



DESIGNED FOR IMPACT

Foundations of Quality & Sustainability

The "WHAT"

Service Design, Quality Practices & Provider + Family Outcomes

Introduction to HBCC Network Toolkits

Home-based childcare (HBCC) networks play a critical role in strengthening early care and education (ECE) systems by supporting the large number of families who rely on home-based care arrangements. In the United States, home-based providers—including licensed family childcare (FCC) and family, friend, and neighbor (FFN) caregivers—serve a significant proportion of young children, particularly infants and toddlers. These settings often provide flexible schedules, culturally responsive care, and smaller group environments that meet the needs of many families. Despite their importance, HBCC providers frequently operate in isolation and have historically had limited access to professional development, coaching, and system support compared with center-based programs (Bromer & Porter, 2019; National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance [NCECQA], 2020).

Home-based childcare networks have emerged as a promising strategy to strengthen the HBCC sector and improve both provider support and program quality. Networks typically connect providers with coaching, professional learning, peer communities, and shared services such as business support and regulatory guidance. Research suggests that relationship-based support offered through networks—particularly coaching and peer learning—can improve instructional practices, strengthen provider knowledge of child development, and reduce professional isolation. In addition, networks can contribute to provider retention and sustainability by supporting both the educational and business aspects of family childcare (Bromer & Porter, 2019; Tout et al., 2018).

As states, communities, and intermediary organizations increasingly invest in HBCC networks, there is a growing need for practical tools that translate research-informed benchmarks into actionable guidance. While emerging research highlights key components of effective networks, including strong relationships, provider leadership, and coordinated services—leaders often need concrete resources to operationalize these principles in practice. Translating research and policy benchmarks into accessible guidance can help network leaders strengthen implementation, support providers more effectively, and ultimately improve the quality, stability, and equity of early care and education systems (Homegrown, 2021; Tout et al., 2018).

What is a Toolkit?

A toolkit is a collection of practical resources, strategies, and guidance designed to help people apply knowledge or research to real-world practice. Unlike a traditional report or academic article, a toolkit focuses on action providing step-by-step support, templates, examples, and tools that help users implement ideas, solve problems, or improve their work.

In professional fields such as early childhood education, a toolkit typically translates research, policies, or best practices into accessible, user-friendly materials that practitioners can use in their daily work. Toolkits often include items such as checklists, reflection questions, planning templates, case studies, worksheets, and implementation guides. These resources help bridge the gap between theory and practice by giving early childhood providers and leaders concrete ways to apply new strategies in their programs or organizations.

HBCC Network Toolkits

Three toolkits were developed to operationalize the Home-Based Child Care Network Benchmarks and make them usable for strategic planning, service design, and implementation. While the benchmarks articulate a comprehensive vision for high-quality networks, they are conceptual and aspirational in nature. The purpose of these toolkits is to help networks move from principles to practice, clarifying how to establish strong organizational foundations, design coherent service models, and build the infrastructure necessary for sustainable impact.

To support practical application, the benchmarks have been organized into three complementary toolkits:

- **Toolkit 1 (The Why):** Focuses on organizational culture, equity commitments, and shared governance.
- **Toolkit 2 (The What):** Focuses on service design, quality practices, and provider and family outcomes.
- **Toolkit 3 (The How):** Focuses on implementation systems, staffing, recruitment, and continuous improvement.

Each toolkit centers a distinct lever of change, while acknowledging that high-quality networks require alignment across all three domains. The benchmarks are interconnected by design and provider voice are intentionally embedded across all domains, not confined to a single benchmark.

Networks may choose to use the toolkits sequentially, beginning with foundational values and governance before refining services and strengthening implementation, or they may engage with a single toolkit based on current priorities and capacity. The tools are designed to support reflection, strategic planning, alignment, and continuous improvement. They are not intended as compliance checklists or rating instruments, but as guides for building coherent, equitable, and sustainable HBCC network strategies.

Designed for Impact: Foundations for Quality & Sustainability

This toolkit supports networks in designing, aligning, and strengthening the services they offer to providers, children, and families. Grounded in the “What” benchmarks, it helps networks translate their values into concrete supports that promote provider well-being, economic sustainability, high-quality caregiving practices, and access to comprehensive services.

Through this toolkit, networks will:

- Align services with clearly defined outcomes for providers, children, and families.
- Design services that promote provider psychological well-being, professional growth, and long-term attachment to HBCC work.
- Develop economic sustainability strategies that stabilize provider income, reduce business burdens, and support long-term viability.
- Expand access to holistic support for children and families, including health, developmental, and social services.
- Strengthen culturally grounded quality practices that build on providers' existing knowledge, community relationships, and caregiving approaches.

Core Service Design Questions

Rather than centering governance or operational infrastructure, this toolkit helps networks answer:

- What solutions are we identifying with and for providers?
- What does economic stability look like in practice?
- How do we build culturally embedded practices that are rooted in the strengths of providers' lived experience, community, and identity(ies)?
- How do we ensure families and children access needed support beyond the childcare setting?
- How do our services align with desired and stated outcomes?

By clearly defining and intentionally designing their service array, networks move from offering isolated support to delivering a coherent and outcome-driven model of care that advances equity, strengthens sustainability, and improves family childcare experiences for children and families.

