



DRAFT Blue Ribbon Plan Outline, September 2023

Purpose of this Document:

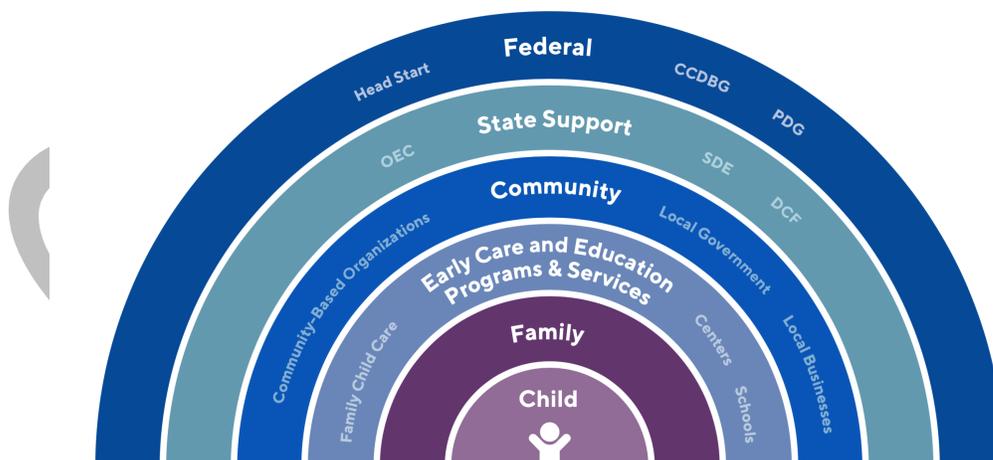
*This outline is a **preliminary draft** of goals, objectives, action steps, and potential measurable indicators for consideration by the Blue Ribbon Panel on Child Care. This draft outline reflects extensive feedback from Blue Ribbon workgroups, national and local experts, Panel Members, and other stakeholders, including providers, parents, businesses, and advocates.*

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.



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

- Invest in and support a high-quality, appropriately compensated professional workforce

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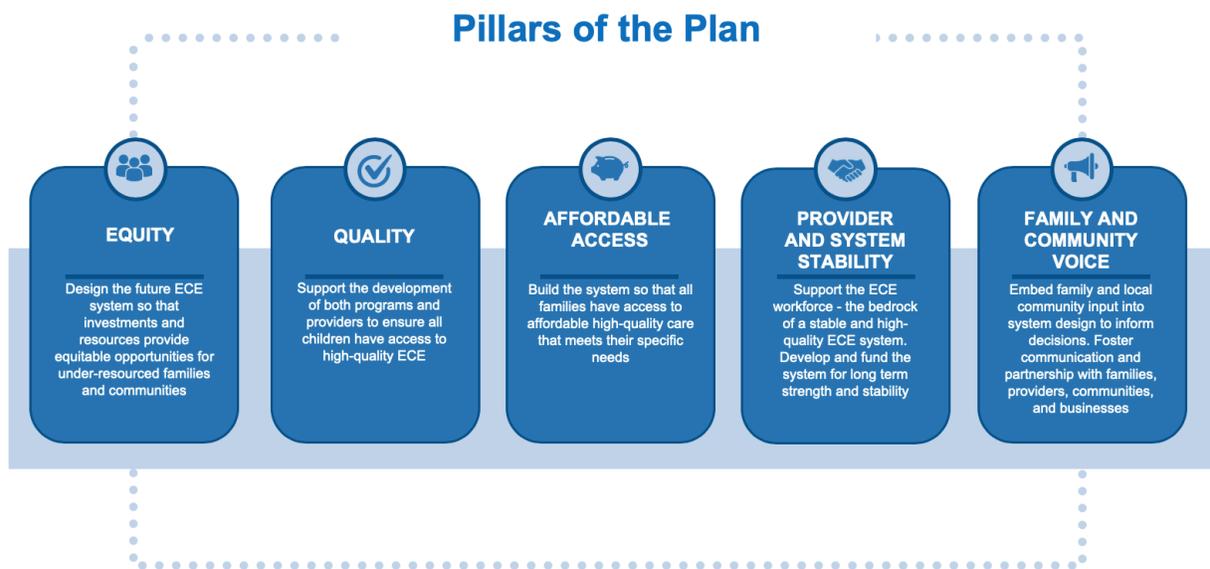
- Expand access to affordable child care for families
- Increase the supply of high-quality care that meets the needs of all families and children
- Elevate family and community voice in system design, implementation, and decision-making
- Enhance early childhood systems and funding to build on recent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

Implemented over the next 5 years, the plan will build on the significant investments that the State has already made in ECE. 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 in an advisory capacity.

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
- 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 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 Executive Summary

Goal 1: Workforce

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

Without a strong and stable workforce, there can be no high-quality ECE. No business or education institution can succeed with high turnover and employees who cannot make a living wage.

