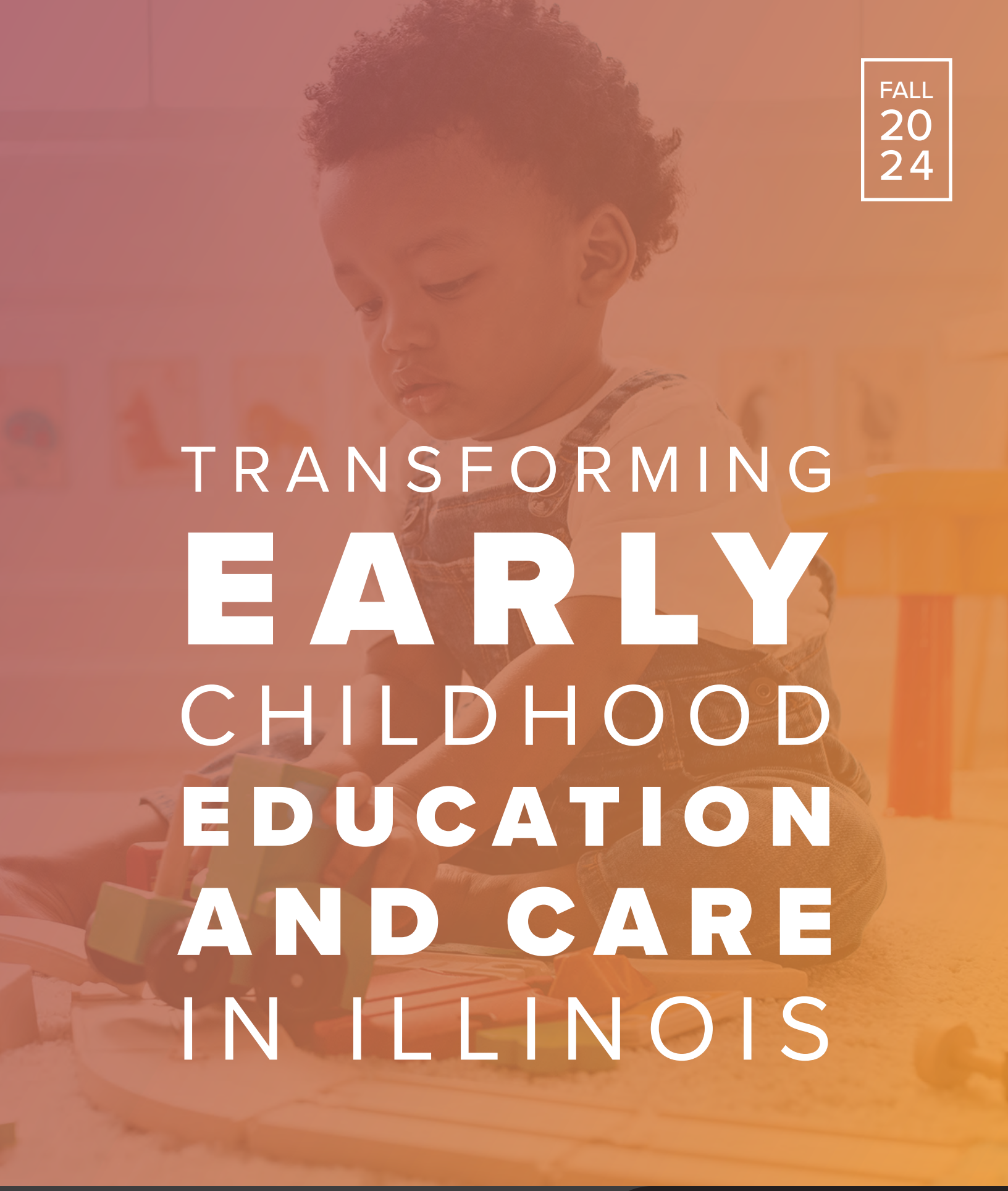

FALL
2024

TRANSFORMING EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE IN ILLINOIS

FINAL REPORT

CHIBYDESIGN

TRANSFORMING EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE IN ILLINOIS

CHIBYDESIGN

A 2024 CHIBYDESIGN COLLABORATION

It is not beyond our power to create a world in which all children have access to a good education.

NELSON MANDELA

Former President of South Africa

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DESIGN PARTNER

CHIBYDESIGN

ChiByDesign is a civic and social impact design firm. We partner with systems and organizations, such as governments, NGOs, and philanthropy, to understand the complex civic and social issues of our time through the lens of the people and communities most harmed and impacted.

In every project, one of our requirements is for lived experts to contribute to the project, and this extends beyond sharing their experiences. We create space for them to make decisions. We compensate those who join our team for the duration of the engagement for their knowledge and expertise. With them, we co-create the tools, resources, and experiences pivotal to ensure they can holistically meet their needs and have thriving and self-sustaining communities.

Tommie Collins

Project and Visual Communications Lead

Justin Walker

Business Strategy and Design Operations Lead

Kendell Miller-Roberts

Design Researcher

Chris Rudd

Founder & CEO

To learn more about us and our work, visit **www.chibydesign.com**

STATE AGENCY

Illinois Department of Children & Family Services

The Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) has more than 3,600 employees in 63 offices across the State of Illinois. DCFS' mission is to keep children safe by strengthening and supporting families. This mission is accomplished by working with families to increase their capacity to safely care for their children; prioritizing guardianship and fictive kin whenever possible, providing for the well-being being of children in our care by connecting them with person-centered services; ensuring appropriate, permanent families as quickly as possible for those children who cannot safely return home; supporting early intervention and child abuse prevention activities and working in partnerships with communities to fulfill this mission.

From helping more than 5,374 Illinois children achieve permanency in FY23 through reunification, guardianship or adoption to answering of more than 231,500 calls to the Child Abuse and Neglect Hotline and provision of services to 60,000 families annually; the department is dedicated to providing unrivaled professional service to ensure safe, loving homes and brighter futures for every child in Illinois.

STATE AGENCY

Illinois Department of Human Services

Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) is the State of Illinois' largest agency, with more than 14,000 employees. Illinois created IDHS in 1997, to provide residents with streamlined access to integrated services—especially those who are seeking financial and housing independence in a healthy and safe environment. The mission of IDHS is to provide equitable access to social/human services, supports, programs, and resources to enhance the lives of all whom the agency serves.

STATE AGENCY

Illinois State Board of Education

The Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) oversees and provides support to 3,840 schools in 852 districts and 38 regional offices across the state. Led by the state superintendent of education and a nine-member board, ISBE serves the state's nearly 1.9 million public school students by developing policy and guidance, administering funding, collecting and analyzing data, and ensuring compliance with state and federal standards. ISBE's mission is to provide each and every child with safe and healthy learning conditions, great educators, and equitable opportunities by practicing data-informed stewardship of resources and policy development, all done in partnership with educators, families, and stakeholders.

LIVED EXPERTS

Workshop Participants

INTERMEDIARIES

David Quiroz (B-5 Council)*

Paula Schnicker Johnson (CCRR)

PARENTS

Oluwabunmi Aderemi

Priscilla Bahena

Jenny Crones

Valerie Coffman**

Melina Le

Wendy Mamola

Cassandra Middleton

Tangela Oliver

PROVIDERS***

Tonia Holden

Kelly Kessel

Elizabeth Martel

Kimberly Nelson

Ruby Rodriguez

STATE REPRESENTATIVE

Charity Hipkins Robinson

Sinthu Ramalingam

*Participated with experience as a parent and intermediary
**Participated with experience as a parent and provider
***Provider is inclusive of educators, administrators, owners, specialists across setting type.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Reimagining Access and Delivery of Early Childhood Care and Services

With the launch of the Department of Early Childhood, Illinois is at a pivotal moment, presenting an exciting opportunity to reimagine how the state operates and delivers early childhood services. By embracing innovative practices and approaches, Illinois is working to make significant strides toward achieving more equitable outcomes for Illinoisan children and families. The development of the Department of Early Childhood offers a chance to shape the future and create better systems for everyone, particularly those in marginalized and underserved communities.

Persistent racial achievement gaps affect Black and Hispanic students, reflecting broader racial inequities that permeate various social systems. The disparities in education and well-being for these children are intrinsically linked to inequities in economic security, health, housing, and employment experienced by Black and Hispanic Illinoisans. These factors are critical in shaping children's educational outcomes and overall well-being. As the Department of Early Childhood aligns, integrates, and develops new services and programs, it is essential to address these interconnected inequities to create equitable outcomes for all of Illinois's children. The Department of Early Childhood can significantly shift the state toward a racially equitable future by embracing new strategies and diverse perspectives.

Parents know best the challenges their families face and what their children need. By facilitating co-design, futuring, and prototyping workshops, ChiByDesign amassed the collective knowledge of parents, school district providers, center-based providers, home-based providers, intermediaries, state personnel, and other key stakeholders to identify **four key outcomes**. The outcomes include:

Continuity of care. The education and well-being of children depend on coordinated, comprehensive care and services from prenatal stages through kindergarten, necessitating that the Department of Early Childhood supports families to ensure equitable outcomes.

Guaranteed access to high-quality learning. Early childhood education should be recognized as a fundamental right, requiring the Department of Early Childhood to tackle systemic inequities and enhance accessibility, transparency, and support roles like ecosystem navigators and parent advocates to help families overcome barriers to services.

(continues on next page)

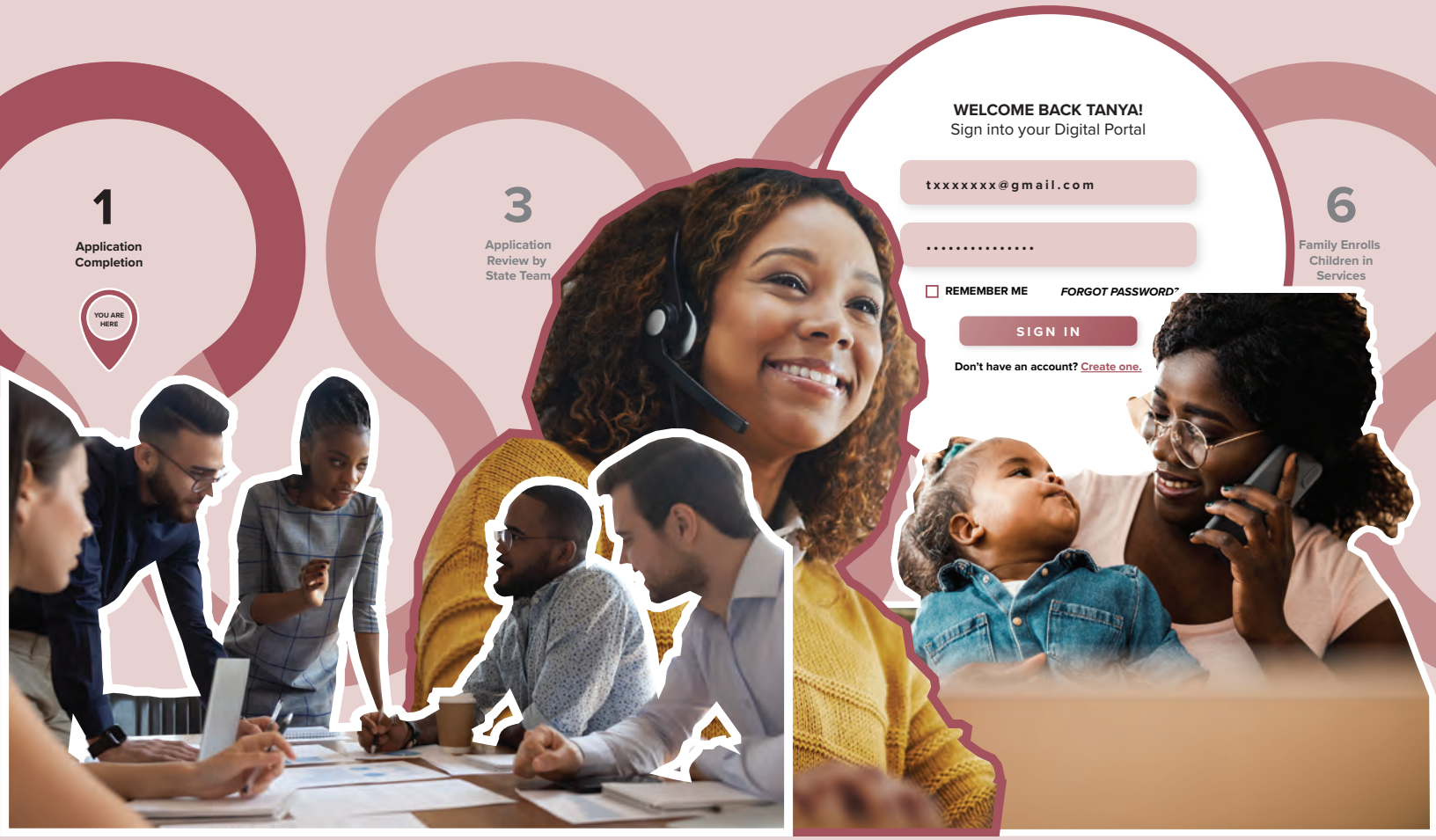
Economic security. To support families and early childhood education professionals, the Department of Early Childhood must prioritize economic security by enhancing career pathways, ensuring family-sustaining wages for practitioners, providing financial resources for professional development, and ensuring families have access to affordable care and services through leveraged funding.