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HBCCN Benchmark Reflection

The "WHAT" Benchmarks

Purpose of Engaging in Reflection

By reviewing each benchmark and indicator through a self-evaluation process, network leaders can better understand where their network currently stands and select the resources that will be most relevant and impactful. This reflective approach ensures that the toolkit is used not simply as a set of activities, but as a guide for continuous improvement that strengthens services for providers and ultimately enhances outcomes for children and families.

How to Use this Reflection Tool

The HBCCN framework provides a comprehensive list of 11 benchmarks which are each organized into indicators and descriptors to provide a clear and structured way to understand expectations and guide implementation. Indicators represent the broad areas of practice that define what strong home-based childcare network supports should include. They highlight the key components of effective network design and functioning and provide a high-level view of what quality looks like within each benchmark area.

Each indicator is further divided into descriptors, which break the broader concept into more specific actionable elements of practice. Descriptors help clarify the different parts of the indicator and make complex concepts more manageable. By separating the indicator into smaller components, network leaders can more easily identify which specific practices are already in place and which may need further development.

Directions:

- Review each benchmark and its corresponding indicators carefully.
- Then read the descriptors provided and select "Yes," "No," or "Sometimes" to indicate the extent to which each practice is currently implemented within your network.
- Your responses will help identify current strengths, areas for growth, and opportunities for improvement as you work through the toolkit.

Benchmark D: The network offers services that promote provider well-being and attachment to HBCC work.

D1: Nurtures provider psychological and physical well-being by reducing stress from difficult working conditions and helping improve work life balance.

Descriptors	Y	N	S
Offers services such as self-care and stress reduction training.	☐	☐	☐
Offers peer support activities, social networking events, and staff visits (including virtual options) to reduce isolation.	☐	☐	☐
Provides support with paperwork requirements, recordkeeping, and payment to reduce provider administrative burdens and working conditions.	☐	☐	☐
Offers providers access to health/mental health resources to increase their physical and psychological well-being.	☐	☐	☐
Facilitates access to legal and social services to reduce stress from family-related issues.	☐	☐	☐

D2: Supports provider educational advancement and lifelong learning.

Descriptors	Y	N	S
Facilitates access to educational opportunities including English as a Second Language, Adult Basic Education, General Equivalency Diploma.	☐	☐	☐
Facilitates access to external credentials such as the Child Development Associate (CDA).	☐	☐	☐
Facilitates credential verification for degrees issued outside of the US.	☐	☐	☐
Facilitates access to higher educational degrees including Associates, Bachelors, and post-graduate degree programs by helping providers navigate higher education systems.	☐	☐	☐

D3: Provides opportunities for career/professional advancement and understands, accepts, and facilitates providers' career development goals and plans (including providers who may not seek additional career development opportunities).

Descriptors	Y	N	S
Offers professional development planning for those who seek it.	☐	☐	☐
Offers current providers in the network opportunities to serve as paid staff, consultants, or contractors to deliver services.	☐	☐	☐

Benchmark E: The network offers services that promote economic well-being and sustainability.

E.1. Facilitates providers' access to benefits, including paid time off, vacation, health insurance and retirement.

Descriptors	Y	N	S
Offers access to substitutes through a provider directory or substitute pool, and/or pays for substitutes to facilitate provider personal time off.	☐	☐	☐
Provides training or technical assistance for retirement planning (e.g., counseling on taxes, Social Security, tax-advantaged accounts, paying down debts).	☐	☐	☐

E.2. Helps providers maintain full child enrollment to ensure steady and reliable income.

Descriptors	Y	N	S
Offers training, technical assistance, and/or peer support activities around marketing and interviews with prospective families that can help providers maintain and/or increase enrollment.	☐	☐	☐
Has dedicated staff that help track enrollment, actively recruit, and refer new families to fill slots.	☐	☐	☐
Maintains a website with information about HBCC options to help families choose a provider, helps providers develop and maintain their own business website, and/or offers orientations for families seeking care.	☐	☐	☐

E.3. Offers support on managing revenues and expenses as well as business operations.

Descriptors	Y	N	S
Offers training, technical assistance, peer support, and/or back-office vendor referrals/services on budgeting, accounting, recordkeeping, marketing, and timely submission of required documents.	☐	☐	☐
Offers training, technical assistance, peer support, and/or back-office vendor referrals/services to help providers calculate revenue based on the actual cost of care.	☐	☐	☐
Offers training, technical assistance, peer support, and/or back-office vendor referrals/services to help providers use business management software to track revenues on a regular basis to ensure full and timely collection.	☐	☐	☐
Offers training, technical assistance, peer support, and/or back-office vendor referrals/services to help providers prepare taxes, including finding a qualified tax preparer.	☐	☐	☐
Offers training on ACH deposits/credit card/VENMO/etc. autopayments.	☐	☐	☐

E.4. Offers support around managing family expectations for care.

Descriptors	Y	N	S
Offers training, technical assistance, and/or peer support activities on developing contracts and policy handbooks that articulate hours of care, payment, and other policies (e.g., sick care).	☐	☐	☐
Helps providers communicate with families about in-kind supports or bartering of services.	☐	☐	☐

E.5. Collects parent fees and/or helps manage state subsidy or other payments for providers to maximize consistency and reliability.

Descriptors	Y	N	S
Manages bookkeeping and billing for affiliated providers.	☐	☐	☐
Processes subsidy payments or helps providers collect subsidy payments and/or parent co-payments.	☐	☐	☐

E.6. Offsets cost of business burdens through financial assistance and material supports.