- **Objective 1A:** Invest in and promote policies that support the professional compensation of early childhood educators in centers, family child care homes, and schools
- **Objective 1B:** Pursue strategies that support worker 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)
- **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
- **Objective 1D:** Create and expand successful strategies to support educators in increasing the quality of early childhood programs

Goal 2: Equitable Access

Increase affordable access that meets the range of family needs and prioritizes under-resourced groups and communities

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.

The lack of affordable access to high-quality care disproportionately impacts the least resourced families and communities.

- **Objective 2A:** Expand affordability for low and middle-income families, committing to expanding Care 4 Kids eligibility to households earning up to 100% of State Median Income (SMI) over 3 years and phasing in a parent co-pay level of a maximum of 7% of family income (TBD)
- **Objective 2B:** Increase equitable access to high-quality programs to meet the needs of children and families, especially for infant/toddler care, children with special needs, and under-resourced families and communities (e.g., incentives for expanding infant and toddler slots, contracted infant and toddler slots, Smart Start, facility funding)

Goal 3: Family and Community Voice

Elevate family and community voice to develop an equitable and responsive ECE system

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 face barriers navigating ECE options to meet their needs.

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Local communities and their families have evolving needs, yet state-funded programs have remained fixed. The quality and focus of local governance councils varies. Given 169 townships, a regional model that supports local efforts is desirable for efficiency, quality, and equity.

- **Objective 3A:** Recognize, empower, and embed families as central and valued decision-makers in the development of an equitable ECE system
- **Objective 3B:** Expand and fund community-informed governance with regional supports that utilizes a common needs assessment for an equitable and responsive ECE system

Goal 4: Systems and Funding

Build a high-quality and well-funded ECE system that maximizes current resources, supports economically viable programs, and is poised to efficiently leverage future investment

By any measure, the ECE system is significantly underfunded, leading the U.S. Treasury Secretary to describe it as “a textbook example of a broken market.” Significant funds must be raised over time and investments staged and prioritized.

Moreover, the ECE system is complex. Parents have difficulty navigating the system. 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.

Outcomes are not regularly assessed. Local and state systems require the capacity to address these challenges in a connected, staged way.

- **Objective 4A:** Simplify state-funded system and better align with federal systems to reduce complexity and increase utility for providers, families, and the State
- **Objective 4B:** Assess true cost of quality care and develop a plan to transition to funding based on this true cost, starting with infant and toddler care and high need communities
- **Objective 4C:** Maximize existing resources by strengthening programs and partnerships to improve enrollment and reduce administrative burdens and redundant costs
- **Objective 4D:** Develop data and information systems, including a provider and parent portal and navigation systems, to track and improve systems and outcomes
- **Objective 4E:** Develop a flexible fiscal model to support implementation and help to prioritize and stage investments
- **Objective 4F:** Identify new funding streams that will support sustained and significant incremental investment in ECE



IV. 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

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Without a strong and stable workforce, there can be no high-quality ECE. No business or education institution can succeed with high turnover and employees who cannot make a living wage.

- **Objective 1A:** Invest in and promote policies that support the professional compensation of early childhood educators in centers, family child care homes, and schools

Action Steps:

- Continue funding increases for Care 4 Kids subsidy rate over 5 years to bolster wages for non-state-funded providers, building on the 11% annual increases that started in 2023 and continue through 2025
- Build toward funding the true cost of care in state-funded programs, beginning with currently budgeted 17% rate increase for SFY 2024 and continuing over 5 years to support higher wages
- 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
- Advance strategies to expand benefits offerings for the ECE workforce across the State, specifically improving access to health insurance (including health navigators and/or subsidies), retirement savings, and education
- Assess equity impact of the proposed compensation schedule and propose strategies to prevent disparate impact on ECE workers

Potential Measurable Indicators:

- Average or median earnings for ECE workforce
- Number of ECE workers with health insurance plans, paid leave/ disability benefits, retirement savings programs
- Assessment of equity impacts (i.e., adoption of UF educator levels supports the recruitment and retention of a more diverse ECE workforce)

- **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:

- 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
- Introduce the ECE field and emphasize its importance in new and traditional settings, like high schools, community colleges, four-year colleges and job centers

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

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- 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 wraparound service support 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)

Potential Measurable Indicators:

- 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:**
- Fund peer mentors and coaches to provide on-the-ground support
 - Support ECE workforce leadership development through director coaches and networks
 - Ensure the collection of comprehensive information on ECE workers by level of licensure
- Potential Measurable Indicators:**
- Share of ECE workers with licensure information entered through the registry
 - Uptake of mentor/coaching services once available

Goal 2: Equitable Access

Increase affordable access that meets the range of family needs and prioritizes under-resourced groups and communities

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.

The lack of affordable access to high-quality care disproportionately impacts the least resourced families and communities.