Harmonious relationships. To create a thriving and equitable early childhood ecosystem, the Department of Early Childhood must cultivate mutually beneficial relationships among all stakeholders, ensuring that caregivers and providers both receive meaningful benefits from their interactions, which will enhance community connections and support the well-being of children and families across Illinois.

Throughout the workshops, the co-designers mentioned above outlined their challenges and needs as well as those of the children, parents, and providers they care for, educate, and interact with. They also proposed solutions to the many challenges they identified. This resulted in the development of **five (5) key drivers** and **eighteen (18) design principles**, enabling the Department of Early Childhood to achieve the identified outcomes when designing new interventions, programs, and services.

Co-designers actualized the design principles and drivers by co-designing three concepts to address significant challenges for families and early education providers. The concepts provide examples of the innovative stakeholder-driven programs, services, and supports the Department of Early Childhood can develop. They also provide a framework for viewing the goals co-designers seek to achieve, the impacts they want to see, and the affordances they believe are necessary to accomplish them.

The recommendations within this report center the needs and desires of parents and providers as key drivers of the development of the Department of Early Childhood. These recommendations can significantly impact the Department of Early Childhood, the early childhood ecosystem, and the systems and agencies providing support to communities across Illinois.



CO-DESIGNER-CREATED CONCEPT

Creating Equitable and Compassionate Digital Experiences

Co-designers addressed the impact of elongated processes and communication gaps. They prototyped a digital platform powered by real-time data that provides an experience that identifies families' needs and connects them with the proper tools and resources. Co-designers developed the following concept to demonstrate the possibilities of mobilizing technology to streamline processes and empower families to make informed decisions that support their well-being. Features of this concept include intuitive and data-driven experience, cross-agency collaboration and data sharing, bi-directional communication, and accessible and proficient support.

CO-DESIGNER-CREATED CONCEPT

Early Childhood Center Evaluation Reimagined

Co-designers designed an evaluation form, process, and associated resources that strengthen providers' efforts to support children, families, and the communities in which they operate. The co-designed evaluation process included the addition of components that bring clarity to the evaluation process, ensuring providers are aware of the expectations and guidelines on which they'll be assessed. Features of the concept include addressing racial inequities in communities through co-developed strategies, developing provider support structures such as a compliance coordinator, relationship and trust building through intentional communication to establish goals and achieve them, and enhanced focus and decision making to decrease bias and increase cultural competency.

CO-DESIGNER-CREATED CONCEPT

Anti-Racist Early Childhood Center

While children are traditionally viewed as the primary beneficiaries of early childhood care services, the co-designers reimagined these organizations and spaces as integral community anchors. They expanded the understanding that early childhood providers and settings can effectively serve the diverse needs of children, parents, and families. This co-designed prototype demonstrates that through clear, explicit, anti-racist messaging, early childhood providers can become institutions that can extend their reach into communities and create anti-racist commitment and action. Features of this concept include clear, explicit anti-racist messaging and community engagement, career pathways to early childhood education and economic security, integrating a global framework, and child-centered spaces meet child-centered needs.

GLOSSARY

Anti-Racist Design Terminology

ANTI-RACISM. Intentional, direct, and targeted actions that work to identify the ways that race has been constructed to oppress particular groups of people; decenter dominant, hegemonic narratives and interests; and, dismantle and eliminate the systems of marginalization and oppression.

ANTI-RACIST DESIGN. A design approach assumes that racism is embedded in problems being addressed, focuses on multi-level interventions that enable anti-racist outcomes, and changes the paradigms that create racist experiences.

BIPOC. Black, Indigenous, (and) People of Color.

CO-DESIGN. An approach to designing with, not for, people. It involves sharing power, prioritizing relationships, using participatory practices, and building capability.

CO-DESIGNER. A contributor to the team and process through knowledge. In the context of this project, co-designers are lived experts who bring firsthand knowledge and experience and/or have been impacted by the challenges of early childhood education and care.

COMMUNITY PARTNERS. General reference to all who participate in think tanks, workshops, training, and/or interviews.

CONCEPTS. The core idea driving the design of a new product or service and explained through a collection of sketches, images, written statements, and supportive quotes from those who are expected to be most impacted.

DESIGN. Design is a practice for solving complex problems and creating innovative solutions, such as products, services, platforms, applications, and strategies.

DISPARITY. The unequal outcomes of one racial or ethnic group as compared to outcomes for another racial/ethnic group.

DISPROPORTIONALITY. The underrepresentation or overrepresentation of a racial or ethnic group compared to its percentage in the total population.

DRIVER. These are the people, conditions, and information that drive a organization's success. They include the key priorities and initiatives that an organization focuses on to achieve its goals.

EQUITY. The intentional effort to address historic systemic discrimination to ensure people have uninhibited access to what they need to succeed. Equity recognizes that each individual or community has a different set of challenges, and to reach equal outcomes, everyone must be provided with resources specific to those circumstances.

INSIGHT. The act of 'seeing into' a situation or understanding the 'inner nature' of what is observed. It is an unbiased, agreed upon, deep, intuitive understanding of the stated emerging theory.

ITERATION. A process of continuous idea generation that goes through a series of refinements to get to a final idea or concept.

LIVED EXPERTISE. The knowledge gained from direct, personal experience with specific

DESIGN TERMINOLOGY (CONT.)

challenges. This firsthand experience provides insights that are unavailable to individuals who have only been informed about the challenges.

OPPRESSION. A combination of prejudice and institutional power that creates a system that regularly and severely discriminates against some groups and benefits others.

PRINCIPLES. A set of laws, guidelines, biases, and considerations that form the basis of any good product, service, or experience.

PROTOTYPING. An experimental process where ideas and concepts are implemented in tangible ways from varying degrees of fidelity. Prototyping helps to refine and validate designed concepts.

RACIAL EQUITY. The condition where one's racial identity no longer predicts one's societal outcomes. It requires targeted and sustained action to address historical and systemic inequities imposed on racially oppressed groups.

RACISM. An interconnected system of violent beliefs, interactions, policies, and practices used to discriminate, oppress, and super-exploit a group based on race to maintain a perceived social/racial hierarchy and economic superiority.

SYSTEMIC RACISM. A combination of systems, institutions, and factors that advantage white people and cause widespread harm and disadvantages in access and opportunity for people of color.

SYSTEMS. An interconnected set of elements that is coherently organized in a way that achieves something. Examples include the child welfare system and the justice system.

TRAUMA-RESPONSIVE. A lens and approach to viewing every aspect of an organization's programming, environment, language, and values, and involving all personnel in better serving those who have experienced trauma.

THE CHIBYDESIGN APPROACH

Goals, Deliverables & Methodology

GOALS.
The State of Illinois engaged ChiByDesign to facilitate a co-design approach that brought together parents and caregivers, early childhood education and care providers, and other key stakeholders to innovate early childhood service delivery and redefine early childhood education within the state based on the following objectives:

Convening diverse stakeholders to understand the conditions, policies, practices, and experiences that shape early childhood education

Co-designing anti-racist innovations with lived experts that can shape early childhood education services and practices

Building relationships between Illinois families, early childhood providers, and adjacent systems actors

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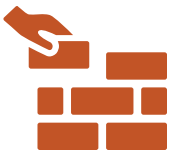
DELIVERABLES.
ChiByDesign was engaged to:

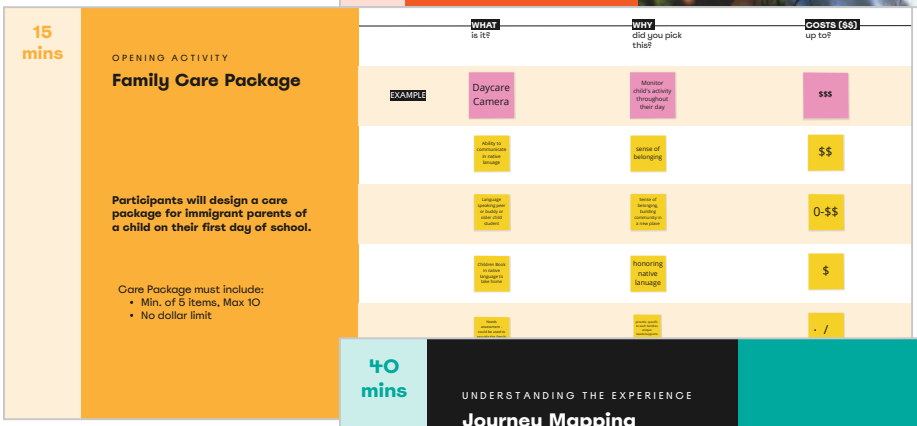


Develop and prototype concepts that address systemic barriers impacting children, families, and providers

Identify barriers to accessing and delivering high-quality early childhood experiences

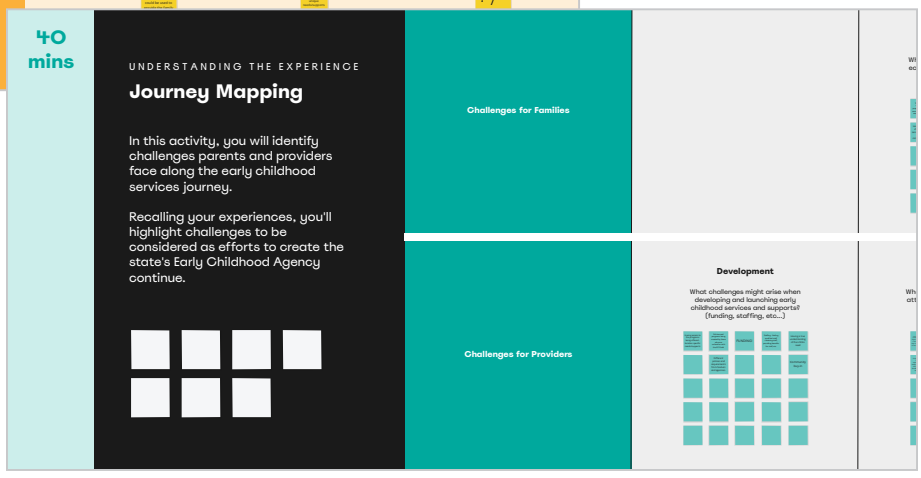
METHODOLOGY. The project's goals were achieved by engaging co-designers in three co-design workshops to understand their challenges, identify desired outcomes, and co-design interventions to achieve them.

1 Each co-designer identified one thing they would change to improve the early childhood experience for children and their families.

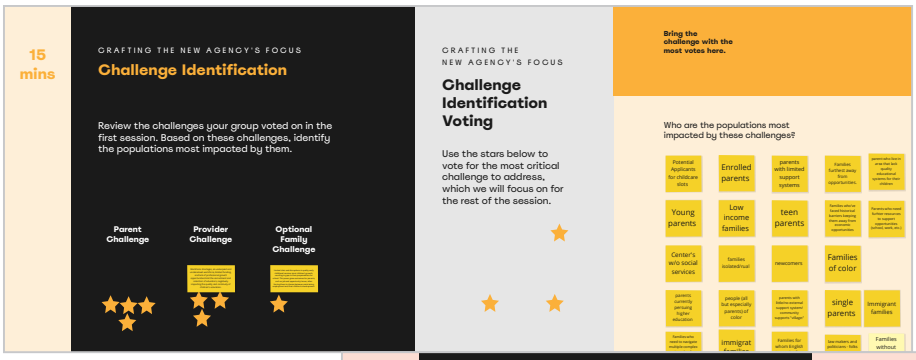


2 Co-designers collaborated to create a family care package for children with unique needs (immigrants, developmental delays, rural area).

3 Co-designers then identified challenges experienced by families and providers throughout the early childhood experience—from development to sustainability.