Descriptors	Y	N	S
Helps new providers with costs associated with licensing process and requirements through payment of licensing fees, liability insurance, background checks, and/or loans to retrofit homes.	☐	☐	☐
Helps providers with the costs of complying with system requirements that relate to the program environment through providing free materials/equipment and/or discounted materials/equipment through bulk purchasing.	☐	☐	☐
Helps providers comply with system training and educational requirements through facilitating access to external public and private scholarships and grants.	☐	☐	☐
Helps providers with ongoing financial needs (e.g., maintains an emergency fund for providers).	☐	☐	☐

E.7. Supports provider navigation of federal, state, and local regulatory systems such as the federal Child and Adult Care Food Program and Early Head Start child care partnerships, pre-k initiatives, state licensing, subsidy, and Quality Improvement Systems (QIS), and local zoning systems.

Descriptors	Y	N	S
Offers training, technical assistance, and/or peer support activities to ensure that providers have a full understanding of regulations and requirements that affect them.	☐	☐	☐

Descriptors	Y	N	S
Offers training on required topics, pre-inspection visits to provider homes, and/or toolkits with materials/equipment to help providers comply with licensing requirements and processes.	☐	☐	☐
Offers training or technical assistance on subsidy and QIS required topics.	☐	☐	☐
Offers timely information on policy changes.	☐	☐	☐
Offers support for providers who face challenges with landlords or Homeowners' Associations around permits for family child care businesses.	☐	☐	☐

E.8. Offers opportunities for provider advocacy around support and sustainability of HBCC.

Descriptors	Y	N	S
Offers providers support for effective advocacy for themselves around interactions with regulatory systems and policy changes.	☐	☐	☐
Offers opportunities such as training workshops and/or peer support activities on organizing and implementing meetings, public speaking and letter writing to build policy advocacy skills.	☐	☐	☐
Facilitates opportunities for providers, families, and staff to influence policy changes through participation in organized events, public hearings, and meetings with legislators and state/local administrators.	☐	☐	☐

Benchmark F: The network offers services that build on and enhance culturally relevant and community-embedded provider practices that contribute to positive child and family outcomes.

F.1 Builds on provider knowledge about working with children and families.

Descriptors	Y	N	S
Offers training, technical assistance, and/or peer support activities that build provider knowledge about children's development across ages, abilities, and domains.	☐	☐	☐
Offers training, technical assistance, and/or peer support activities that build provider knowledge about supporting families and establishing responsive relationships with them.	☐	☐	☐

F.2 Promotes HBCC health and safety practices and environments to nurture children's learning and development and reduce child illness and harm.

Descriptors	Y	N	S
Offers training, technical assistance, and/or peer support activities that help providers arrange the child care home space to optimize child development across domains for all children, including those with disabilities, and to meet health and safety system requirements if relevant.	☐	☐	☐
Offers training, technical assistance, access to a nurse consultant and/or peer support activities that help providers implement health and safety practices.	☐	☐	☐
Supports the quality of provider environments by providing materials and equipment (e.g., First Aid kits, fire extinguishers, toy/book lending library, resource van).	☐	☐	☐

F.3 Promotes provider interactions with children across age groups that foster positive identity, social-emotional, cognitive, language, and physical development.

Descriptors	Y	N	S
Offers tools and supports for providers to identify and convey milestones, individual learning and growth, and to establish individualized learning supports for children.	☐	☐	☐
Offers training, technical assistance, and/or peer support activities that help providers support children's cross-age interactions, including infants, toddlers, preschoolers, and school-age children.	☐	☐	☐
Offers training, technical assistance, and/or peer support activities that help providers support children with disabilities.	☐	☐	☐
Offers training, technical assistance, and/or peer support activities that help providers support dual and multi-lingual language learners.	☐	☐	☐
Offers training, technical assistance, and/or peer support activities that help providers implement anti-bullying and anti-racist practices with children.	☐	☐	☐

F.4 Supports provider practices around planning and engaging in formal and informal learning activities with children.

Descriptors	Y	N	S
Offers training, technical assistance, and/or peer support activities that model activities and routines for mixed-age groups of children.	☐	☐	☐
Helps providers develop, select, and use curricula that honor their program preferences.	☐	☐	☐
Offers support on how to use daily routines as informal learning opportunities.	☐	☐	☐

F.5 Promotes provider practices around supporting and engaging families of children in care and developing strong provider-family relationships.

Descriptors	Y	N	S
Helps providers promote families as their children's first teachers, including collaborative goal setting with families.	☐	☐	☐
Offers training, technical assistance, and/or peer support activities on how to help providers engage families of children in care in the child care setting or in their children's learning activities at home.	☐	☐	☐
Offers training and/or peer support activities to help providers engage families as advocates for their child's learning needs.	☐	☐	☐
Facilitates mutually respectful, strengths-based and reciprocal communication between providers and families (e.g., facilitates family meetings with provider).	☐	☐	☐

F.6 Supports providers to engage in their own processes of continuous quality improvement.

Descriptors	Y	N	S
Facilitates providers in collecting data about their own caregiving and teaching practices with children.	☐	☐	☐
Engages providers in using their own data or data collected by the network to set their own goals for improving their practices with children and families.	☐	☐	☐

Benchmark G: The network offers holistic services for children and families beyond the support offered for providers.

G.1 Knows and supports the ways that providers informally offer social-emotional, material, and informational supports to families.

