



20/20

A CLEAR VISION  
FOR THE FUTURE



**—In Memory of Maria Whelan—  
(1950-2020)**

**20/20 A Clear Vision for the Future is dedicated to Maria Whelan,  
President and CEO of Illinois Action for Children, 2000-2020.**

## IT ALL STARTED WITH A QUESTION...

### “What about the children?”

For more than five decades, that single question has been the focus of Illinois Action for Children’s work. It drives everything we do. It’s the reason we are an advocacy organization, a community organizer, a professional support, and so much more for parents and early care and education (ECE) practitioners who have dedicated their lives to improving the futures of children.

Over the years, we have built programs to meet the educational and developmental needs of children and families. We have worked with legislators, policy makers, advocates, and the early learning field to ensure all early care and education settings are high quality. We have tackled the hard questions surrounding the highest need families and their care providers through program models and framed solutions that stem from a practice-research-policy triad that has helped shape the early childhood ecosystem.

We are making a difference thanks to our talented staff, our partners, advocates, and donors. The result of our work is meaningful and measurable.

Still, there remains much more work to do in services, support structures, and resources.

**We amplify the voices of our communities; we are a resource for those seeking better answers for the children they wish to advance; and we partner with individuals and organizations who strive to prepare our children for success in a dynamic world.**





## WE'RE BUILDING ON DECADES OF ACHIEVEMENT.

IAFC is in a perfect position to positively impact the children and communities who need us most. Our Mission and Vision define who and what we are:

### **Mission:**

We are a catalyst for organizing, developing, and supporting strong families and powerful communities where children matter most.

### **Vision:**

Illinois Action for Children envisions a future in which:

- Every family in the United States has equitable access to affordable, high-quality child care and education in the community.
- Having access to enriching early experiences and environments improves life outcomes for every child, while freeing their parents and families to pursue opportunities for their own development and the family's benefit.
- Equitable, accessible, and innovative systems providing high-quality child care and education are viewed as critical levers for improving the quality of life in communities that are the most isolated from resources and opportunities.
- Early care and education practitioners have access to affordable and high-quality training, technical assistance, and supports.
- Advocates fiercely promote and government enacts policies and laws that favor universal access to high-quality child care and education and parent choice.
- Excellent research on issues related to quality child care and education is widely supported, findings are accessible to all who want/need them, and the results are factored into public policy, provider training, educational quality, and supports for families.
- Donors and grant makers – individual, corporate, foundation, government – understand the importance of and are eager to contribute to the cause of universal, affordable, equitable and accessible high-quality child care and education.

**“One’s vision is not a road map, but a compass.”**

—Peter Block





## THE CHALLENGES ARE VAST—BUT SO ARE THE OPPORTUNITIES TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE.

### **Our Strategic Plan Focuses On Programs, Public Policy, and Research.**

This plan identifies the systemic impact areas that we will pursue. We believe a focus on these areas will drive the political, economic, and social changes that are required to create the world we desire.

### **Evolving Community Systems: Serving the Whole State**

Though endemic poverty can be attacked at the individual and family level, when addressed at the system level, community and societal gains increase exponentially. Our work in community systems development and capacity building has demonstrated that the greatest potential educational return, for the greatest number of children in all communities, will be achieved through this work.

### **Driving Diversity of Child Care and Education: Supporting Parental Choice for Home- and Center-Based Settings**

While ongoing research and policy findings continue to drive funding and political momentum toward center-based education and universal pre-kindergarten, the work of studying, researching, and acknowledging the value of diverse settings and experiences in ECE and care for school-age children while not in school is sorely lacking. The prevalence of families who choose different child care options exemplifies the need for a spectrum of high-quality solutions across every income, social, and child care delivery structure. We are committed to pursuing quality measures that acknowledge different settings, offer new options, and provide meaningful solutions to every family.

### **Vitalizing the Early Care and Education Workforce**

The early education workforce, who we entrust to nurture and teach our children during the most important developmental years of their lives, is in urgent need of vitalization. Identifying, recruiting, developing, and sustaining that workforce has increasingly eluded the field. When we recognize an issue of this magnitude, we rise to the challenge. The methods, protocols, and incentives to overcome the talent shortage in ECE has become our focus. We know that without a solution to this crisis, there remain nearly insurmountable obstacles to developing the next generation of leaders for the field, and without a solution, it will be the children who continue to pay the price.