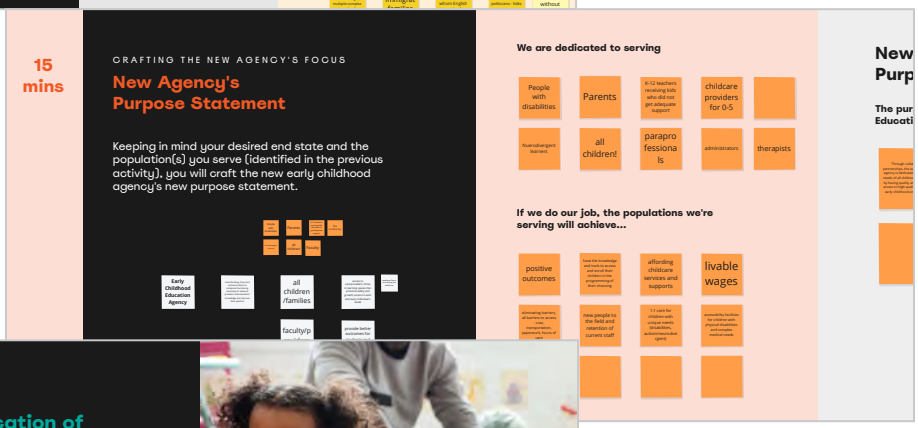


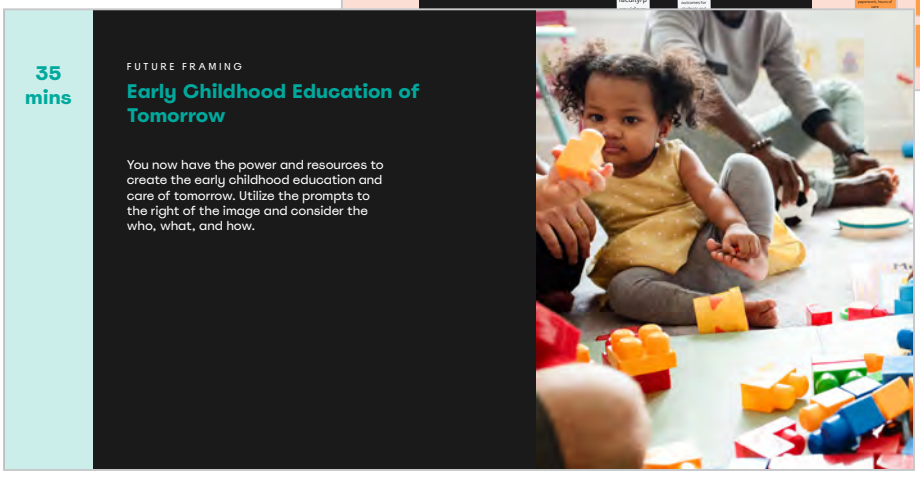
Session One: Understanding the System. Convening diverse stakeholders (parents, providers, state personnel, and other stakeholders) to connect their experiences in the early childhood ecosystem and the policies, practices, and infrastructures that influence them.



1 The co-designers reviewed the challenges they identified from the first session and voted which challenge they would prioritize. Then brainstormed the populations impacted by said challenge.

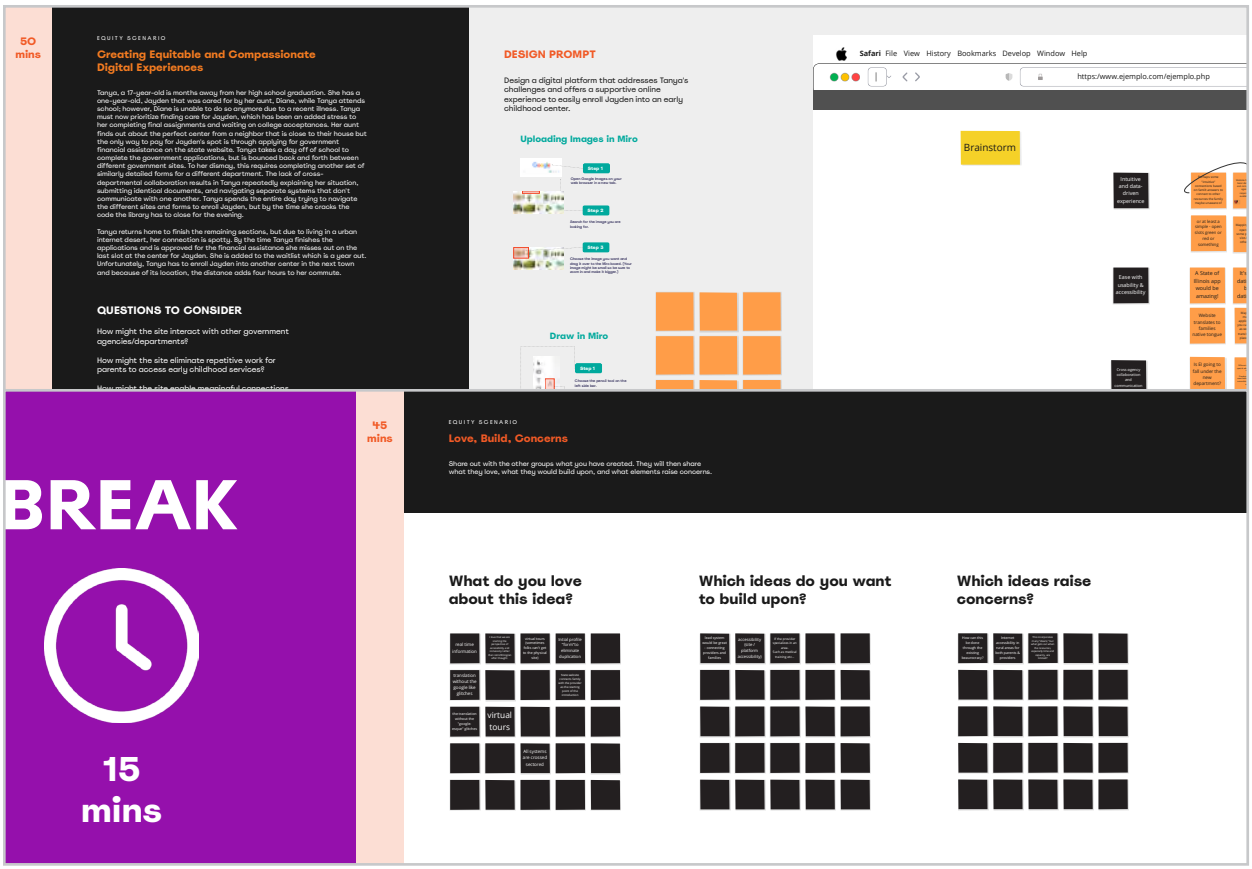
2 Co-designers used the challenges and populations identified to then craft a purpose statement for the new Department of Early Childhood.





3 Co-designers imagined the new agency through identifying some of the following: culture (events, traditions, norms practiced), people (new roles and positions), services, and policy.

Session Two: Future Framing. Collectively imagining futures in which the needs of children, families, and providers are centered.



1 Based on the ideas that came forth from session two, co-designers, in three breakout groups, prototyped them through three scenarios—creating equitable and compassionate digital experiences; reimagining early childhood center evaluation processes; and designing an anti-racist childcare center. They then shared their ideas with each other and received feedback in real-time.

Session Three: Prototyping. Collectively prototyping new policies, practices, and infrastructures that address children, families, and providers' challenges. These prototypes will inform future platforms and experiences for children, parents, and providers within the ecosystem.

ENSURING ACCESS & DELIVERY

CONCEPTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

CO-DESIGNER DRIVEN

Desired Outcomes

Informed by the insights provided by the co-designers, four key outcomes were identified as essential to supporting children, families, and providers within the early childhood ecosystem. These outcomes represent the co-designers' collective vision of a future in which children, their families, and the providers that offer services and care are connected and supported.

Continuity of care.

The education and well-being of children are impacted by the care and services provided from prenatal through the transition into kindergarten and beyond. To create equitable outcomes for children and provide them with the support and care they need to thrive, The Department of Early Childhood must provide consistent, coordinated, and comprehensive support to children and families, ensuring their educational, developmental, and health needs are continuously met.

Guaranteed access to high-quality early learning.

Early childhood education and care should be treated as a fundamental right, ensuring the creation of equitable pathways to education, care, and essential services for all families. To drive equitable outcomes, the Department of Early Childhood must address systemic inequities directly, prioritizing increased accessibility and transparency within the early education and care ecosystem. Children and families face significant barriers in accessing early childhood education and care services. Beyond the financial burden of childcare costs and the scarcity of available services, families often struggle to navigate the system and understand how best to support their children's development. Creating new roles, such as ecosystem navigators and parent advocates, can provide insight and clarity to families and providers and assist them in remedying challenges they may encounter.

Economic security.

To ensure the success of families, providers, practitioners, and other stakeholders, the Department of Early Childhood must prioritize economic security for families and early childhood professionals. A key initiative in this effort should be forging new pathways to advance early learning careers—supporting families interested in the field and providing opportunities for existing professionals to enhance their skills. Continuous and sustained financial support is essential to achieving economic security. Early childhood practitioners must receive family-sustaining wages and be supported in their educational and professional development through scholarships, stipends, and other resources. Additionally, families must have access to affordable care and services, and local, state, and federal funding should be leveraged to address unmet needs and close service gaps. Ensuring caregivers earn a family-sustaining wage is essential to their overall well-being and stability, directly impacting the care and opportunities they can provide for their children.

Harmonious relationships.

Mutually beneficial relationships and interactions are crucial for cultivating a thriving, equitable, and effective early childhood ecosystem. The Department of Early Childhood must ensure that the value exchanges within this ecosystem adequately meet the needs of all stakeholders. Caregivers should derive meaningful benefits from the time and energy they invest in supporting their child's provider, just as providers benefit from parents' active involvement and resources. Such mutually beneficial relationships should be fostered between all stakeholder groups at every level of the ecosystem. Harmonious relationships support the ecosystem's and its stakeholders' sustainable growth and development. They also foster stronger connections among stakeholders, building a sense of community and belonging, enabling trust-building, and collectively supporting the well-being of children and families across Illinois.

Drivers

Illinois must continue its approach to reimagine high-quality early childhood education and care support services to achieve the desired outcomes. We propose five (5) drivers to enable the Department of Early Childhood to create equitable outcomes for children and families. The drivers are listed below, along with their related principles:

Bridge digital and physical infrastructure divides.

Access to modern digital and physical infrastructure is essential for all communities to ensure equitable growth and opportunities for all families. Communities of color often face severe underinvestment in digital resources—like broadband Internet and technology—and physical infrastructure, leading to restricted access to critical services such as transportation, employment, healthcare, and more. This dual deficit hampers economic advancement and exacerbates social inequities. Investing in digital and physical improvements is crucial for creating vibrant, thriving communities where families, providers, and practitioners can fully participate in and benefit from broader societal advancements. Addressing these infrastructure gaps gives all communities the tools and environments to succeed and prosper.

RELATED PRINCIPLES

Ensure bi-directional communication among stakeholders

Position early childhood providers as community anchors

Create needs-based and sensory-rich environments

Facilitate collective anti-racist action

Advance communication and information exchange.

Information is the currency through which knowledge is exchanged, decisions are informed, and progress is driven. Breakdowns in the exchange of information have created significant barriers to children receiving the essential care and services they deserve, resulting in uninformed decisions that have undoubtedly affected their lives. The Department of Early Childhood must take decisive action to enhance the flow of information among all stakeholders. It must also ensure that information is easily accessible in diverse languages, culturally responsive, and available to all Illinois parents, caregivers, and families. By ensuring that parents, providers, and other key stakeholders have relevant, timely, and accurate information and the means to communicate effectively with one another, the Department of Early Childhood can empower them to make well-informed decisions, improving children's education and well-being across Illinois.

RELATED PRINCIPLES

Establish trust and confidence

Ensure bi-directional communication among stakeholders

Foster informed decision-making

Provide 360-degree human support

Strengthen sustainability and support structures

Catalyze community partnership and support

Create seamless, individualized experiences

DRIVERS (CONT.)

Strengthen cross-sector collaboration.

Children and families within the early childhood ecosystem have needs that extend across multiple social systems, including housing, employment, transportation, and healthcare. However, the siloed approaches used by respective agencies often result in fragmented solutions, forcing families to repeatedly navigate various systems and expend excessive time, energy, and resources. To address these challenges, the Department of Early Childhood must work collaboratively with state and local agencies to develop integrated strategies that holistically meet the needs of children and families. Likewise, as the Department integrates services from various agencies, those agencies should maintain continuous collaboration to better support children and their caregivers. By fostering inter-agency cooperation and designing comprehensive social interventions, the Department can significantly expand its impact and drive the transformational change necessary to achieve positive family outcomes.

RELATED PRINCIPLES

Establish trust and confidence

Create seamless, individualized experiences

Strengthen sustainability and support structures

Establish safety for BIPOC communities and families

Champion policies that safeguard and support families

Facilitate collective anti-racist action

Catalyze community partnership and support

Prioritize holistic family well-being.

The growth and development of children are significantly influenced by the environment and conditions in which they live as is the well-being of those who educate and care for them. In addition to early childhood education and care services, the Department of Early Childhood must strive for equitable outcomes for families and other stakeholders by addressing the social determinants of health in partnership with other state agencies. Addressing these determinants through policies and programs that ensure access to healthcare, stable housing, adequate nutrition, and social support is crucial for promoting healthy development and creating positive generational impacts for Illinois residents and those who care for them.

