



**DRAFT Blue Ribbon Plan Outline Version 2, September 2023**

**Purpose of this Document:**

*This outline is a **preliminary draft** of goals, objectives, action steps, and potential measurable indicators for consideration by the Blue Ribbon Panel on Child Care. The first section of the document outlines the long-term vision and the subsequent sections provide detail on the proposed plan for the first five years. This draft outline reflects extensive feedback from Blue Ribbon workgroups, national and local experts, Panel members, and other stakeholders, including providers, parents, businesses, and advocates. Additional feedback on the outline is welcome through the end of September. At that point, the outline will be finalized and used to draft the Blue Ribbon Panel report. The final report will be submitted to the Governor in December. Ongoing stakeholder input will continue to be prioritized as plans for implementation develop and evolve.*

**I. Overarching Vision:**

All families will have access to an equitable, high-quality, and affordable early childhood education (ECE) system.

This system will center on the needs of children and families, enabling children to learn and thrive, and families to work.

A strong ECE system will benefit our communities and economy by helping to attract and retain young families, increase workforce participation – especially among women, and grow the State’s economy.



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Source: Adapted from Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory

To achieve this vision, all stakeholders will work together to:

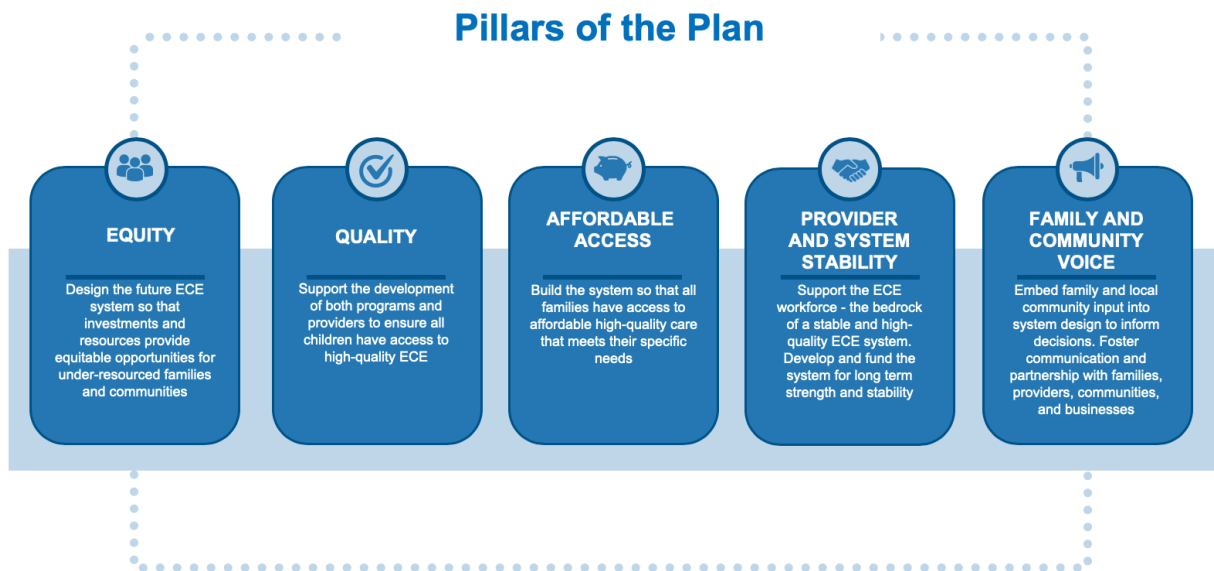
- Invest in and support a high-quality, appropriately compensated professional workforce
- Expand access to affordable child care for families
- Increase the supply of high-quality care that meets the needs of all families and children
- Elevate family and community voice in system design, implementation, and decision-making
- Enhance early childhood systems and funding to build on recent investments, maximize use of the current system, and build a high-quality, sustainable ECE system

This vision represents a long-term commitment requiring significant system-building and investments. Building on the investments that the State has already made in ECE, the Blue Ribbon Plan specifies the goals, objectives, and actions steps for the next five years. The plan also prepares the State to prioritize investments if additional federal dollars are appropriated. The roll out of this plan will prioritize historically under-resourced groups and communities and will take care to honor the existing workforce and a public-private mixed delivery model.