### **Working Beyond Need-Based Equity**

While some progress has been made, in 21st century America, race, gender, disability, zip code, and nationality directly impact the future of children. Where children live matters. Their race and nationality matters. Gender, disability, all of it matters. The time to collect and analyze the data is long overdue. These questions will continue to engage our study and pursuit of equity within our organization and in the child care and education field.



*IMPACT AREA***EVOLVING COMMUNITY SYSTEMS:  
SERVING THE WHOLE STATE**

Initiated in response to a philanthropic vision, and broadened by state and federal recognition of its value, our systems change work is focused on:

- 1 Systems development in specific, high-need communities in which depth of engagement and tenure of investment matter.
- 2 Assessing, enhancing, and aligning the assets of underserved communities.
- 3 Examining the underlying root causes and their gaps (in funding and philosophy) that contribute to challenges in certain identifiable communities.

**“The best vision  
is insight.”**

—Malcom Forbes

What remains is to cultivate and connect what we have learned on a community level to state-wide impact and national direction setting.

**Anticipated Impact:**

- Continued development of single-community immersion models;
- Application of capacity building supports to 40 additional Illinois communities by 2025;
- Understanding and providing requisite investments in emerging collaborations;
- Research and policy development to achieve adequate community investment and ensure efficacy; and
- New and diverse policy partners who will expand our ability to address the critical issues unique to each community.



## IMPACT AREA

# DRIVING DIVERSITY OF CHILD CARE AND EDUCATION: SUPPORTING PARENTAL CHOICE FOR HOME- AND CENTER-BASED SETTINGS

Parenting can be challenging. Add in the complexities of navigating the child care system including finding and paying for child care, the obstacles can often be too complex for parents to overcome. Many families need options that do not align with the traditional center-based model, especially related to care during non-standard hours. The current strategies and theories that underpin the work of the entire system have created biases that limit parents' choices. At the same time, investment in family, friend, and neighbor (FFN) care is severely lacking, creating disparity and inconsistency in the quality of care.

We will engage across the levels of complexity and bias to support quality child care and education for all children, in the context that is appropriate for individual need and parental choice.

### Anticipated Impact:

- New and enhanced supports for non-traditional family care requirements;
- Development and dissemination of trauma, informed practice models;
- Championing parental choice through evolving definitions of school readiness;
- Advocacy for in-place quality across all settings of the child care spectrum; and
- Development of an effective Mixed Delivery system for all ECE.



## IMPACT AREA

# VITALIZING THE EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION WORKFORCE

The ECE community faces an ongoing talent shortage, an aging workforce, low wages, and a mismatch between the institutions preparing the workforce and the funding and incentives required to attract and retain the desired staff. At the same time, as brain science continues to identify the critical impact of brain development during the first five years of life, the staff that delivers most of the primary care is often professionally unprepared to engage its pertinent issues. Mandated working hours and a pay structure that is both archaic and disincentivizing must be addressed.

We are committed to driving the vitalization of the ECE workforce to advance equitable pay, incentives, and learning settings. These changes will help attract and retain educators who can deliver essential, high-quality care and learning for children and their families.

### Anticipated Impact:

- Equitable compensation and funding models for early care staff and ECE system;
- Refined and expanded application of Illinois Action for Children's Early Childhood Mental Health Consultant's 360-degree consultation model;
- Expanded supports to non-degreed care workers and non-licensed facilities;
- Funding constructs to support a robust recruitment model for ECE;
- Developed practicum and educational tracks for early career professionals; and
- New consultation and teaching assistant options for the ECE field.



## IMPACT AREA

# WORKING BEYOND NEED-BASED EQUITY

While society seems to be open to change, many challenges remain. We have seen issues of implicit bias, racism, sexism, and nationalism in the classrooms of our youngest children and in many Illinois communities. These issues demand research and public response to combat the forces that threaten to undermine the futures of the next generation. We are committed to amplifying their voices, demanding change, and making sure the playing field is as fair as possible.