RELATED PRINCIPLES

Foster informed decision-making

Activate culturally affirming experiences

Create needs-based and sensory-rich environments

Develop pathways to family-sustaining employment

Champion policies that safeguard and support families

Address the social determinants of health

Catalyze community partnership and support

Expand the scope of early childhood education and care

Invest in workforce excellence.

Early childhood education and care fosters children's development, promotes long-term health, and improves generational economic outcomes. However, many of the workers—many of whom are women of color—who deliver this essential service are underpaid and struggle to support themselves and their families. Furthermore, they often lack access to the professional development and career pathways needed to advance and secure higher-paying positions in early childhood education. This is especially true for early educators and childcare professionals. The Department of Early Childhood must prioritize paying its workforce sustainable and equitable wages, developing pathways to and through the field, and creating structures and policies within the workforce that reinforce the value early childcare professionals provide. By prioritizing these areas, the department can improve the quality and stability of early childhood education, ultimately benefiting children, families, and communities across Illinois.

RELATED PRINCIPLES

Shift the perception of early childhood education and care

Expand the scope of early childhood education and care

Enhance & expand early childhood educational and professional pathways

Strengthen sustainability and support structures

Address the social determinants of health

RECOMMENDATIONS

Principles

Developed from co-designer discussions, the following principles should be incorporated into interventions and utilized as a metric for creating positive experiences between children, families, and providers within the early childhood ecosystem.

Establish trust and confidence. Prioritize trust building with Black and Brown communities and other populations impacted by systemic challenges and barriers and develop confidence in their knowledge and firsthand experiences.

Ensure bi-directional communication among stakeholders. Create mechanisms for families, providers, and state personnel to receive and distribute information amongst each other and establish channels for providing feedback to improve services and overall experiences.

Foster informed decision-making. Develop systems that enhance transparency and enable informed decision-making by providing access to real-time data and essential information.

Create seamless individualized experiences. Mobilize data and information to meet the unique needs of families and providers through individualized experiences—using existing insights and collected data to connect stakeholders with the resources and services they need.

Provide 360-degree human support. Humans should enhance the power, clarity, and connection that technology provides in the experience for families, providers, and other stakeholders. Person-to-person interaction is critical to successful delivery and positive outcomes.

Expand the scope of early childhood education and care. Broaden the definition and purview of early childhood to include prenatal development through school age, considering the children's and families' holistic well-being.

Shift the perception of early childhood education and care. Transform how early childhood education and its practitioners are perceived, valued, and prioritized, emphasizing their essential roles in child development and impact on community well-being.

Enhance and expand early childhood educational and professional pathways. Facilitate pathways for caregivers and others to obtain the qualifications and knowledge required to enter the field of early childhood education.

Activate culturally affirming experiences. Design environments, experiences, and interactions that respect the richness of diverse cultures and languages honor cultural practices, and promote a sense of belonging for all stakeholders.

Create needs-based and sensory-rich environments. Design spaces that address children's unique and multifaceted needs, helping them reach and exceed their developmental milestones.

PRINCIPLES (CONT.)

Position early childhood providers as community anchors. Enhance early childhood providers' ability to utilize their spaces to foster more connected communities and support the needs and aspirations of children and families.

Strengthen sustainability and support structures. Ensure unimpeded access to diverse financial and economic resources that sustain high-quality early childhood education and care and its providers.

Develop pathways to family-sustaining employment. Develop accessible pathways for families to secure family-sustaining employment and create flourishing communities.

Establish safety for BIPOC communities. Develop anti-racist policies, practices, and spaces to ensure the safety of families of color and other marginalized groups.

Champion policies that safeguard and support families. Equip and protect families with policies that guarantee access to early childhood education and care, ensure their involvement in their children's development without fear of penalization, and sustain their confidence in making critical decisions.

Facilitate collective anti-racist action. Initiate and facilitate opportunities for stakeholders to collectively create strategies and initiatives that create racially equitable outcomes, foster inclusion, and cultivate anti-racist communities.

Address social determinants of health. Utilize a public health framework to develop policies, practices, and environments that enhance children's and families' quality of education and life.

Catalyze community partnership and support. Facilitate the creation of community-based partnerships that provide children, caregivers, and providers with the resources and tools they need to flourish.

CO-DESIGNER-DRIVEN RECOMMENDATIONS

Transforming Early Childhood Education and Care in Illinois

Co-designers created interventions to remedy challenges inhibiting children, families, and providers from smoothly accessing, navigating, and receiving support and care from the early childhood ecosystem. They determined which of the previously identified challenges they preferred to build interventions for. Based on the challenge being solved, they then identified outcomes that the interventions must deliver. Throughout the co-design process, they focused on centering racial equity when creating their concepts and incorporated equity-focused interventions that address racial disparities that impact Illinoisan families. Lastly, they collectively built solutions that addressed the selected challenges and enabled positive experiences for children, families, and providers.

1. **DIGITAL PLATFORM.** Creating Equitable and Compassionate Digital Experiences
2. **PROCESS OR EXPERIENCE.** Early Childhood Center Evaluation Reimagined
3. **PHYSICAL OR BUILT ENVIRONMENT.** Anti-Racist Early Childcare Center

CO-DESIGNER-CREATED CONCEPT

Creating Equitable and Compassionate Digital Experiences

CONCEPT DESCRIPTION

Co-designers addressed the impact of elongated processes and communication gaps. They prototyped a digital platform powered by real-time data that provides an experience that identifies families' needs and connects them with the proper tools and resources. Co-designers developed the following concept to demonstrate the possibilities of mobilizing technology to streamline processes and empower families to make informed decisions that support their well-being.

Due to limited slots, lengthy applications and processes, and one-directional communication, families and providers feel their relationship with the state is transactional and extractive. The state requests information, yet there aren't effective mechanisms for families and providers to receive information and share concerns. This new digital platform seeks to create new mechanisms that simplify processes, reduce repetitive steps, lessen the time to process information, and support families more efficiently. Furthermore, reimagining how families, providers, state personnel, and other critical stakeholders communicate will result in more effective use of technology.

Intuitive and data-driven experience. Families can expect a seamless experience when seeking care and services for their children. Utilizing time-stamp utilization, families can pause and resume applications. The platform can identify critical needs and automatically pair families with available services based on the information provided. For non-English speakers, the platform will automatically translate and create a culturally affirming experience. The state will connect families with providers as the first point of introduction.

Cross-agency collaboration and data sharing. With this platform, state departments can efficiently share information and knowledge to ensure families are holistically supported. Families can access their data in a centralized location, flag discrepancies and incorrect details, and more. They will no longer be required to input the same information more than once, eliminating redundancy. The platform will also implement mechanisms for information security—protecting sensitive data from being accessed or weaponized against families.

Bi-directional communication. Feedback loops are essential features

CONCEPT DESCRIPTION

of this platform, enabling families to communicate with the state and providers from whom they receive services. Once paired with services, families can experience the facilities through virtual tours before visiting in person. The state can see when providers have made contact with families once paired.

Accessible and proficient support. Technology should enhance, not eliminate, the human touch from the digital experience. It should be used as a tool to facilitate smoother experiences and ensure family outcomes (such as enrolling children in services that ensure their learning and development) are achieved. Families will have access to ecosystem navigators and parent advocates (new roles proposed under the new agency) who can provide tailored insight based on their needs and clarify any ambiguities in the process.

CONNECTED BARRIERS

Language barriers between providers and parents hinder information sharing, preventing parents from making informed decisions about their children's learning and development.

Although parents and caregivers are responsible for decisions affecting their children's growth and well-being, they often need more tools and insight to identify the best programs and services for their children, limiting their ability to make informed decisions.

Inadequate digital infrastructure at the system and provider levels perpetuates information gaps, deepens the digital divide, and increases uncertainty around where and how to access resources.

Despite their commitment to their children's well-being, parents may lack essential knowledge of developmental milestones and the ability to utilize evaluations effectively. As a result, parents need help to bolster their children's growth.

The parent-provider relationship often feels transactional and lacks concerted efforts to build trust, effective communication, and community, which are crucial for children's success and well-being.

Siloed state departments and providers constrain cross-system communication, thus widening families' information gaps and reinforcing repetitive administrative processes for parents and providers.

Limited collaboration amongst agencies responsible for transportation, healthcare, and housing creates obstacles for families, exhausting their resources and energy. Thus, parents' ability to access early childhood care and support equitably and promptly is restricted.

CONNECTED BARRIERS (CONT.)

Limited slots and service disruptions constrain access to quality early childhood services and supports, which presents significant challenges for parents and caregivers. These include job and opportunity loss, hindering their children's ability to thrive, and fostering feelings of parental inadequacy and failure.

CONNECTED PRINCIPLES

Establish trust and confidence

Ensure bi-directional communication among stakeholders

Foster informed decision-making

Create seamless individualized experiences

Provide 360-degree human support

Activate culturally affirming experiences

RACIAL EQUITY-FOCUSED INTERVENTIONS

Automated translation technology that enables greater accessibility for non-English speakers

Culturally responsive website designed to be inclusive, respectful, and considerate of diverse cultural backgrounds and needs

CO-DESIGNER-CREATED CONCEPT COLLAGE

Creating Equitable and Compassionate Digital Ex

1

Application Completion

YOU ARE HERE

3

Application Review by State Team

xperiences

WELCOME BACK TANYA!
Sign into your Digital Portal

txxxxxxx@gmail.com

••••••••••••••••

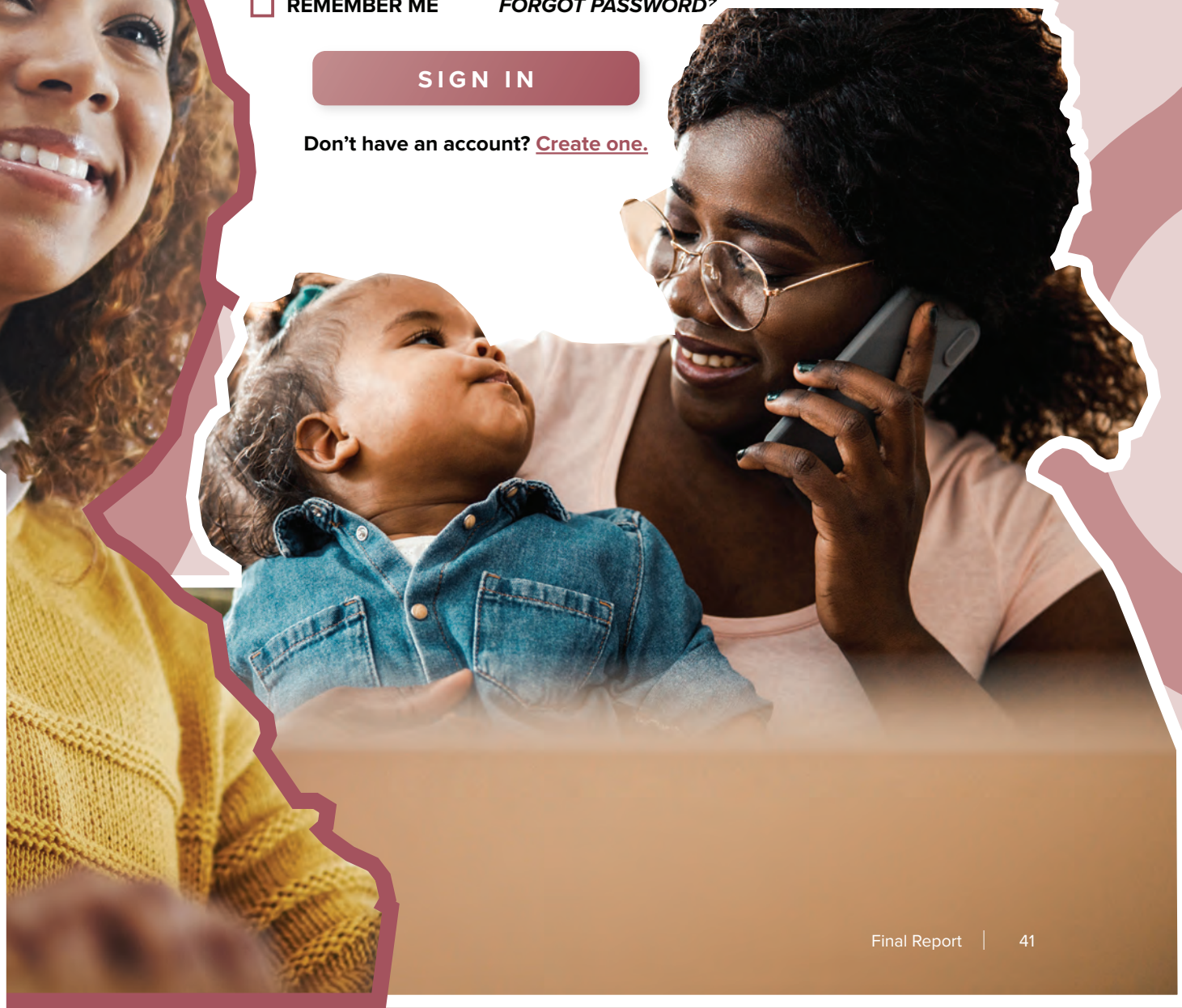
REMEMBER ME *FORGOT PASSWORD?*

SIGN IN

Don't have an account? Create one.