Descriptors	Y	N	S
Knows and supports the ways that providers informally offer social-emotional, material, and informational supports to families and makes an effort to support providers in those activities.	☐	☐	☐

G.2 Offers providers and families lists of current community resources and services that respond to families' home cultures, interests, needs, and preferred languages, updated on a regular basis.

Descriptors	Y	N	S
Offers providers and families lists of current community resources and services that respond to families' home cultures, interests, needs, and preferred languages and that are updated on a regular basis.	☐	☐	☐

G.3 Refers children as needed to developmental, health and nutrition, mental health screening and assessments, and mental health consultation.

Descriptors	Y	N	S
Refers children to hearing, dental, and vision screening.	☐	☐	☐
Refers children to cognitive and learning evaluations.	☐	☐	☐
Helps families establish a medical home or obtain health insurance if needed.	☐	☐	☐

G.4 Refers families as needed to material, educational, legal, and/or health and mental health supports.

Descriptors	Y	N	S
Refers families to or has a family support specialist or social worker on staff who works with families of children.	☐	☐	☐

G.5 Follows up with providers to ensure that families and children have accessed needed referrals and supports.

Descriptors	Y	N	S
Facilitates providers in collecting data about their own caregiving and teaching practices with children.	☐	☐	☐
Engages providers in using their own data or data collected by the network to set their own goals for improving their practices with children and families.	☐	☐	

HBCCN Benchmark Reflection Analysis

The "WHAT" Benchmarks

Use your benchmark data to guide this reflection. Be specific — reference the data points, trends, or patterns you noticed. Honest reflection is the foundation of meaningful growth!

Strengths

One area where my data shows clear growth or strength is...

Point to a specific metric, score, or trend as your evidence.

I believe this strength developed because...

Consider your practices, strategies, or intentional focus this term.

A strategy or practice I want to continue and build on is...

Be specific — what will you keep doing, and why does it work?

Areas of Growth

An area where my data indicates I have room to grow is...

Name the specific benchmark, standard, or data point that stands out.

I think this area is a challenge because...

Reflect honestly — what factors (internal or external) may be contributing?

One concrete step I will take to improve in this area is...

Focus on an action within your control. What will look different next cycle?

Developing a Community of Practice

A Framework for Learning and Engagement

Introduction

What is Community of Practice (CoP)?

A community of practice (CoP) is a group of people who come together because they share a common concern, passion, or interest in a topic and want to deepen their knowledge and expertise through ongoing interaction. It is a purposeful network where people learn with and from each other in a sustained, structured way.

Intended Goals of a Community of Practice (CoP)

1. Share best practices and lessons learned.
2. Build collective knowledge that individuals can apply in their own work.
3. Collaboratively draw on members' different experiences to brainstorm solutions.
4. Support professional development through mentoring and informal learning.

Benefits of Communities of Practice (CoPs) for Early Childhood Educators

Theory surrounding CoPs argues that organizational success depends on the institution's ability to design themselves as social learning systems (Wenger, 2000). Social learning systems recognize that humans learn best in collaboration, conversation, and co-construction with other professionals in similar roles and/or contexts (Kretchmar, 2019). High quality outcomes increase when professionals take advantage of social learning systems, such as communities of practice, and apply learning to broader contexts (Wu et al., 2025). In the case of early childhood professionals can use CoPs as informal and formal spaces to improve performance and learning thereby leading to higher-quality instruction, safe and inclusive early childhood education, stronger family engagement, and overall better outcomes for children.

Professional Growth and Reflective Practice

Members share real examples, reflect together on challenges, and test strategies, creating a culture of ongoing learning. This type of community and engagement improves teaching quality, builds confidence, and fosters reflective practitioners rather than isolated problem-solvers.

Leadership Development: CoPs provide structured yet collaborative mentorship opportunities, allowing emerging leaders to learn from experienced staff, strengthen their skills, and contribute to a unified culture of quality across programs.

Family & Community Engagement: Teams share effective ways to build trust with families, overcome barriers, and strengthen home–school connections, which increases family participation and supports children's learning—both of which are key to school readiness.

Wellness and Retention: CoPs support staff wellbeing by providing a safe space for peer support, reducing feelings of isolation, improving overall mental health & wellbeing, job satisfaction, and retention.

Framework for Developing a Community of Practice (CoP)

When designing a community of practice (CoP) it is important to note that CoPs can take many forms and consist of many elements. Our framework will build upon the [World Bank Environmental and Social Framework \(2017\)](#), prioritizing the three P's ***purpose, people, and practice***.

Purpose

Decide the domain: e.g., *literacy instruction, dual language learners, family engagement, leadership development, wellness.*

Link to organizational goals: Tie the CoP to school readiness outcomes, CLASS scores, QRIS/Head Start standards, or continuous quality improvement priorities.

Clarify the value: Make it clear how participation will help educators grow and improve child/family outcomes.

Determine and Recruit People

Who will be the facilitator? The role of the facilitator is to guide discussions, encourage reflection, manage group dynamics, and keep the CoP aligned with its goals. Will facilitators rotate to share leadership skills or stay the same?

Who are the members?: Teachers, family engagement staff, coaches, directors, community partners, or even parents (depending on the CoP's focus).

Size: Aim for **8–15 members**—large enough for diverse perspectives but small enough to build trust.