The Office of Early Childhood (OEC) will be responsible for implementation and the Early Childhood Cabinet will serve as the ongoing advisory body.

## II. Guiding Pillars and Principles:

### Pillars of the Plan



### Principles Behind Plan Development:

- Simplicity: Seek efficient solutions (e.g., the most impact for the least effort)
- Flexibility: Design recommendations to be flexible, responsive to demand, and to optimize Connecticut's mixed delivery system

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- Public/Private Mixed Delivery System: Strengthen Connecticut’s current public/private early childhood system of community-based centers, group and family child care homes, and school-based early childhood programs
- Leveraging what exists: Use current resources efficiently. Build on recent successes and investments. Leverage local, national, and federal organizations, investments, and systems
- Data-driven: Develop new and enhance existing data systems and incentives to ensure continuous progress toward goals and to manage for improved outcomes for children, families, and the State’s economy

### III. Goals, Objectives, Action Steps, and Indicators

#### Goal 1: Workforce and Quality

##### ***Invest in and support the retention and recruitment of a professional, high-quality ECE workforce***

*Today’s ECE workforce needs urgent support to meet the child care needs of Connecticut’s families and to attract, develop and retain the next generation of educators and leaders. Without a strong and stable workforce, there can be no high-quality ECE. No business or education institution can succeed in the long run with high turnover and employees who cannot make a living wage. Children and families are negatively impacted when teachers leave for higher paying jobs.*

- **Objective 1A:** Support the professional compensation of current and future early childhood educators in centers, group and family child care homes, and schools

##### **Action Steps:**

- Build toward professional wages by increasing state-funded budgets by approximately 11% per year for state-funded center and family based programs to reach mid-career compensation levels in year 5 (TBD)
- Continue funding increases for Care 4 Kids subsidy rate over 5 years to help raise wages for non-state-funded providers, building on the 11% annual increases that started in 2023 and will continue through 2025 (TBD)
- Align compensation increases with the roll out of the educator levels outlined in the Unifying Framework (UF) and set a compensation schedule for state-funded programs to be implemented in alignment with rate increases in 4 years
- Advance strategies to expand key benefits for the ECE workforce across the State, specifically improving access to health insurance (including health navigators and/or subsidies), retirement savings, and education, through strategies that could include dedicated resources for early childhood educators on Access Health CT, including assistance for anyone whose increases in compensation make them ineligible for Medicaid coverage, and pooled retirement savings plans
- Assess equity impact of the proposed compensation schedule and propose strategies to prevent disparate impact on ECE workers through strategies to convert experience to credit and supports that enhance the accessibility of education and training, like child care and stipends for transportation

##### **Potential Measurable Indicators:**

- Average or median earnings for ECE workforce
- Number of ECE workers with health insurance plans retirement savings programs

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- Assessment of equity impacts (including whether adoption of UF educator levels supports the recruitment and retention of a more diverse ECE workforce)
- Monitor and evaluate turnover and increased hiring in the field
- **Objective 1B:** Pursue strategies that support ECE workforce recruitment and retention, and build education and training programs for skilled, diverse ECE educators and staff (e.g., apprenticeships, high school CDA, retraining from other fields)
  - Action Steps:**
    - Develop a campaign about the benefits of a career in ECE and the impact of this work
    - Introduce the ECE field and emphasize its importance in new and traditional settings, like high schools, community colleges, four-year colleges, and job centers
    - Support career mobility with clear education/training pathways such as apprenticeships
    - Connect ECE professionals with currently available resources for “upskilling” (e.g., no- or low-cost education and training opportunities)
    - Make scholarships and flexible educational opportunities available to field entrants
    - Ensure coursework is available on schedules that give early childhood educators the ability to work and study and include dedicated supports for those pursuing education and training programs so they can participate fully as students
    - Explore granting presumptive eligibility for child care assistance programs to early childhood educators working in family child care homes and centers
    - Dedicate resources to help early childhood educators mitigate the impacts of “benefits cliffs,” or instances when increased compensation means that educators will no longer qualify for public benefits programs like Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Programs
  - Potential Measurable Indicators:**
    - Rates of individuals entering and completing education or training programs
    - Number of ECE professionals advancing in levels of the UF
    - Demographics of individuals entering and staying in the ECE workforce
- **Objective 1C:** Adopt a three-step career ladder that aligns with the Unifying Framework and links career advancement with compensation, following an implementation timeline and stakeholder input process that ensures any new system supports all providers
  - Action Steps:**
    - Develop a roadmap with interim steps and options for existing ECE providers to adopt educator levels outlined in the UF, including “grandfathering” and transitional period and establish pathways for non-native English speakers and educators who are also English learners
    - Work with Connecticut higher education institutions to assure the educator levels outlined in the UF include the competencies associated with CDA programs that offer credit and full degree programs
    - Build on current funding scholarships and service support (like child care and transportation stipends) to ensure access to training and education programs required in the UF
    - Shift Head Teacher licensure requirements to align with educator Level I (adopt CDA + 9 ECE credits as Connecticut’s ECE Level 1)
    - Work with family child care organizations to assure UF rollout, structure, and supports are accessible and that pathways are clear for family child care home providers
  - Potential Measurable Indicators:**