### Anticipated Impact:

- Growth in representation, cultural environments, and systems geared toward racial equity;
- Family and community engagement strategies that empower all voices;
- Knowledge, skills, and capacity in policymakers and ECE leaders to promote racial equity;
- Strength-based training and tools to support effective navigation of issues of race, power, and privilege; and
- Prioritizing of resources, career pathways, and collaborations toward racial equity.





## OUR PILLARS ARE OUR FOUNDATION.

The pillars described below represent the primary structural components that will be leveraged as we create the impacts and outcomes outlined in this strategic plan.

### **Alignment**

Early childhood is the most fragmented of the education systems. As we move forward, we will continue to influence system and capacity alignment through appropriate thought leadership and model development, with the aim of serving all children.

### **Architecture**

We understand the challenge of change. New needs, new technologies, and new partnerships will continue to influence our organization and we will continue the work at hand today while being prepared for the future. We have positioned our agency to attract and retain top talent; we have utilized technology and social media to enhance communication and engagement; and we are ready for continued growth and ongoing opportunities to make a difference.

### **Agility**

We are dedicated to remaining nimble and responsive in all we do. From our staff to our structure to the programs we implement, innovation is at our core. We realize that as society and technology continue to evolve, we must be ready to address emerging needs of children and their families.

### **Ability**

Our programs are uniquely effective because they're driven by research and real-life experiences. We know how to make an impact because we continuously research the challenges and make decisions that are powered by real-world data. With applied research capacity, technology, adequate financial and development resources, and diversified outreach and innovative program models, we have an opportunity to expand our influence exponentially in the coming decade.



## PILLAR I ALIGNMENT

ECE has, for many years and for many reasons, suffered as the most fractured and misaligned educational system. The funding streams that accompany these institutional structures are both rigorous and limiting. Consequently, in practice, they make for disjointed treatment of children and families in program structures that are internally inconsistent and often self-defeating.

We have been fortunate to work with the philanthropic community to advance our theory of change with municipal and state powers around aligned funding streams and service delivery models. Our work continues with all partners on appropriately sized investments to actualize advancing theoretical models. We have also worked with the City of Chicago and are beginning state-wide work around modifying the funding model for community-based ECE agencies to reflect the actual cost of child care and preschool programs and to support long-term sustainability in the wake of universal Pre-K.

### Expected Outcomes:

*Enhancements to governance systems, accountability structures, and funding streams that further rationalize advancements in the ECE ecosystem.*

### Planned Actions:

- Expand Chicago child care center, community-based organization, and other related financing models;
- Align financing and regulation of child-care providers through state-level policy work;
- Advance partnering with state and national ECE advocates around issues impacting financial resources available to high-need families;
- Adopt and implement state governance, financing, and accountability protocols; and
- Advocate for Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) expansion and efficiency of state child care subsidies.

## PILLAR II

# ARCHITECTURE

Over the past five years, driven by our previous strategic plan, our agency has grown dramatically to include workforce development and advanced technical assistance departments; a department constructed around community systems assessment, development, and technical consulting; and an ECE Mental Health and Family Engagement consulting initiative.

We have expanded our leadership team and focus on human resource development to build upon our fiscal and technological expertise, brand management, message delivery, facilities development, and funding for sustainability.

### Expected Outcomes:

*Continued organizational growth and structural momentum. Enhanced leverage of technology-based communication systems and message management. Greater point of view reach and effectiveness. Ongoing revenue diversification.*

### Planned Actions:

- Grow internal data informed protocols and tools;
- Advance our workforce, universal Pre-K, and early childhood mental health consultation practices;
- Acquire new community systems development work income streams and philanthropic partners;
- Add internal and external community platforms to aid messaging and brand enhancements;
- Promote policy positions and calls to action that draw new partners and resources; and
- Practice with a racial equity lens across the organization and in all our work.



## PILLAR III

# AGILITY

Thought leadership and capacity to execute at the right time are the hallmarks of agility. Over the past decade we have supported the state in delivering on high-demand, time-intensive, assignments that are demographically, and geographically challenging.