Establish CoP Procedures

Meeting Structure, Frequency and Format: How often will the group meet (monthly, quarterly, etc.)? How will the session be formatted?

Expectations: Set norms for participation (e.g., active sharing, confidentiality, openness to learning).

Shared Resources: Create a living toolkit of strategies, lesson plans, data analysis guides, or family engagement activities. Use a shared platform (Google Drive, Slack, or a learning management system) so members can continue collaborating between sessions.

Foster Trust and Peer Support: Set ground rules around confidentiality and respect. Create a process for celebrating small wins together. Encourage vulnerability—sharing challenges openly leads to deeper learning.

Evaluate and Sustain: Determine a process for collecting and incorporating feedback from members. Additionally, bring real program data (child outcomes, assessment results, CLASS/ECERS scores, family surveys) into discussions. Reflect together: What's working? Where are the gaps? Track improvements in classroom quality, staff

retention, or family engagement tied to CoP activity.

Celebrate Small and Big Wins: Recognize participants' efforts—acknowledge growth and leadership.

Example Format, Roles, and Responsibilities

Example Format	
Welcome	Review the session topic, purpose of the group, group norms, any announcements
Check-In	Allow time for relationship building, sharing successes/challenges
Knowledge Exchange	Determine conversation engager who will share strategies, resources, or research
Discussion/Problem Solving	Encourage members to respond to shared knowledge and bring real challenges for group discussion
Action Planning	Help members identify concrete strategies to try before the next meeting
Closing	Thank participants, provide a closing survey, and conclude with any next steps

Example Meeting Agenda (90 Minutes)

1. Welcome & Check-in (10 min)

- Quick round: What's one success or challenge since our last meeting?
- Builds trust, sets the tone.

2. Learning Spotlight (20 min)

- A member shares a practice, resource, or strategy.
- Option: Review a short article, video, or data trend.

3. Collaborative Problem-Solving (30 min)

- One or two members bring a real challenge.
- Group asks clarifying questions, shares experiences, and brainstorm solutions.

4. Action Planning (20 min)

- Each member commits to **one concrete action** to try before the next meeting.
- Document commitments in the tracking form.

5. Closing Reflection (10 min)

- Quick round: What is one takeaway or insight from today?
- Preview next meeting focus.

Preparing for the Community of Practice (CoP)

Pre-Meeting:

Moderator (Host): Ensure agenda, calendar invite, slides, and survey are updated for the current session. Send pre-session communication with the date, time, and time zone of the session, and any pre-work is sent out one week prior.

Facilitator (Conversation Engager): The volunteer conversation engager is responsible for finding resources and developing materials for the monthly session. Conversation engager will have a 30-minute internal planning meeting with the logistics coordinator prior to the CoP meeting. During this time, the logistics coordinator will offer thought partnership on resources, activities, and slides. All pre-work and communication will be ready to send out one week prior to meeting.

During Meeting:

Moderator (Host)

- Welcome and greet participants, share intro slides, and any full group announcements.
- Ensure all comments in the chat are read and addressed.
- Encourage participants to have cameras on and are appropriately following group norms.
- and that conversation is aligned to the purpose of the group and the topic. This includes making sure participants are sharing the space and not dominating the conversation.
- Document the session by keeping simple notes, resources shared during session, and any follow up action items.
- Close the meeting by thanking participants for attending, providing a link to the session survey and concluding with any additional announcements or next steps.

Facilitator (Conversation Engager(s)):

- Prepare slides, handouts, materials prior to the session.
- Increase engagement and promote active participation by asking reflective and analytical discussion questions surrounding a chosen topic.
- Lead participants in considering action planning. Specifically, what did the participants learn and how will they apply their learning to their context?

After Meeting:

Post-Session Communication: Send a follow-up email to all staff with slides, resources, takeaways, and reminders for the next session and how to engage with the CoP in between sessions (email, text, Slack, etc).

Conclusion

By structuring CoPs with clear goals, skilled facilitation, shared resources, and a culture of trust, early learning providers can transform professional learning from one-off training into sustained, collaborative growth that improves outcomes for children and families.