6

Family Enrolls Children in Services



CO-DESIGNER-CREATED CONCEPT

Creating Equitable and Compassionate Digital Experiences

INFRASTRUCTURE ANATOMY

To critically analyze the concepts created by co-designers in the prototyping workshop, we adapted the 'anatomy of infrastructure' tool to learn from the concepts created in the workshop. The anatomy of infrastructure is a tool designers use to understand and communicate complex concepts. It is a tool that combines principles of multi-level systems mapping with the POEMS-A* design framework. POEMS-A is a framework used in the workshop to help the participants expand their ideas.

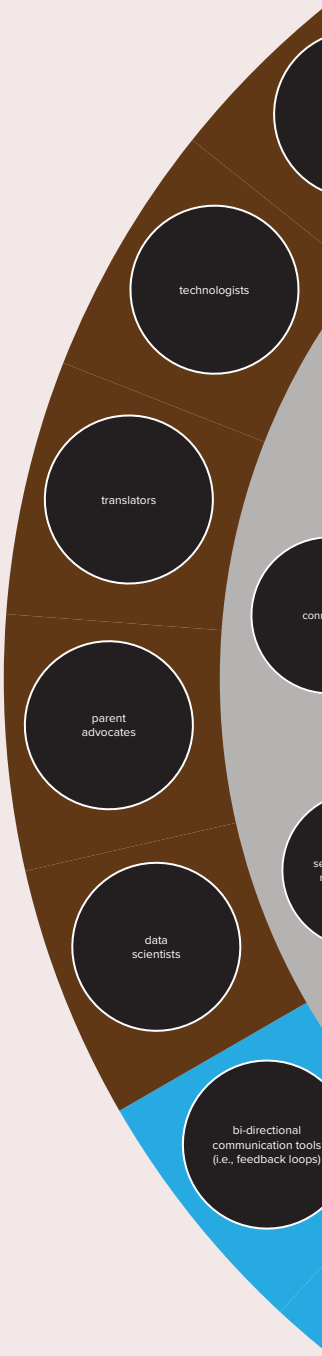
GOALS. The primary goals the co-designers sought to address through prototyping and concepting.

IMPACT. The impacts that can be created given the primary goal. They were driven by co-designers' vision of the future and informed by the affordances and identified features.

AFFORDANCES. The actionable properties that need to be created/afforded to reach the identified impacts and goals. Affordances are specific capabilities that a user is enabled to do.

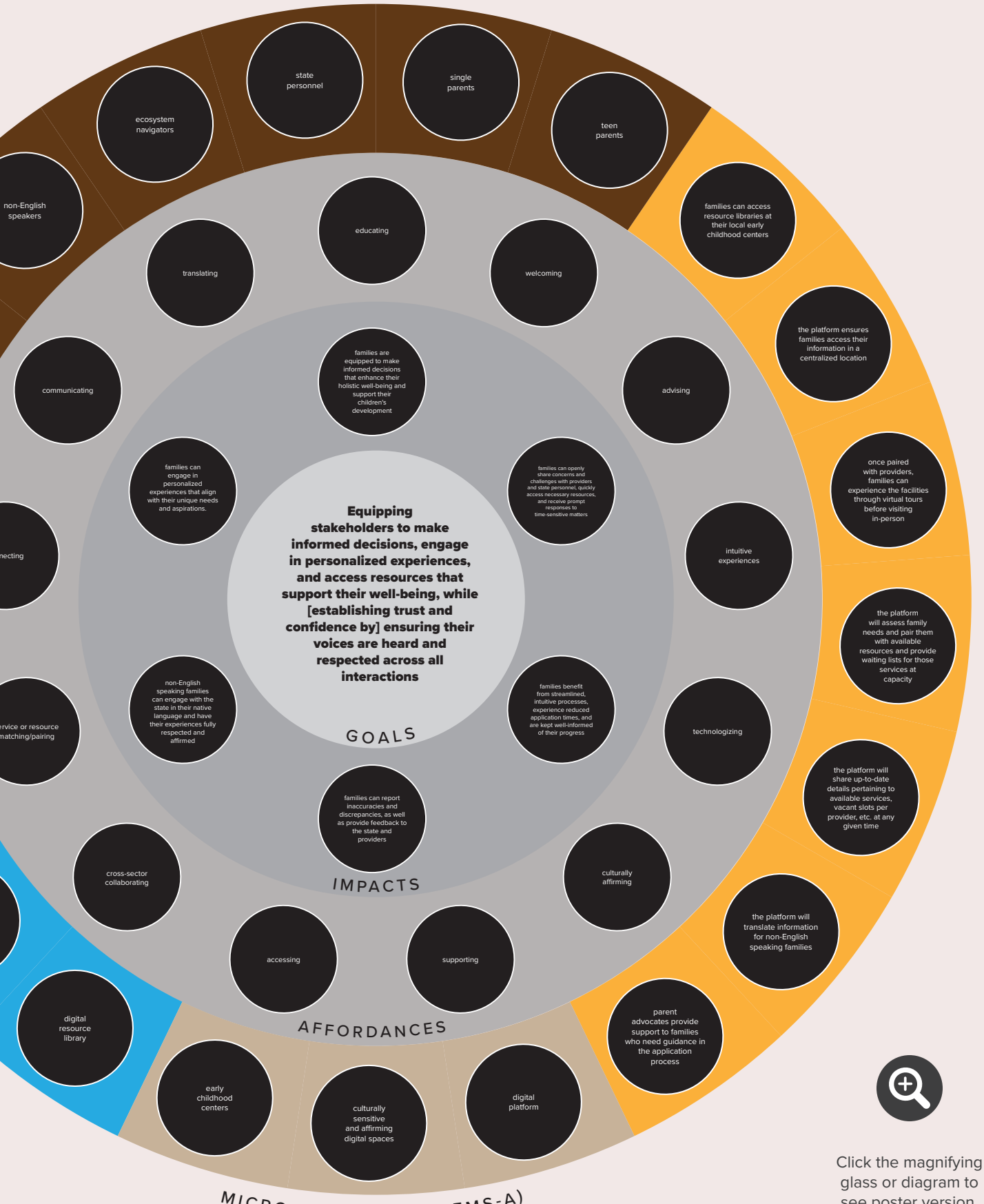
FEATURES. The elements identified drive the enablement of the identified affordances to achieve the identified impacts.

The four levels of the anatomy (features, affordances, impacts, goals) help us to analyze the co-designer-created prototypes. These also help us to visualize how various elements can be integrated into new system interventions.



MICRO-FEATURES (POEMS-A) LEGEND

- People
- Objects
- Environments
- Messages
- Services
- Activities



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CO-DESIGNER-CREATED CONCEPT

Early Childhood Center Evaluation Reimagined

CONCEPT DESCRIPTION

Co-designers developed the following prototype to address many providers' challenges when operating within communities experiencing systemic racism. Through the prototype, co-designers also sought to shift the dynamics of providers' relationship to the state from adversarial to collaborative and supportive.

Co-designers designed an evaluation form, process, and associated resources that strengthen providers' efforts to support children, families, and the communities in which they operate. The co-designed evaluation process included the addition of components that bring clarity to the evaluation process, ensuring providers are aware of the expectations and guidelines on which they'll be assessed. One such component was a letter notifying providers of upcoming evaluations' timing and purpose. It also serves as a relationship-building tool that introduces providers to the licensing agents they'll work with. Co-designers also recommended that the process include mechanisms for bi-directional communication, enabling providers to communicate the needs of the communities they serve and their own goals, needs, and experiences.

Addressing racial inequities in communities. Early childhood center communities of practice would co-develop strategies to address structural racism. These communities of practice would include providers, state employees, and community-based organizations. Licensing agents evaluating and supporting providers would receive training that builds their understanding of challenges and racial inequities in the communities they serve.

Developing provider support structures. Shifting the dynamics of the relationship between the state and providers was central to this concept. A new role, compliance coordinator, would be created to assist providers with understanding regulations and meeting the state's expectations. The state would facilitate relationships between providers and community-based organizations, proactively increasing access to resources the provider and children may need.

Relationship and trust building. Shifting the dynamics of the relationship between providers and the state requires increasing trust and building collaborative relationships. The evaluation process would begin with efforts to establish a positive relationship

CONCEPT DESCRIPTION (CONT.)

between providers and the licensing agents who evaluate them to enable this. Communication would start ahead of evaluations in the form of messages and conversations. Providers would work with licensing agents to establish goals and co-develop plans to achieve them. Licensing agents would also work with providers to develop individualized development plans to improve providers' ability to sustain their businesses and educate the children in their care. To maintain accountability and continuously improve the relationship, bi-directional feedback mechanisms would be established to provide feedback and recommendations for providers and licensing agents.

Enhanced focus and decision making. The Department of Early Childhood would work to decrease bias in the licensing evaluation process and increase cultural competency and understanding by utilizing licensing teams rather than individuals to evaluate providers. Evaluation teams would reduce the size of the regions managed by licensing teams to increase familiarity with the communities and challenges within the regions. This would also increase the bandwidth licensing teams have to support providers as more collaborative relationships are developed.

CONNECTED BARRIERS

Siloed state departments and providers constrain cross-system communication, widening families' information gaps and reinforcing repetitive administrative processes for parents and providers.

Varying regulations and processes for local, state, and federal funding pose persistent barriers for providers. Inconsistent cycle timelines, eligibility criteria, and requirements create overwhelming stress and undermine quality early childhood care and support sustainability.

Limited collaboration amongst agencies responsible for transportation, healthcare, and housing creates obstacles for families, exhausting their resources and energy. Thus, parents' ability to access early childhood education and support equitably and promptly is restricted.

The personal and professional challenges parents and providers experience significantly impact their physical, mental, and emotional well-being. There is a substantial need to increase their access to and the availability of mental health support.

Although training is essential for delivering quality early learning services, providers and educators need more funding, time, and communication to complete the training necessary to advance their knowledge and improve their practice.

CONNECTED BARRIERS (CONT.)

Workforce shortages, an underpaid and undervalued workforce, limited funding, and lack of professional growth opportunities limit the recruitment and retention of educators, negatively impacting the quality and continuity of children's education and care.

CONNECTED PRINCIPLES

Position early childhood providers as community anchors

Facilitate collective anti-racist action

Establish trust and confidence

Ensure bi-directional communication among stakeholders

Provide 360-degree human support

Foster informed decision-making

Establish safety for BIPOC communities

Strengthen sustainability and support structures

Catalyze community partnership and support

Create seamless individualized experiences

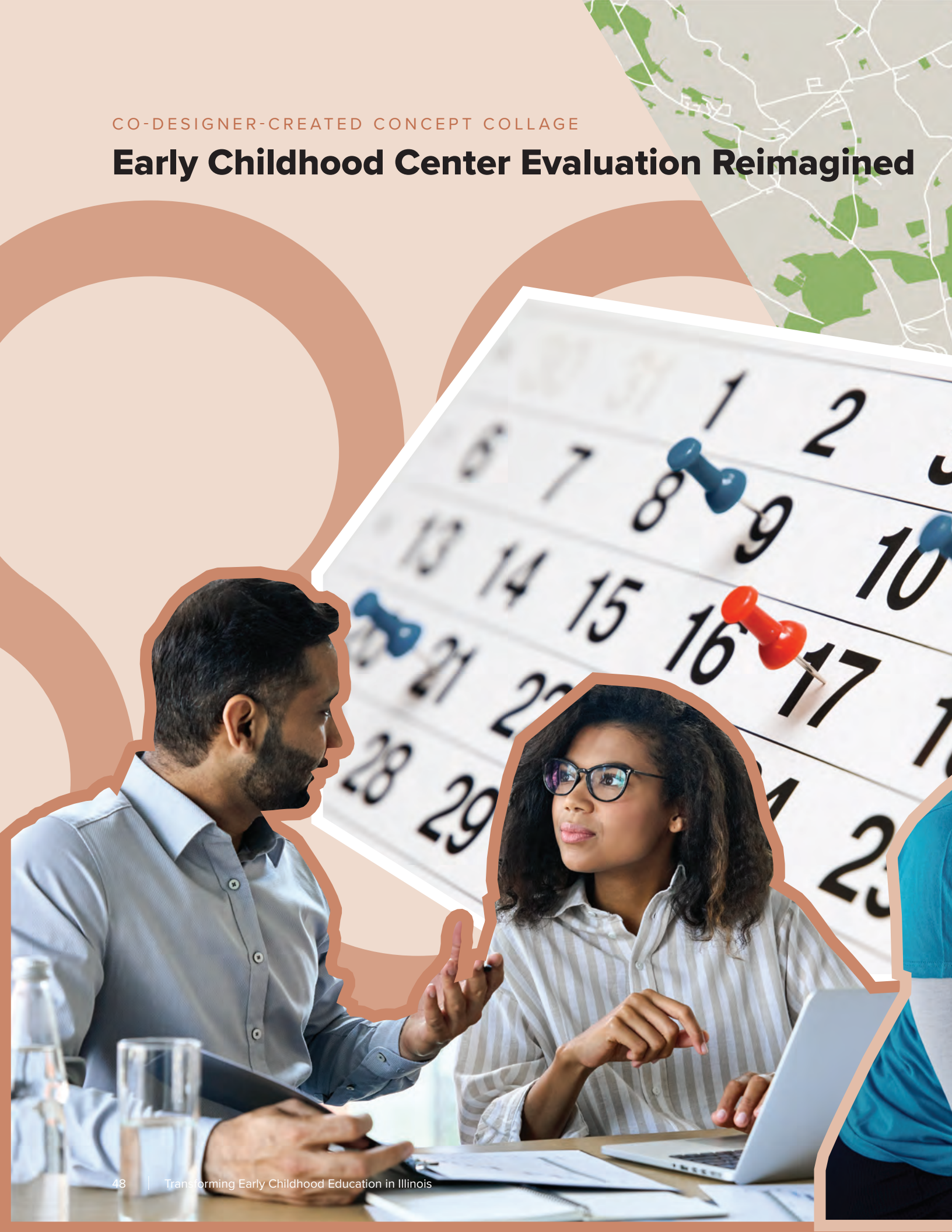
RACIAL EQUITY-FOCUSED INTERVENTIONS

Early childhood center communities of practice that co-develop strategies to address structural racism