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- Completed roadmap that clearly indicates how credentials or current steps on the career ladder correspond to educator levels in the UF
- Number of ECE professionals at each educator level post-adoption and thereafter
- Number of ECE professionals enrolling in programs to advance their educator level
- **Objective 1D:** Create and expand successful strategies to support educators in increasing the quality of early childhood programs
  - Action Steps:**
    - Increase awareness of trainings and other resources for professional development available through Elevate and at OEC
    - Fund peer mentors and coaches to provide on-the-ground support
    - Support the development of coaches within programs and FCC homes for ECE workforce leadership development
    - Provide effective training on program health and safety protocols through Elevate
    - Collect comprehensive information on ECE workers by level of licensure for, and clearly marketed to, both the state-funded and non-state-funded systems
  - Potential Measurable Indicators:**
    - Share of ECE workers with licensure information entered through the registry
    - Uptake of mentor/coaching services once available with surveys and enrollment counts

## Goal 2: Affordability

### *Increase affordability for low- and middle-income families*

*The cost of ECE in Connecticut is among the highest in the country, unaffordable for most families and well above the recommended 7% of family income. This impacts families' decisions to participate in the workforce and live in the State.*

*If families who receive subsidies become ineligible due to increased household income, they face a significant benefit cliff, and families just out of reach of subsidies have limited affordable options outside of state-funded and school-based programs.*

- **Objective 2A:** Expand affordability for low and middle-income families, committing to funding and expanding Care 4 Kids eligibility to households earning up to 100% of State Median Income (SMI) using a parent co-pay schedule with a maximum of 7% of family income and phasing in over 5 years (TBD)
  - Action Steps:**
    - First expand Care 4 Kids eligibility to 85% of SMI over 3 years to ensure equity, then raise to 100% by the 5<sup>th</sup> year, with no co-pays for lowest income families and a maximum family co-pay of 7% (TBD)
    - Develop strategies to minimize the use of enrollment management systems (i.e., waitlist)
    - Track parent pay and workforce participation rates related to expanded eligibility to ensure least resourced families are being served
  - Potential Measurable Indicators:**

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- Percentage of eligible children and families served by the ECE system across race, geography, and income level
- Parent co-pay
- Number and percentage of females of childbearing age participating in the State's workforce
  
- **Objective 2B:** Design and implement cost-sharing public-private model with businesses to reach families just out of reach of publicly funded subsidies
  - Action Steps:**
    - Consider public-private cost share model similar to Michigan's Tri-Share to make access more affordable for those just out of reach of public support, also building on learning from additional states that are adopting this model
    - Focus first on Eastern region of Connecticut where there is a severe shortage of ECE
    - Develop strategies to build business support for the ECE needs of their employees
  - Potential Measurable Indicators:**
    - Reach of families just out of reach of Care 4 Kids
    - Reduction in unmet need in Eastern Connecticut and other targeted areas of unmet need
    - Participation of businesses in the program
  