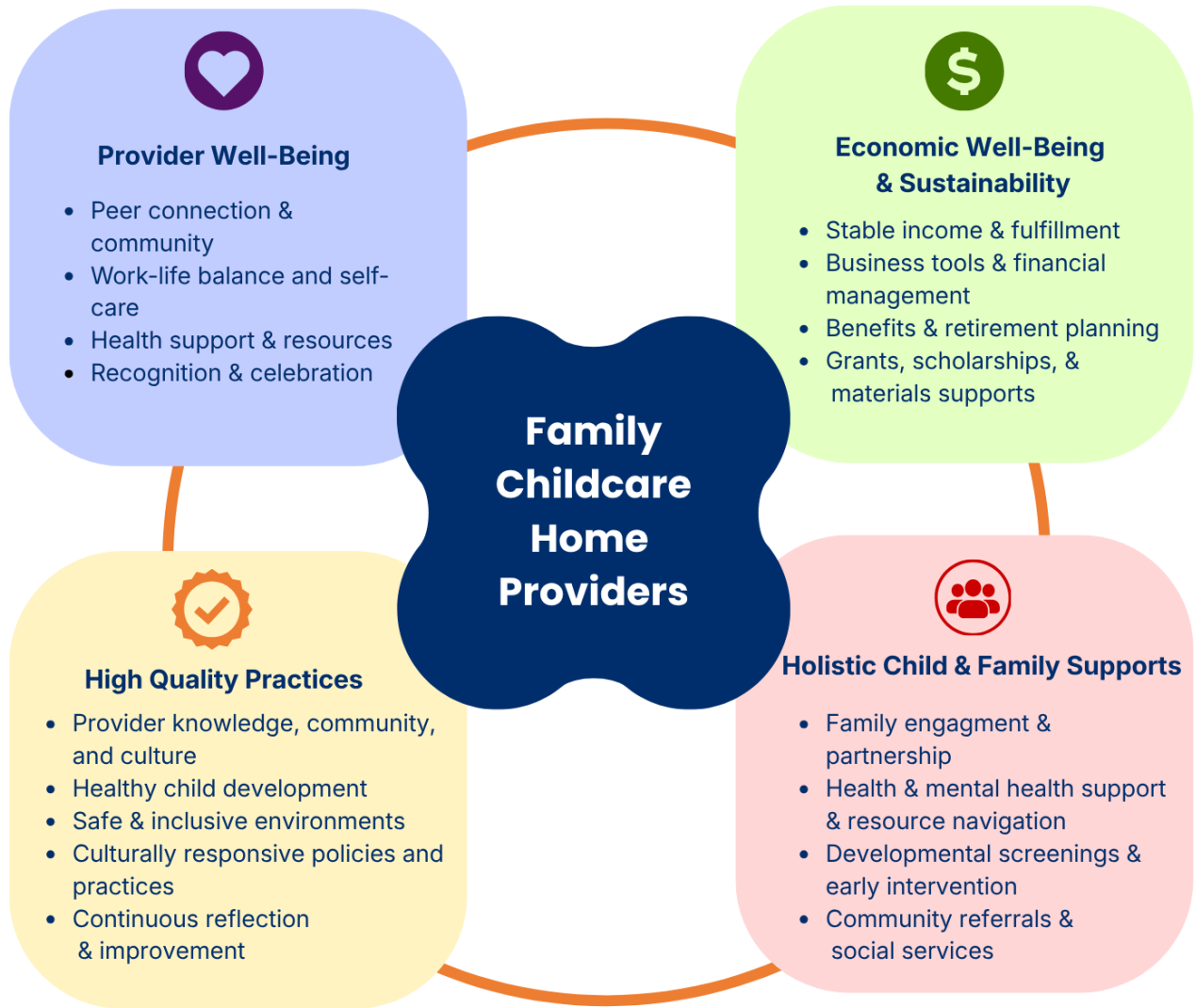
Networks as Advocates and Connectors: A Brainstorm

Purpose: To explore how strong networks support Family Child Care Home Providers and contribute to provider well-being, economic sustainability, high-quality practices, and holistic child and family support.

Directions: Review the graphic on page 20 of this toolkit and individually reflect and respond to the following prompts.

Which of the four support areas feels strongest in your current network?	
Which area could benefit from additional advocacy or connections?	
What people, organizations, or resources currently help support providers in these areas?	
What gaps or unmet needs do you notice?	

Networks as Advocates and Connectors



Building a Culture of Well-Being and Support



We honor provider identity, culture, & lived experiences



We listen, learn, & reflect together



We build trust through respectful, ongoing relationships



We support healing, joy, & belonging



We grow stronger together for children, families, & communities

STRONG PROVIDERS. SUPPORTED FAMILIES. THRIVING CHILDREN. VIBRANT COMMUNITIES.

The Wellness Blueprint: From Me to We

Building a Culture of Wellness from the Ground Up

Use this tool to capture key insights and plan how you will apply what you have learned about wellness in your daily life and work.

SECTION 1 | WHAT IS WELLNESS?

"Wellness is not a 'medical fix' but a way of living — a lifestyle sensitive and responsive to all the dimensions of health: body, mind, spirit, and community."
— Bill Hettler, National Wellness Institute

Definition of Wellness

Wellness is dynamic physical, mental, social-emotional, and cultural well-being. It emerges when individuals focus on key factors within their control — biology, environment, lifestyle, and healthcare and can cope with normal life stressors, work productively, and contribute to their community(ies) (APA Dictionary of Psychology, 2023; Ruggari et al., 2020).

Key Concepts to Remember

- Wellness is multidimensional and a continuous journey, not a destination
- Individual dimensions are interconnected and influence one another
- Each person’s journey is unique to their values, needs, and circumstances
- Small, consistent actions create long-term wellbeing

✦ Reflection

In your own words, how do you define wellness? What does it mean to you personally?

SECTION 2 | THE EIGHT DIMENSIONS OF WELLNESS (Swarbrick, 1997)

The Eight Dimensions of Wellness model recognizes that wellbeing encompasses multiple interconnected aspects of a person's life. Review each dimension, then rate yourself and identify a personal action step.

Dimension	Definition & Key Elements
 1. Emotional	The ability to understand and acknowledge, express, and manage emotions while coping with everyday stress. This includes recognizing your feelings while maintaining a positive outlook.
 2. Physical	Prioritizing regular physical activity, balanced nutrition, adequate sleep, and preventive healthcare.
 3. Social	Building and nurturing meaningful relationships, developing a sense of connection, belonging, and a well-developed support network.
 4. Intellectual	Engaging in stimulating mental activities, expanding knowledge, embracing creativity, and openness to new ideas and experiences.
 5. Spiritual	Seeking meaning and purpose in life, living by one's values and beliefs, and experiencing a sense of peace and inner harmony.
 6. Occupational	Finding personal satisfaction, enrichment, and meaning through work. It includes work-life balance, using your skills, and finding purpose in your career.
 7. Environmental	Respecting and protecting the natural world, and creating safe, clean, and stimulating living and working environments that support wellbeing.
 8. Financial	Managing financial resources effectively to reduce stress, support life goals, and achieve financial security, stability, and preparedness.