Training that supports evaluators in understanding challenges and racial inequities in the communities they serve

CO-DESIGNER-CREATED CONCEPT COLLAGE

Early Childhood Center Evaluation Reimagined



CO-DESIGNER-CREATED CONCEPT

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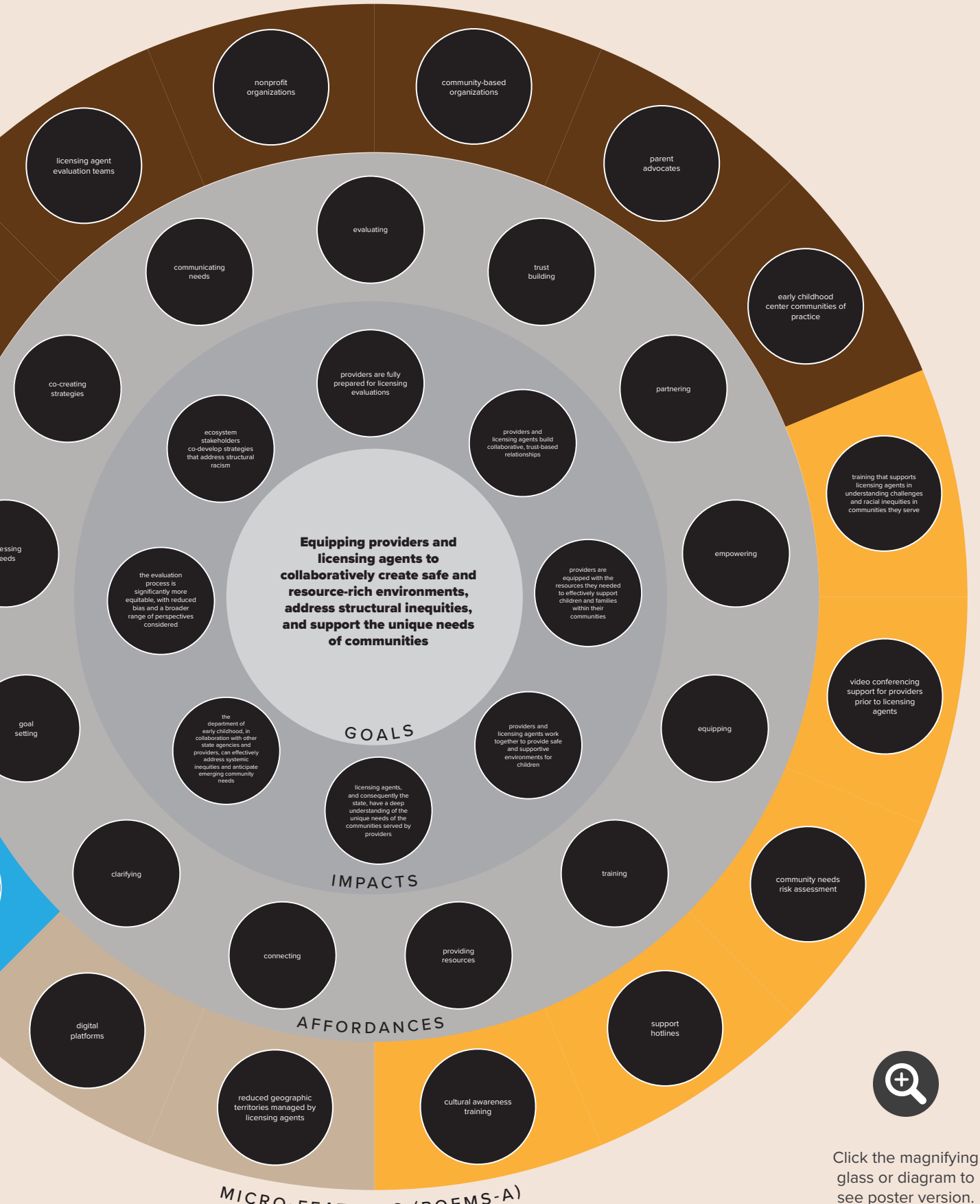

Click the magnifying glass or diagram to see poster version.

CO-DESIGNER-CREATED CONCEPT

Anti-Racist Early Childhood Center

CONCEPT DESCRIPTION

In this prototype, co-designers addressed family economic security, early childhood education and care career pathways, and accessibility. They considered how spatial design, messaging, and resources could initiate anti-racist action within the community and create bridges to economic security for families. Co-designers also integrated a global perspective into the prototyped center, highlighting the importance of building and maintaining an inclusive space for families from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and languages.

While children are traditionally viewed as the primary beneficiaries of early childhood education and care services, the co-designers reimagined these organizations and spaces as integral community anchors. They expanded the understanding that early childhood providers and settings can effectively serve the diverse needs of children, parents, and families. This co-designed prototype demonstrates that through clear, explicit, anti-racist messaging, early childhood providers can become institutions that can extend their reach into communities and create anti-racist commitment and action.

Additionally, by expanding their reach to serve a wider audience, early childhood providers can play an integral role in developing and securing economic security for families. A specific avenue to achieve economic security explored in this prototype was early childhood providers providing professional pathways for those interested in early childhood education as a career. This would allow for more opportunities for future early childhood educators to enter the profession and, ultimately, help secure economic security for their families.

This prototype emphasizes how early childhood providers and centers can be expanded to serve children, families, and the communities in which they operate.

Clear, explicit anti-racist messaging and community engagement. Early childhood providers communicate their explicit commitment to maintaining safety for families from marginalized communities. Providers utilize their learning spaces to catalyze anti-racist action and develop anti-racist learners through actions within the space and the broader community.

Career pathways to early childhood education and economic security. Develop educational and professional pathways so individuals can secure family-sustaining jobs. Specifically,

early childhood providers and centers should leverage interactions as entryway points for those interested in the early childhood education profession.

Integrating a global framework. Early learning environments should uplift diverse cultures and languages through art, technology, and objects. They should strive to be inclusive and accessible learning environments supporting young people to become multilingual through signage, literature, and curriculum.

Child-centered spaces meet child-centered needs. Early childhood spaces should create multi-sensory learning environments—spaces containing thoughtful sensory and spatial designs appropriate to children's needs and ages.

CONNECTED BARRIERS

Although parents and caregivers are responsible for decisions affecting their children's growth and well-being, they often need more tools and insight to identify the best programs for their families, limiting their ability to make informed decisions.

Language barriers between providers and parents hinder information sharing, preventing parents from making informed decisions about their children's learning and development.

Limited collaboration amongst agencies responsible for transportation, healthcare, and housing creates unnecessary obstacles for families, exhausting their resources and energy. Thus, parents' ability to access early childhood care and support equitably and promptly is restricted.

External factors like socioeconomic status, family education levels, and economic stability shape children's growth and development. However, parents and caregivers often lack the necessary support to effectively address these factors and foster their children's development.

Many parents need more early childcare services during atypical hours. Standard hours conflict with work schedules and don't meet the need for extended care, potentially hindering employment and quality childcare options.

Workforce shortages, an underpaid and undervalued workforce, limited funding, and lack of professional growth opportunities limit the recruitment and retention of educators, negatively impacting the quality and continuity of children's education.

Inadequate physical infrastructure at provider facilities may prevent some children from accessing environments that adequately support their physical and medical needs.

CONNECTED PRINCIPLES

Establish trust and confidence

Establish safety for BIPOC communities

Facilitate collective anti-racist action

Activate culturally affirming experiences

Shift the perception of early childhood education

Create needs-based and sensory-rich environments

Position early childhood providers as community anchors

Catalyze community partnership and support

Champion policies that safeguard and support families

Address the social determinants of health

Enhance & expand early childhood educational and professional pathways

Develop pathways to family-sustaining employment

RACIAL EQUITY-FOCUSED INTERVENTIONS

Interior and exterior expressions of anti-racism

Anti-racist assemblies that promote anti-racism across the community

Quarterly anti-racist and cultural sensitivity training open to the entire community

CO-DESIGNER-CREATED CONCEPT COLLAGE

Anti-Racist Early Childhood Center

ENVENUE स्वागत

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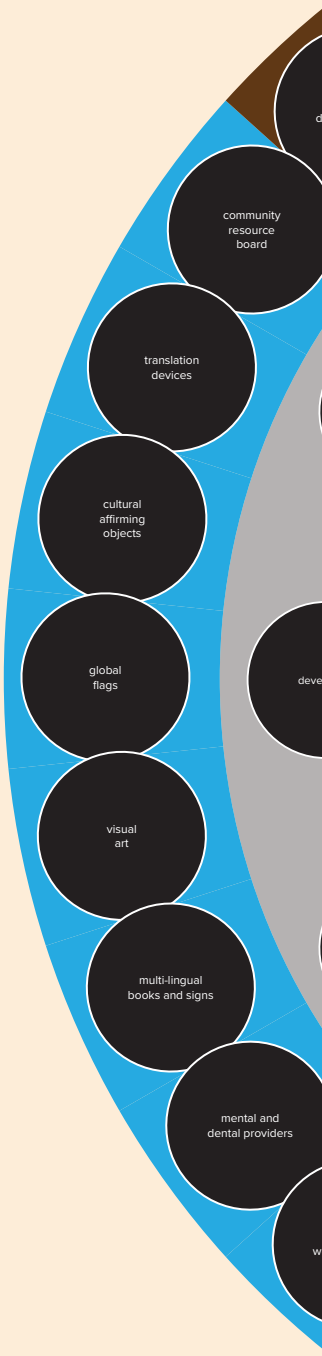
欢迎