- **Objective 2C:** Develop strategies to expand affordability and mitigate the impacts of benefits cliffs
  - Action Steps:**
    - Identify opportunities to connect families and programs to benefits cliffs calculators and navigation supports
    - Consider incremental opportunities to limit parent co-pay
  - Potential Measurable Indicators**
    - Percentage of eligible families served by the ECE system across race, geography, and income level
    - Parent co-pay

### Goal 3: Equitable Access

***Increase access to high-quality programs that that meets the range of family needs, especially for infant and toddler care and children with special needs and prioritizes under-resourced groups and communities***

*Families are their children's primary teachers and caregivers, yet their voices, especially those of historically underserved populations, are not always heard in developing an ECE system.*

*Families struggle to find care that meets their needs and preferences. The lack of access to high-quality care disproportionately impacts the least resourced families and communities. The need for infant and toddler care is particularly acute in Connecticut. The number of children with special needs has also increased dramatically since the onset of Covid, and the supports for these children, their families and the programs that serve them have not kept pace.*

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- **Objective 3A:** Recognize, empower, and embed families as central and valued decision-makers in the development of an equitable ECE system

### Action Steps

- Partner with parents as expert advisors to develop and implement policies at the program, state, and local level to elevate families' diverse voice and perspectives (e.g., parent input on implementation plans)
- In concert with parent leaders, create a statewide umbrella entity for parent advisory groups to foster communication and identify areas for potential alignment
- Increase opportunities for parent leadership training for interested parents
- Track impact and outcomes related to parent leadership and equitable participation

### Potential Measurable Indicators:

- Parent representation across the ECE system
- Equitable parent participation in state and local governance

- **Objective 3B:** Increase the supply of infant and toddler care

### Action Steps:

- Increase access to infant/toddler care by expanding contracted slots by 3,600 over 5 years (TBD)
- Develop policies and incentives to expand infant and toddler care in family child care homes and center-based settings (e.g., align group home regulations with family child care)

### Potential Measurable Indicators

- Supply of infant and toddler slots

- **Objective 3C:** Improve access to programs and services to meet the needs of children with special needs and their families

### Action Steps:

- Increase access to inclusive school-day classrooms led by credentialed teachers by expanding school day, school year Smart Start, by about 900 slots, focusing on communities with unmet need for care (TBD)
- Seek opportunities to deepen partnerships with other state agencies--e.g., Department of Children and Families, State Department of Education (SDE)--to be more aligned and intentional in serving children with special needs and their families, considering transportation and part-day challenges
  - Work with public school districts to develop strategies to remove barriers to receiving services and bring special education services to children in community-based settings

### Potential Measurable Indicators:

- System capacity to serve children with special needs
- Provision of care for children with special needs

- **Objective 3D:** Increase equitable access to high-quality care, especially for under-resourced families and communities

### Action Steps:

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- Expand the supply of and access to programs ready to serve children from under-resourced groups, such as undocumented families and families experiencing homelessness
  - Increase outreach to and enrollment of undocumented families and children, and families and children experiencing homelessness by partnering with local community-based organizations
- Increase the supply of family child care and group homes equipped to serve families needing care in non-traditional hours, multilingual care, and care for children who live in child care deserts
  - Align group home licensing regulations with family child care homes
  - Continue support of innovative models, such as the family child care incubator model
- Develop a pathway to presumptive eligibility model to grant families provisional coverage while their applications are being processed to help parents get to work, while simultaneously working to shorten application time to two months
- Fund training, coaching and staffing to help programs support under-resourced families
  - Potentially utilize the Head Start Parent, Family and Community Framework as a guide
  - Include training for programs to be able to meet the needs of multilingual learners and their families
- Track the provision of equitable care for families of color, families living in poverty, multilingual families, and families experiencing homelessness and under resourced communities

### **Potential Measurable Indicators:**

- System's capacity to serve under-resourced children and families
- Supply of off-hour care
- Number of licensed family child care and group homes

## **Goal 4: Systems**

### ***Develop an agile, flexible, and collaborative ECE system that maximizes current resources and supports economically viable programs***