In becoming a successful Head Start grantee, we filled a critical gap in south suburban Cook County with a commitment to reaching children and families with the greatest need and the least access to essential educational and community services.

Whether successfully responding to the ECE practitioner Resource and Referral state rebids, leading thinking around the state's implementation of license-exempt ECE provider monitoring, or developing and sharing important work-arounds during the Child Care Assistance Program technology migration, we have passed test after test of speed and quality responsiveness.

We are prepared to go farther into communities, with parents, and partners.

### Expected Outcomes:

*Greater engagement with partners around family needs and greater response to philanthropic and government initiatives in niche areas; all leading to greater self-sustaining revenue options, sources, and opportunities.*

### Planned Actions:

- Expand the research-practice-policy triad in the Sylvia Cotton Center for Research and Policy Innovation;
- Grow our fee-for-service models across practice areas;
- Enhance program designs responding to community/philanthropic opportunities; and
- Increase influence from business model focus and brand presence.



## PILLAR IV ABILITY

We have demonstrated a unique ability to engage, educate, and address the needs of families and communities expressed in their layers of complexity. From family engagement to workforce development, from applied research on non-standard parental working hours and related child care needs to changing demographics in Family, Friend, and Neighbor Care and licensed home care, our program and policy areas have responded.

Our consultants and training and technical assistance teams have stepped up to deliver in-home coaching for quality and individual advancement, virtual classroom training for teachers, and personalized supports for parents. Our public policy, advocacy, and research teams, through grassroots organizing and formalized teaching and publishing platforms, have educated and influenced policy makers, ECE practitioners, as well as the general public.

The tenure and experiences of our staff and our rapidly increasing expertise in data management, change management, financial and philanthropic modeling, and systems development have prepared us to lead boldly into the future.

### Expected Outcomes:

*Greater impact through technical expertise offered providers and partners; innovations around continued model development in direct service areas; and growing visibility and use of research and policy findings and publications.*

### Planned Actions:

- Grow talent and talent acquisition assignments across disciplines;
- Advance implementation of government funding models and investment levels in ECE;
- Grow and accelerate trauma-informed supports and structures; and
- Disseminate research across fields and platforms.



## WE HAVE A CLEAR VISION FOR THE FUTURE. WORKING TOGETHER, WE CAN MAKE IT REALITY.

At Illinois Action for Children, as stated in our name, our focus is on action. Our work is rooted in the understanding that we have a unique opportunity to significantly impact the areas identified in our Strategic Plan.

We cannot do this work alone.

Just as it takes a village to raise a child, the work of families, communities, and systems improvement requires the active engagement of individuals, parents, and caregivers, as well as corporate and philanthropic partners dedicated to driving change.

In the final analysis, it is only through this collective commitment and investment that legislators and leaders will be engaged to empower our children, families, and communities, first to imagine and then to realize, the world we all believe belongs to every child.

### Theory of Change

We believe that lasting change comes only by empowering families and communities with knowledge leading to power; that institutions change only with resources and leadership; and that systems change only through the lever of informed power. Our work is therefore delivered in a series of concentric and interwoven circles of engagement, education and empowerment, with children at the center of all we do.

Every child, regardless of the zip code in which they live, deserves the chance to achieve their greatest potential. Our children are depending on us to ensure they have the resources and opportunities that will enable them to make the world better a better place.

We invite you to join us in making our shared vision for the future a reality, for everyone.







**"The greatest danger for most of us is not that our aim is too high and we miss it, but that it is too low and we reach it."**

**—Michelangelo**

#### SPECIAL THANKS...

We gratefully acknowledge and offer special thanks to all those who participated in our Strategic planning process:

Board of Directors

Executive and Senior Management

All Management Staff

All Agency Staff

Surveyed and interviewed stakeholders and partners from the early care and education field, government, academia, philanthropy, and corporations.

*"Illinois Action for Children is a catalyst for organizing, developing and supporting strong families and powerful communities where children matter most."*



@IAFC\_Cares

[www.actforchildren.org](http://www.actforchildren.org)  
© 2020

Illinois Action for Children is a 501(c)3 charitable organization.  
All gifts are tax deductible as allowable by law.