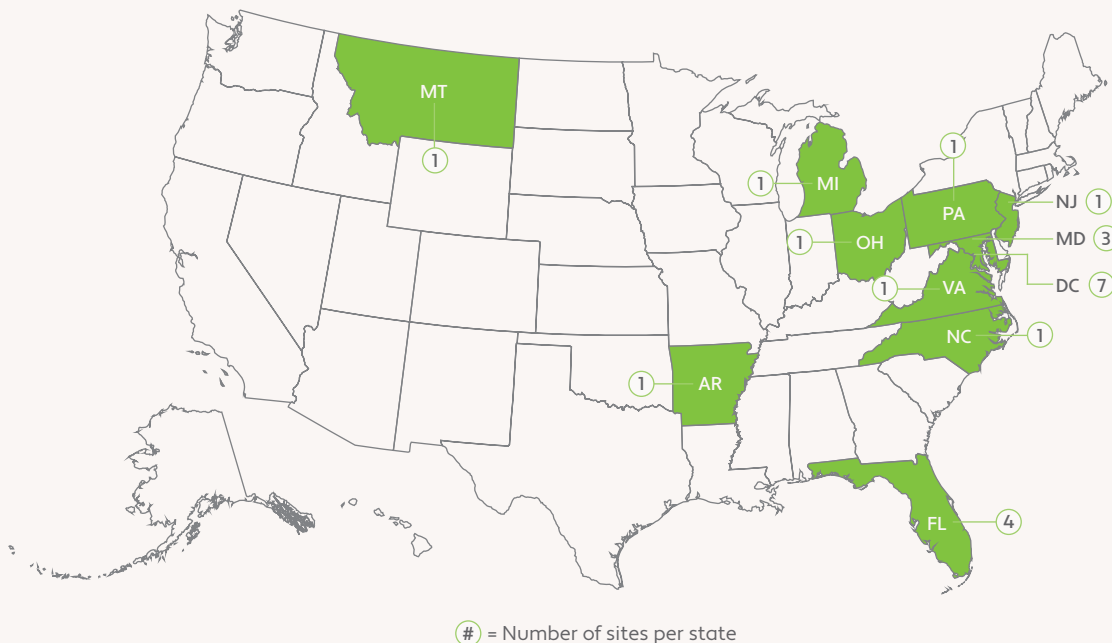
- \* Child care governance and accountability should be shared with families, ECE professional organizations, and government agencies to reduce administrative burden for families and ECE programs, while maintaining adequate safety and quality.
- \* Accountability for the quality of child care should be appropriate for the two clear and distinct child care options: ECE programs and trusted caregivers. Regulations should be right-sized and aligned to industry standards.

## 3. Solutions Lab sites provide evidence and inspiration

To test ideal solutions, we have engaged (as of February 2025) 10 child care partners at a total of 22 sites across 10 states and D.C., representing America. **We have asked them to do what it takes, starting from where they are now, to make the ideal as real as possible in every aspect. In other words, dream big and do it all.**

FIG. 4

Solutions Lab Sites by State





WeVision EarlyEd not only challenges outdated mindsets about child care but also challenges outdated and harmful research practices.

Solutions Lab sites include both child care options—trusted caregivers and ECE programs. They are diverse in location (rural, urban, and suburban), history, families and children served, and business structure. **We are demonstrating, in a tangible and practical way, that the ideal child care as defined by our proximity experts can be made real—right now. It is within our reach.**

Rooted in data from proximity experts and aligned with the core mindset shifts and policy essentials, Solutions Lab sites are funded and held accountable for: 1) child growth and development, 2) affordability for families regardless of income, 3) adherence to quality and regulatory standards that are appropriate and streamlined, 4) determining an accurate cost formula, and 5) sharing data and lessons learned to advance and inform child care research, policy, and practice.

In turn, the Bainum Family Foundation is accountable for providing the autonomy, agility, and accountability Solutions Lab sites need to innovate and make the ideal real. We will provide stable and consistent funding for at least five years; create peer learning and sharing opportunities; identify partnerships to deepen impact and sustainability; and

support complementary projects that can pave the way making the ideal child care real on a large scale. We will amplify the data and lessons learned to advance and inform child care research, policy, and practice.

#### **4. Solutions Lab Sites generate insights and impact**

Evaluation and learning are key components of this initiative. However, we also are intentional about ensuring that proximity experts and the WeVision EarlyEd Solutions Lab sites drive the research agenda. WeVision EarlyEd not only challenges outdated mindsets about child care but also challenges outdated and harmful research practices. Too often, research needs restrict implementation and innovation. While some early findings are being examined, evaluation and knowledge capture will intensify in fall 2025 after all stakeholders co-design an evaluation plan that is ethically grounded and appropriate.

## GET INVOLVED

WeVision EarlyEd provides an opportunity for all of us to deepen our understanding of what families, educators, and administrators are experiencing in the current system and what they want and need in their ideal child care system. Visit us at [wevisionearlyed.org](http://wevisionearlyed.org) to learn how you can get involved.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to express our tremendous thanks and appreciation to all who have contributed to the development and launch of WeVision EarlyEd and who are partnering with us to make the ideal child care real.



**WeVision EarlyEd**