✦ Reflection

Looking across all eight dimensions, which dimension do you feel MOST balanced in — and why? Which dimension needs the most attention right now?

SECTION 3 | CREATING A CULTURE OF WELLNESS

A culture of wellness exists when an organization's values, practices, and environment actively support the physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing of all its people. It goes beyond programs — it is embedded in leadership behavior, policies, and everyday norms.

Core Elements of a Wellness Culture

Organizational Factors

- Visible leadership commitment to wellbeing
- Policies that support work-life balance
- Safe, inclusive, and psychologically healthy environments
- Accessible wellness resources and programs
- Reduced stigma around mental health
- Recognition and reward of healthy behaviors

Individual & Team Factors

- Personal accountability for one's own wellbeing
- Peer support, encouragement, and community
- Open conversations about stress, burnout, and boundaries
- Modeling healthy habits at all levels of the organization
- Encouraging help-seeking without judgment
- Celebrating wellness successes and milestones

◆ Reflection

What does your current workplace culture do well to support wellness? Where do you see gaps or opportunities for improvement?

→ Action Planning

What is ONE thing you could do personally, or advocate for, to strengthen the culture of wellness in your team or organization?

SECTION 4 | MY WELLNESS COMMITMENT

Learning is most powerful when it leads to action. Use this section to make a personal commitment to how you will apply your wellness learning going forward.

START	STOP	CONTINUE
What will I begin doing to support my wellness?	What will I stop doing that harms my wellness?	What am I already doing well that I will keep doing?

My 30-Day Wellness Goal

One specific, meaningful goal I will commit to over the next 30 days:

Goal:

How will I measure progress?

How will I keep my goal at the forefront of my mind and work?

Who will support me?

Provider Business Sustainability & Systems Navigation

How to Use This Tool

Review each reflection area and identify where your organization currently falls along the continuum. Evidence may vary across providers, service areas, or regions. Use the reflection questions to identify opportunities for growth and priorities for action planning.

Facilitate Providers' Access to Benefits

Reflection Questions

- How do providers access time off without losing income or disrupting care?
- What support exists to help providers plan for long-term financial security?
- How does the network address provider well-being and sustainability?

Emerging	Developing	Leading
Providers are largely responsible for finding their own substitutes and navigating benefits independently.	The network provides information, referrals, or occasional support related to substitutes, retirement planning, or provider benefits.	The network has structured systems such as substitute pools, paid substitute support, retirement planning assistance, benefits navigation, and proactive wellness supports.

Evidence of Current Practice:

What would moving to the next level look like?

Help Providers Maintain Full Enrollment

Reflection Questions

- How are providers supported in attracting and retaining families?
- What systems are in place to fill vacancies quickly?
- How are families connected to available HBCC options?

Emerging	Developing	Leading
Providers are primarily responsible for recruitment and marketing on their own.	The network provides marketing resources, occasional referrals, or training on enrollment strategies.	Dedicated systems actively track vacancies, recruit families, maintain referral networks, and provide ongoing enrollment support.

Evidence of Current Practice:

What would moving to the next level look like?

Supports Business Operations and Financial Management

Reflection Questions

- How are providers supported in managing revenues and expenses?
- What business management tools and resources are available?
- How does the network strengthen providers' financial sustainability?

Emerging	Developing	Leading
Business support is informal, limited, or available only upon request.	The network offers training or technical assistance on budgeting, taxes, recordkeeping, or business practices.	Providers receive comprehensive business supports including coaching, software support, financial analysis, tax preparation resources, and back-office assistance.

Evidence of Current Practice:

What would moving to the next level look like?

Supports Management of Family Expectations

Reflection Questions

- How are providers supported in communicating policies and expectations to families?
- What tools help providers address payment, attendance, and service expectations?
- How are difficult conversations with families supported?

Emerging	Developing	Leading
Providers develop policies and communication practices independently.	Templates, training, or technical assistance are available to support provider-family communication.	Providers receive ongoing coaching, tools, and peer support to establish strong family partnerships and clear expectations.

Evidence of Current Practice:

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What would moving to the next level look like?

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Supports Consistent and Reliable Payments

Reflection Questions

- How are providers supported in collecting fees and subsidy payments?
- What systems reduce payment delays and administrative burden?
- How does the network help stabilize provider income?

Emerging	Developing	Leading
Providers independently manage billing, collections, and subsidy processes.	The network provides guidance, training, or limited assistance related to payments and billing.	The network actively manages or supports billing, subsidy processing, co-pay collection, and financial tracking systems.

Evidence of Current Practice:

What would moving to the next level look like?

Offsets Business Costs Through Financial and Material Supports

Reflection Questions

- How does the network reduce barriers to entry and sustainability?
- What financial or material supports are available?
- How are providers connected to grants, scholarships, or emergency resources?

Emerging	Developing	Leading
Providers are expected to independently cover most business-related expenses.	Some financial assistance, scholarships, materials, or resource referrals are available.	The network maintains robust systems of financial assistance, startup supports, emergency funds, bulk purchasing opportunities, and material resources.