*The ECE system is generally inflexible and complex. Programs struggle to navigate funding streams and lack access to business and leadership development that would enable stronger fiscal management to better utilize and enhance resources and improve enrollment. One-time investments can make ongoing improvements to program economics (e.g., facility expenses, administration).*

*A family's child care needs and preferences vary and they often face challenges in finding information about ECE and face barriers navigating ECE options.*

*Programs and agencies sometimes operate in silos, based on an out-of-date model of family and program needs. Local needs vary but stakeholders aren't always represented in assessing a community's needs. The use of data and outcomes tracking and technology generally is limited.*

- **Objective 4A:** Simplify state-funded system and better align with federal systems to reduce complexity and increase utility especially for providers, but also for families, and the State



**Action Steps**

- Complete mapping of existing state funded programs requirements in order to consolidate into a single funding stream to minimize administrative burdens on providers and simplify parent navigation
- Determine statutory and regulatory changes to support a unified state funding system for consideration in the 2024 session
- Issue an RFP to fund existing state-funded programs in communities to pilot the consolidation of at least two funding streams by July 2025
- Pay state-funded programs up front and quarterly on a classroom-based system to support income stabilization for programs to support staffing needs, including wages for staff
- Transition OEC subsidy regulations to align with federal guidelines to simplify and allow for a more responsive system that makes more families eligible for affordable care

**Potential Measurable Indicators**

- Percentage of contracts funded from a unified funding stream
- Contracts funded from multiple SIDs
- Number of programs offering families more flexible schedules that meet family need including part week, part day, extended hours.
- Number of required provider reports
- Number of GPs (OEC created rules for ECE state funded providers)
- Survey of impact on program administration

- **Objective 4B:** Maximize existing resources by strengthening programs and partnerships to improve enrollment, reduce administrative burdens and redundant costs

**Action Steps**

- Develop programs, policies and incentives to improve program operations and maximize enrollment (e.g., shared services, business coaching)
- Grow facility funding and expand access to low- to no-cost facilities to reduce or eliminate ongoing costs related to facilities
  - Secure bond funding (amount TBD) for facilities investments: conversions, renovation, expansion, and new builds that promotes safety and access
  - Consider opportunities to partner with SDE to identify low- to no-cost classroom space for programs, where there is unmet need
  - Develop capacity of local communities to help support program facility needs (e.g., subsidized space, churches, local philanthropy)
  - Provide ongoing dedicated resources to help programs access any state as well as federal or local facilities funding
  - Incentivize the provision of unmet needs, such as off-hour care
- Expand existing and forge new partnerships
  - Leverage the Early Childhood Cabinet to capitalize on opportunities that would benefit multiple state systems (e.g., Family First, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families)
  - Explore opportunities to enhance partnerships with state agencies SDE, DCF, and Department of Social Services (DSS), among others, to identify additional opportunities for alignment
    - Expand Head Start on Housing model with CT Department of Housing to include families experiencing homelessness enrolled in ECE programs

- Leverage federal and local resources, such as Head Start or Smart Start to blend, braid, and layer funding as well as to adopt potential standards and resources
  - Explore expanding the Early Childhood Mentorship Pilot in Partnership with Early Head Start pilot

**Potential Measurable Indicators**

- ECE funding related to inter-agency collaboration
  - Head Start programming
  - Smart Start programs serving children with special needs
- **Objective 4C:** Implement a common needs assessment and expand organizational supports to ensure an equitable and responsive ECE system that covers all geographies in the state

**Action Steps**

- Implement a rigorous common needs assessment that will reflect differences in local community needs and priorities, drawing from existing models (e.g., Community Action Agencies, Head Start, and North Carolina)
- Enhance funding to local early childhood councils (School Readiness and/or Local Early Childhood Collaboratives) to cover expanded role in local planning efforts to include needs assessment, planning and oversight of all state-funded ECE programs in the community
- Allow communities to collaborate and form multi-town councils as needed based on community size and capacity
- Consider potential legislative changes to current governance structure to ensure leadership by community-based organizations and broad representation of stakeholders