- **Objective 2A:** Expand affordability for low and middle-income families, committing to expanding Care 4 Kids eligibility to households earning up to 100% of State Median Income (SMI) over 3 years and phasing in a parent co-pay level of a maximum of 7% of family income (TBD)
- Action Steps:**
- Expand Care 4 Kids eligibility to 100% of SMI over 5 years with a maximum parent co-pay of 7% (TBD)
 - Track economic impact on Connecticut through expanded eligibility
 - Extend outreach and application support especially for the least resourced families as part of new navigation systems for families
 - Adopt a presumptive eligibility model, when there is no active waitlist, granting families provisional coverage while their applications are being processed to help parents get to work, while working to shorten application time to two months

- 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 child care
- Design and implement cost-sharing public private model with businesses similar to Michigan's Tri-Share to make access more affordable for those just out of reach of public support

Potential Measurable Indicators

- Percentage of eligible 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:** Increase equitable access to high-quality programs to meet the needs of children and families, especially for infant/toddler care, children with special needs, and under-resourced families and communities (e.g., incentives for expanding infant and toddler slots, contracted infant and toddler slots, Smart Start, facility funding)

Action Steps:

- Increase access to infant/toddler care by expanding contracted slots by 5,000 over 5 years
- Develop incentives to expand infant and toddler care in FCC and center-based settings
- Expand the supply of and access to programs ready to serve children with special needs and under-resourced groups, such as undocumented families and families experiencing homelessness
 - Partner with other state agencies--e.g., Department of Children and Families, State Department of Education (SDE)--to serve children with special needs and under-resourced groups and communities
 - Increase access to inclusive school-day classrooms led by certified teachers by expanding school day, school year Smart Start
 - Improve the seamless provision of services for children with special needs, bringing care to the child or providing transportation where that is not possible, in coordination with SDE
 - Increase outreach to and enrollment of undocumented families and children, and families and children experiencing homelessness by partnering with local community-based organizations
 - 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 of children with special needs, families living in poverty, multilingual families and families experiencing homelessness
- Grow facility funding and expand access to low- to no-cost facilities that are accessible to all types of providers in a mixed delivery system, prioritizing programs serving under-resourced families particularly for infant and toddler care
 - Secure \$30 million (TBD) in bond funding for facilities investments: conversions, renovation, expansion, and new builds

- Consider opportunities to partner with SDE to identify low- to no-cost classroom space for programs, particularly in under-resourced communities
- 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
- 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
 - Replicate innovative models such as the family child care incubator model

Potential Measurable Indicators

- Supply of infant and toddler slots
- 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 3: Family and Community Voice

Elevate family and community voice to develop an equitable and responsive ECE system

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 face barriers navigating ECE options to meet their needs.

Local communities and their families have evolving needs, yet state-funded programs have remained fixed. The quality and focus of local governance councils varies. Given 169 townships, a regional model that supports local efforts is desirable for efficiency, quality, and equity.

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

Action Steps

- Develop and implement policies to elevate families' diverse voice and perspectives at the program, state, and local level
- Create a statewide umbrella entity for parent advisory groups to foster communication and identify areas for potential alignment
- Provide consistent, accessible training, best practices, and coaching for all types of programs to enhance their ability to partner with families
- Increase opportunities for parent leadership training for interested parents
- Track impact and outcomes related to parent leadership and equitable participation
- Conduct an annual statewide parent survey about the ECE system

Potential Measurable Indicators

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

- **Objective 3B:** Expand and fund community-informed governance with regional supports that utilizes a common needs assessment for an equitable and responsive ECE system

Action Steps

- Implement a rigorous common needs assessment that will reflect the differences in local community needs and priorities
- Design a sustainably funded, statewide regional governance structure that will equitably and efficiently support allocation of local funding

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

Goal 4: Systems and Funding

Build a high-quality and well-funded ECE system that maximizes current resources, supports economically viable programs, and is poised to efficiently leverage future investment

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Moreover, the ECE system is complex. Parents have difficulty navigating the system. 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.

Outcomes are not regularly assessed. Local and state systems require the capacity to address these challenges in a connected, staged way.

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

Action Steps

- Determine statutory and regulatory changes to support a unified state funding system
- Issue an RFP for existing state-funded programs to pilot the consolidation of at least two funding streams by July 2025

Potential Measurable Indicators

- Percentage of contracts that fund from a unified funding stream
- Contracts funded from multiple SIDs
- Number of required provider reports

- **Objective 4B:** Assess true cost of quality care and develop a plan to transition to funding based on this true cost, starting with infant and toddler care and high need communities

Action Steps

- Develop estimates of the true cost of quality care 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 4C:** Maximize existing resources by strengthening programs and partnerships to improve enrollment and 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)
- 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
- 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

Potential Measurable Indicators

- ECE funding related to inter-agency collaboration
- Head Start programming
- Smart Start programs serving children with special needs

- **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
- Improve on design of current parent portal and navigation system, complemented by trusted on the ground resources, 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
 - Enhance the Provider 360 portal for all Connecticut ECE programs. Leverage 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

- **Objective 4E:** 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

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- Identify resource gaps and significant hurdles and risks in implementation

Potential Measurable Indicators

- Ability to apply in implementation to make needed adjustments
- **Objective 4F:** Identify new a funding streams that will support sustained and significant incremental investment in ECE

Action Steps

- Secure new funding through a trust fund, a public-private partnership, or other means, looking to other states and municipalities for 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

Potential Measurable Indicators

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

Out-of-date