CO-DESIGNER-CREATED CONCEPT

Anti-Racist Early Childcare Center



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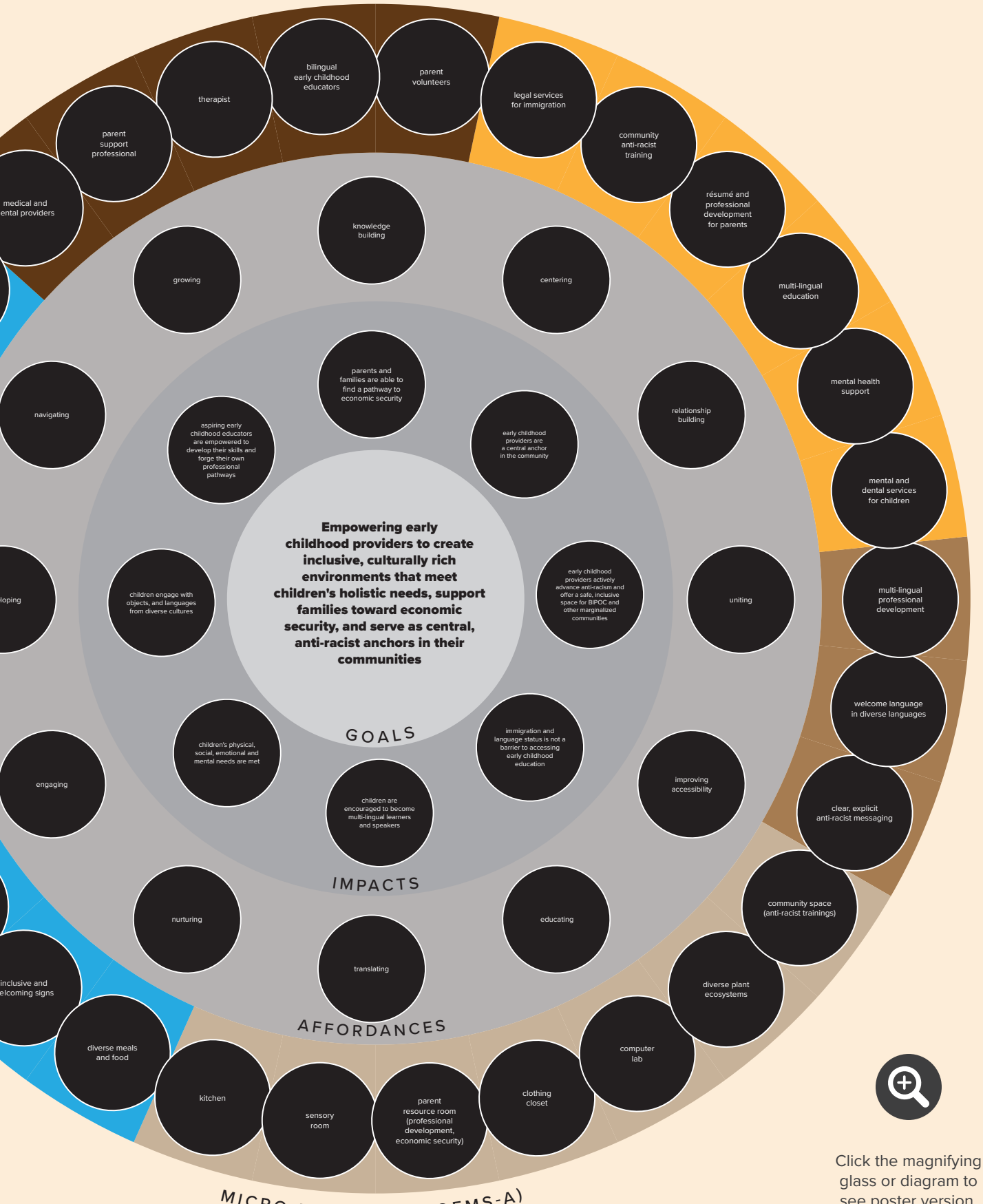

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DEEP DIVE INTO OPPORTUNITY AREA

KEY LEARNINGS

KEY LEARNINGS

Barriers to Early Childhood Services and Care

The co-design workshops identified significant challenges that prevent children and families from accessing quality care and learning, as well as barriers providers face in delivering services that meet their unique needs. These barriers range from information navigation and accessibility to dynamic learning environments and diverse learning needs.

Co-designers identified 20 key challenges hindering access, quality care, and learning delivery. These challenges must be addressed to ensure the early childhood ecosystem fully meets existing needs, anticipates and provides interventions for future demands, and fosters trust and confidence amongst all stakeholders.

INFORMATION NAVIGATION AND ACCESSIBILITY

1

Inadequate digital infrastructure at the system and provider levels perpetuates information gaps, deepens the digital divide, and increases uncertainty around where and how to access resources.

2

Although parents and caregivers are responsible for decisions affecting their children's growth and well-being, they often need more tools and insight to identify the best programs and services for their children, limiting their ability to make informed decisions.

INFORMATION NAVIGATION AND ACCESSIBILITY (CONT.)

3

Enrollment with early education and care providers including early intervention programs can be daunting for parents due to the scarcity of quality programming. This often results in families being placed on lengthy waitlists and facing uncertainty and frustration as they wait for openings.

4

Despite their commitment to their children's well-being, parents may lack essential knowledge of developmental milestones and the ability to utilize evaluations effectively. As a result, parents need help to bolster their children's growth.

5

Language barriers between providers and parents hinder information sharing, preventing parents from making informed decisions about their children's learning and development.

CROSS-COLLABORATION AND COMMUNICATION

1

Varying regulations and processes for local, state, and federal funding pose persistent barriers for providers. Inconsistent cycle timelines, eligibility criteria, and requirements create overwhelming stress and undermine quality early childhood care and support sustainability.

2

Limited collaboration amongst agencies responsible for transportation, healthcare, and housing creates obstacles for families, exhausting their resources and energy. Thus, parents' ability to access early childhood education and support equitably and promptly is restricted.

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CROSS-COLLABORATION AND COMMUNICATION (CONT.)

3 Siloed state departments and providers constrain cross-system communication, widening families' information gaps and reinforcing repetitive administrative processes for parents and providers.

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4 The parent-provider relationship often feels transactional and needs concerted efforts to build trust, effective communication, and community, which are crucial for children's success and well-being.

HOLISTIC WELL-BEING

1 The personal and professional challenges parents and providers experience significantly impact their physical, mental, and emotional well-being. There is a substantial need to increase their access to and the availability of mental health support.

---

2 External factors like socioeconomic status, family education levels, and economic stability shape children's growth and development. However, parents and caregivers often lack the necessary support to effectively address these factors and foster their children's development.

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3 High enrollment fees and limited access to resources and information make early childhood education and care services financially inaccessible for many families. This forces them to choose between essential needs and quality education for their children. This lack of affordability restricts enrollment in quality programs, induces stress, limits employment opportunities, and compromises overall family well-being.

HOLISTIC WELL-BEING (CONT.)

4

Many parents need more early childcare services during atypical hours. Standard hours conflict with work schedules and don't meet the need for extended care, potentially hindering employment and quality childcare options.

5

Limited slots and service disruptions constrain access to quality early childhood services and supports, which presents significant challenges for parents and caregivers. These include job and opportunity loss, hindering their children's ability to thrive, and fostering feelings of parental inadequacy and failure.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND SUPPORTS

1

The misrepresentation of early educators as babysitters has left communities misinformed about the importance of early childhood education and care. Thus, some parents may be less prepared to engage with early childhood education and care services.

2

Workforce shortages, an underpaid and undervalued workforce, limited funding, and lack of professional growth opportunities limit the recruitment and retention of educators, negatively impacting the quality and continuity of children's education.

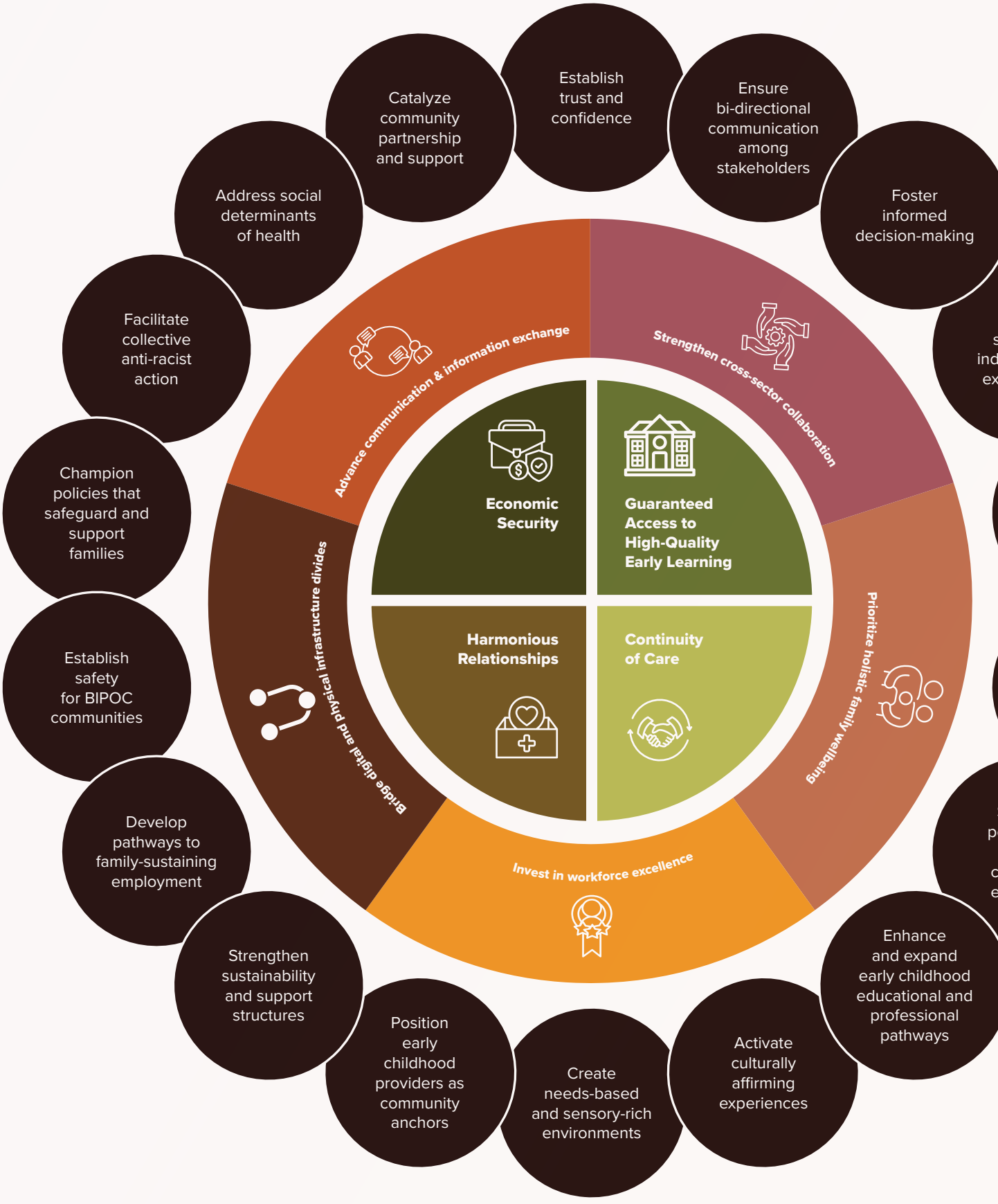
3

Although training is essential for delivering quality early learning services, providers and educators need more funding, time, and communication to complete the training necessary to advance their knowledge and improve their practice.

DYNAMIC LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS & DIVERSE LEARNING NEEDS

1

Inadequate physical infrastructure at provider facilities may prevent some children from accessing environments that adequately support their physical and medical needs.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Establish safety for BIPOC communities
Develop pathways to family-sustaining employment
Strengthen sustainability and support structures
Position early childhood providers as community anchors
Create needs-based and sensory-rich environments
Activate culturally affirming experiences
Enhance and expand early childhood educational and professional pathways
Advance communication & information exchange
Strengthen cross-sector collaboration
Prioritize holistic family wellbeing
Invest in workforce excellence
Bridge digital and physical infrastructure divides
Economic Security
Guaranteed Access to High-Quality Early Learning
Harmonious Relationships
Continuity of Care

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

Equity Framework

To address the racial inequities and hardships experienced by Illinoisan families, the Department of Early Childhood must implement strategic efforts that ensure all children, families, and providers receive the necessary resources and supports to access and deliver high-quality care and services. The Early Childhood Education and Care Equity Framework identifies the pathway to create an ecosystem that serves all Illinoisans and captures the interconnectivity of the proposed and co-created outcomes, drivers, and principles. Desired outcomes represent the goals set by co-designers for the Department of Early Childhood, while the drivers refer to the essential approaches employed to reach these goals. To bring the drivers—and ultimately the desired outcomes—to fruition, the principles serve as guideposts for developing new programs and services, modifying existing ones, and acting as evaluation metrics for both.

DESIRED OUTCOMES. The desired experiences and results expected by co-designers that are sought after and achieved through specific actions, decisions, or efforts.

DRIVERS. The people, conditions, and information that drive an organization's actions and help it achieve its goals. Drivers are the core approaches that enable an organization's success. They should align with the organization's vision and mission.

PRINCIPLES. The actionable properties that need to be created/afforded to reach the identified impacts and goals.