**Potential Measurable Indicators**

- OEC approved community needs assessment is utilized by a percentage of providers/communities
  - Number of geographies using common needs assessment
  - Percentage of towns covered by regional structure
- **Objective 4D:** Develop data and information systems, including a provider and parent portal and navigation systems, to track and improve systems and outcomes

**Action Steps**

- Develop an approach to track systems, child and family outcomes to support accountability and progress
  - Identify strategies to collect the necessary data
  - Enhance demand and supply tracking to reflect the range of parent needs and preferences and program options
  - Conduct two RCT research projects to understand impact of infant and toddler care and impact when combined with home visiting and specific professional development (\$10 M per study funded through ARPA) to learn how to scale data collection and ongoing interventions tied to improved child outcomes
- Design and develop an easy-to-use, accessible parent portal that would be a 'single point of entry' for the ECE system
  - Conduct extensive interviews with families to understand their needs and preferences
  - Map existing data systems

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- Devise a plan to rapidly launch a minimally viable product, improving on design of current parent navigation system, that is easy-to-use, organized, accessible, to engage parents as partners in children's overall development and well-being
- Promote awareness of available family supports related to physical and mental health services, transportation, housing, and paid leave
- Complement online navigation system with an expansion of trusted on the ground resources
- Consider the need for dedicated marketing and outreach
- Enhance the Provider 360 portal for all Connecticut ECE programs, leveraging incentives, strategic communications, and broad access points such as licensing to encourage uptake and use
  - Determine costs, sequencing, and scope for new and/or integrated system

### Potential Measurable Indicators

- Child, family and system outcomes data collection
- Demand and supply matching
- Family experience navigating ECE system
- Usage of and satisfaction with parent and provider portals

## Goal 5: Funding

### ***Build a well-funded, sustainable ECE funding system that is poised to efficiently leverage future investment***

*The ECE system is significantly underfunded, leading the U.S. Treasury Secretary to describe it as “a textbook example of a broken market.” Funding does not support the true cost of quality care. Significant funds must be raised over time and investments staged and prioritized.*

*With the impending expiration of federal Covid relief funding, programs need help now.*

- **Objective 5A:** Implement a stabilization program for centers, group homes family child care homes that is based on a sliding scale program grant that offers significantly enhanced funding for programs that serve high-need communities and under-resourced families and that incentivizes high quality
  - Action Steps:**
    - Design a payment schedule to rapidly deploy funds to pay at a program or classroom level to help support stable provider economics and increased workforce incentives
    - Identify criteria and requirements for payments that rationalizes administrative burdens on programs while still supporting overall system goals
    - Evaluate other states that have implemented similar models
  - Potential Measurable Indicators:**
    - Program supply
    - Program economics
    - Workforce compensation levels
- **Objective 5B:** Develop a plan to transition to funding based on the true cost of care starting with infant and toddler care and high-need communities

**Action Steps**

- Develop estimates of the true cost of quality care, building off of existing state cost of care model, by analyzing approaches from comparable states and aligning with Elevate’s quality standards
- Review federal guidelines to inform potential implementation plans

**Potential Measurable Indicators**

- Development of true cost of quality care estimates
- Development of an implementation plan

- **Objective 5C:** Develop a flexible fiscal model to support implementation and help to prioritize and stage investments

**Action Steps**

- Build robust revenue, cost, and investment model that informs key policies and plans
- Identify resource gaps and significant hurdles and risks in implementation
- Design this model to be able to stage investments to prioritize first both foundational investments and high-impact investments with low effort

**Potential Measurable Indicators**

- Ability to apply in implementation to make needed adjustments

- **Objective 5D:** Identify new funding streams that will support sustained and significant public and private incremental investment in ECE

**Action Steps**

- Secure significant new funding through a trust fund, a public-private partnership, and/or other means, looking to other states and municipalities for funding models that have worked
- Identify opportunities enabled by any new sources of revenues to leverage newly formed Early Childhood Fund, defining its purpose, structure, and governance as applicable
- Cultivate philanthropic investment in ECE, especially for one-time catalytic investments in systems and facilities
- Consider incremental strategies to generate business engagement

**Potential Measurable Indicators**

- Ability to raise sustained funding to address short- and long-term system needs