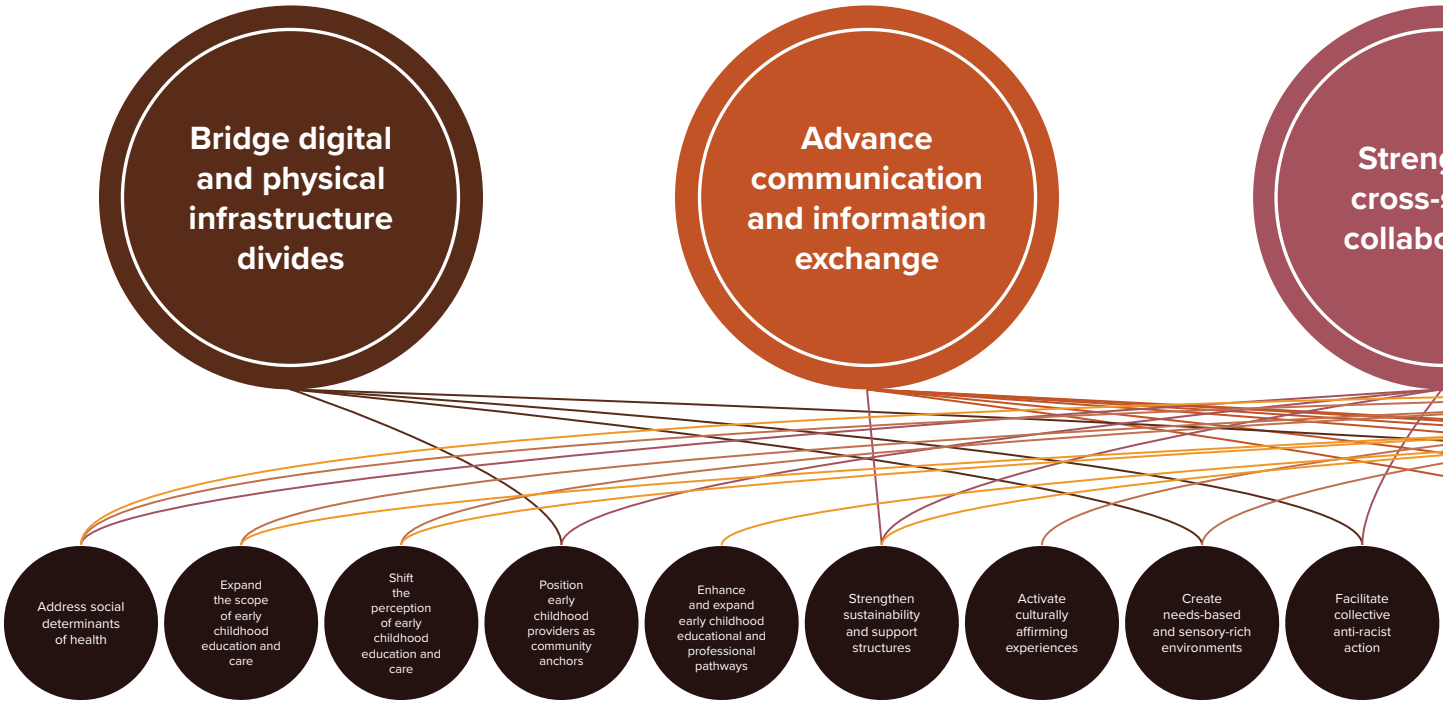
4 **DESIRED OUTCOMES**

5 **DRIVERS**

18 **PRINCIPLES**

Driver & Action Mapping

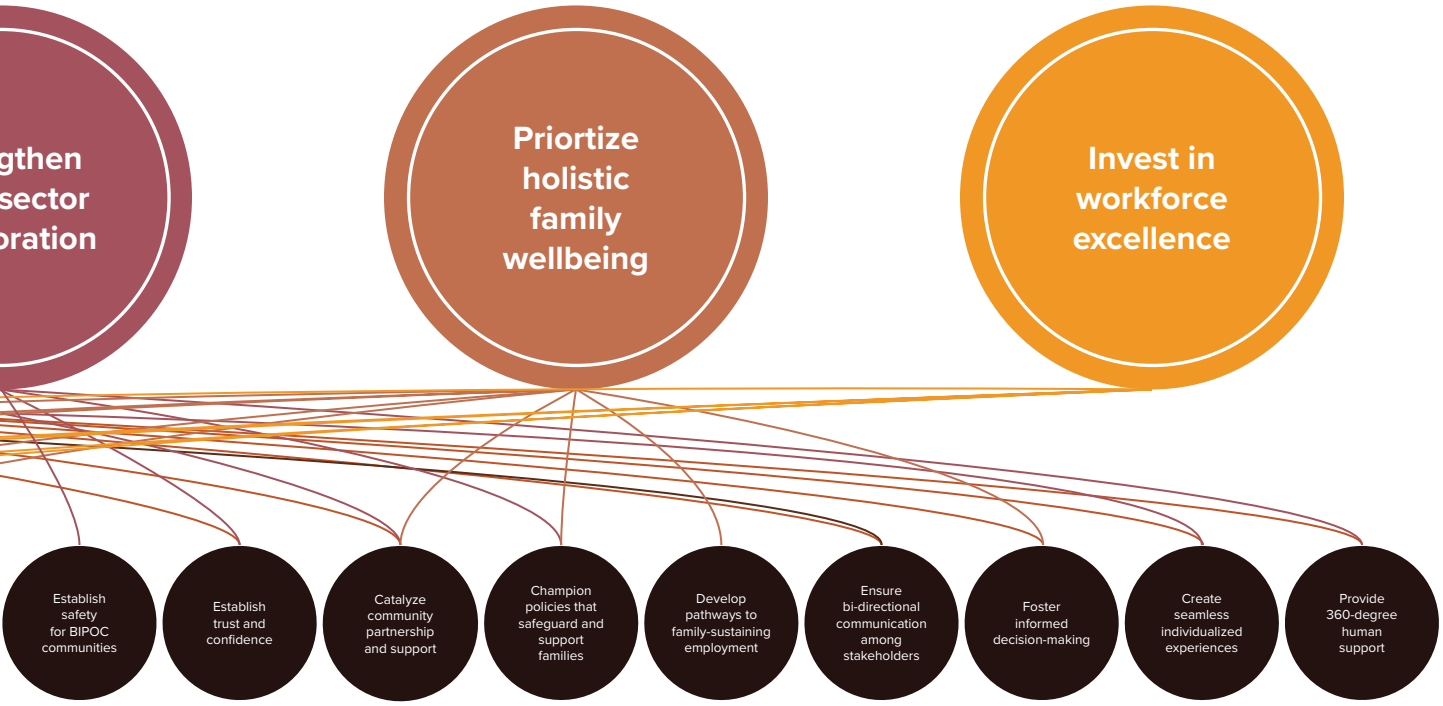
The Department of Early Childhood ende
of care and services that meets the need
agency must implement drivers that prior
providers and to do so, these drivers mus



Develop digital platforms that assess needs based on responses	Develop a platform that connects families with providers based on their needs and enables them to determine the right fit for their children	Establish partnerships with learning opportunities for
Utilize automated translation technology that enables greater accessibility for non-English speakers	Develop a MyChart style application that enables families to share relevant information with providers and the Department of Early Childhood	Create statewide laws and policies that protect employ work-life balance (e.g., rem parent protections, etc.)
Enable technology to improve language accessibility and cultural nuance	Provide opportunities for parents to view and explore learning environments and other provider facilities through virtual tours	Expand transportation optic equitable access to early ch
Enable providers to support children with complex medical needs through equipment and accessible facilities	Provide caregiver advocates to help families with system navigation while delivering localized, personalized support	Connect families with servic support their well-being an WIC, SNAP, medical service baby and child items)

eavors to create an ecosystem
s of Illinoisan families. The new
itize the concerns of families and
st be connected to specific actions.

The diagram below connects the five drivers (the overarching direction or plan to achieve desired outcomes) to the 18 principles (guidelines to achieve desired outcomes). Below each driver are very specific actionable next steps identified by co-designers to implement them.



colleges to provide parents and staff	Implement universal home visiting programs that start prenatally to ensure early and consistent support for families	Provide fair and substantial compensation to parents for their involvement and coordination in supporting early childhood centers and programs
promote organizational yment and support ote work, parental leave,	Establish navigator roles to facilitate the transition from early childhood education to school districts	Provide anti-racist and cultural awareness training to educators, state evaluators, and communities served
ons and services to ensure ildhood services and care	Provide on-site therapists who help parents and children navigate and process trauma	Establish reliable and sustainable funding streams (e.g., blended and braided funding) to ensure consistent provider operations and effective service delivery
cves and resources that d economic security (e.g., es, employment, essential	Develop a community-centered assessment that identifies family and resident needs beyond childcare	Develop apprenticeship programs for parents and community members with early childhood career interests.
		Create pathways and supports that expand educators' knowledge and skills (e.g., apprenticeships, coaching, AI trainings, etc.)

TRANSFORMING EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

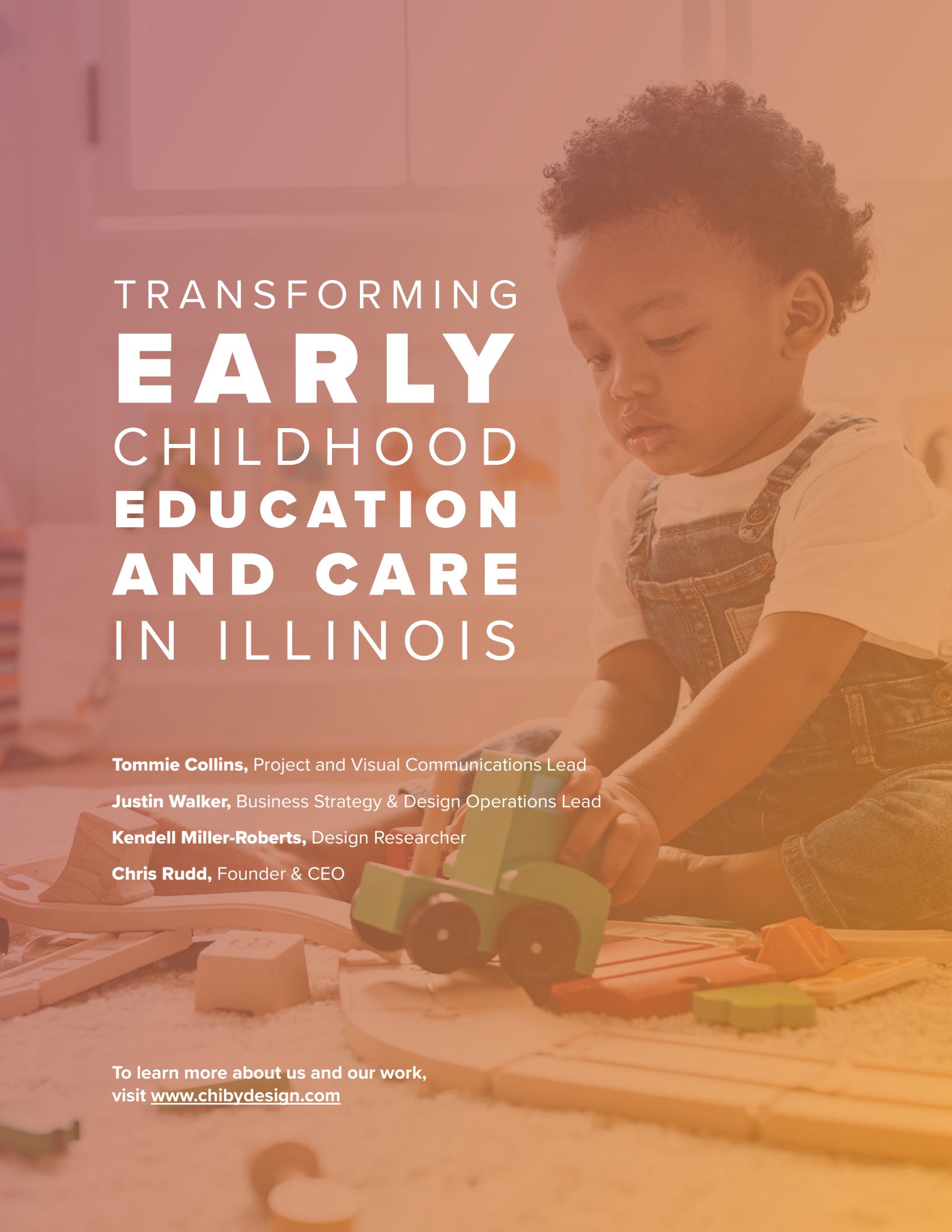
The Work Ahead

Creating an early childhood ecosystem that meets the needs of children, families, and providers requires multi-level interventions, practices, and policies prioritizing access to and delivery of early learning and care. Strategic cross-sector collaboration with other state departments (housing, transportation, human services) enables children, families, and providers to have the social, financial, emotional, and mental resources needed to achieve equitable outcomes for all families.

This report highlights co-designed concepts to address many of the challenges experienced by families and providers as they navigate the early childhood ecosystem. These concepts, grounded in co-designer-determined outcomes and design principles, empower families to make informed decisions about their well-being and their children's learning and development. Additionally, they enable providers to deliver high-quality and culturally affirming care and services. The Department of Early Childhood and its partners should ensure alignment with the outlined outcomes, drivers, and principles as they highlight the integral components needed to build an equitable early childhood ecosystem. The outcomes, drivers, and principles will guide the Department of Early Childhood in holistically supporting families, building thriving and resilient communities, and creating trusting connections among all early childhood stakeholders.

1 2 3 4 5 6
ORANGE
APPLE
PEAR
STRAWBERRY
MERRY
PAPA'S JOB
WHAT IS MY COLOR?
UNCLE VULTURE
ON THE OLD TREE

7 8 9 0
SALLEY
JENNY AND THE HORSE
THE MAGIC MOUSE
THE CHICKEN



TRANSFORMING EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE IN ILLINOIS

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