Evidence of Current Practice:

What would moving to the next level look like?

Supports Navigation of Regulatory Systems

Reflection Questions

- How are providers supported in understanding and meeting regulatory requirements?
- How does the network help providers respond to policy changes?
- What support exists to navigate licensing, subsidy, CACFP, QIS, and other systems?

Emerging	Developing	Leading
Providers largely navigate regulatory systems independently.	Training, updates, and technical assistance are available to support compliance.	The network provides proactive, comprehensive support including coaching, pre-inspections, policy updates, toolkits, and advocacy assistance.

Evidence of Current Practice:

What would moving to the next level look like?

Supports Provider Advocacy and Leadership

Reflection Questions

- How are providers encouraged to share their voice and influence policy?
- What opportunities exist to build advocacy and leadership skills?
- How are providers engaged in systems change efforts?

Emerging	Developing	Leading
Advocacy opportunities are limited or occur only when external opportunities arise.	Providers receive information about advocacy opportunities and may participate in selected activities.	The network intentionally develops provider leaders, builds advocacy skills, and creates structured opportunities to influence policy and systems change.

Evidence of Current Practice:

What would moving to the next level look like?

So Now What?

Priority Growth Areas

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

My 30-Day Provider Business Sustainability Goal

Goal:

How will I measure progress?

How will I keep my goal at the forefront of my mind and work?

Who will support me?

Provider Wellness & Support Navigator

A resource guide to support provider well-being, professional growth, and career advancement aligned to Benchmark D standards

How to Use this Guide

This navigator is organized by support category. Each entry includes a description, Connecticut-specific resources and links, and the Benchmark D descriptor it addresses. Network staff can use this guide to:

- Identify services already in place and gaps to address
- Connect individual providers to relevant resources
- Document service offerings for Benchmark D self-assessment
- Share relevant sections with providers seeking specific support

WELL-BEING & STRESS REDUCTION

Self-Care & Stress Reduction

Family childcare work is demanding. Networks can offer regular self-care workshops, mindfulness sessions, and stress reduction trainings specifically designed for home-based providers juggling caregiving with running a small business.

Connecticut OEC Provider Resources: www.ctoec.org

Mind & Movement (free mindfulness tools): www.freemindfulness.org

Educational Advancement & Lifelong Learning

Networks can partner with local adult education programs to help providers improve their English skills, earn their GED, or strengthen foundational literacy and numeracy — all of which support professional growth and confidence.

CT Adult Education Programs (SDE): portal.ct.gov/sde/services/adult-education

Find local ESL/GED providers (211 CT): uwc.211ct.org/adult-education

GED registration and resources: www.GED.com

PEER CONNECTION & COMMUNITY

Peer Support & Social Networking

Isolation is one of the top challenges for home-based providers. Networks can facilitate monthly peer support circles, seasonal social events, and virtual meetups where providers share challenges, strategies, and encouragement.

CT Childcare Networks & Technical Assistance: ctoec.org — Professional Development & TA

Professional Development Planning

For providers who want to advance, networks can offer one-on-one professional development planning sessions to help providers map out next steps — whether that's a new credential, a different role, or higher education — with realistic timelines.

CT Early Childhood Professional Registry: oecregistry.org

→ Individualized Professional Development Plans available through the Registry

Provider Employment & Consulting Roles

One of the most meaningful career advancement opportunities is becoming a paid coach, mentor, or trainer within the network itself. Experienced providers bring irreplaceable expertise — networks can hire them as staff, consultants, or peer coaches.

OEC Technical Assistance Provider Application: <https://www.ctoec.org/oec-approved-trainer/>

ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT

Paperwork, Recordkeeping & Billing Help

Administrative paperwork — from OEC licensing renewals to Care4Kids billing — can overwhelm providers. Networks can offer dedicated staff support, templates, digital tools, and one-on-one sessions to reduce this burden significantly.

Care4Kids Provider Portal: ctcare4kids.com

OEC 360 Provider Portal: portal.ct.gov/oec/oec360

OEC Licensing Information: ctoec.org/licensing

HEALTH & MENTAL HEALTH

Health & Mental Health Resource Referrals

Networks can partner with local health centers, telehealth providers, and Employee Assistance Program-style resources to connect providers with affordable physical and mental health care, including therapy, primary care, and dental referrals.

CT Community Health Centers (CHCACT): chcact.org

CT Dept. of Mental Health & Addiction Services: portal.ct.gov/DMHAS

CT Mental Health Resources (state portal): health.ct.gov/mental-health-help

211 CT — Health & Human Services Referrals: 211ct.org

LEGAL & SOCIAL SERVICES

Legal Aid & Family Support Referrals

Many home-based providers face legal or family stressors that affect their ability to work — immigration concerns, housing instability, custody issues, or consumer debt. Networks can maintain a vetted referral list and help providers navigate these systems.

Connecticut Legal Services (statewide): ctlegal.org

CT Institute for Refugees & Immigrants (CIRI): cirict.org

Greater Hartford Legal Aid: ghla.org

CT Coalition to End Homelessness: cceh.org

211 CT — Find Local Social Services: 211ct.org

CREDENTIALS & HIGHER EDUCATION

CDA Credential Support

CDA is a critical credential for family childcare providers. Networks can help providers choose the right pathway, connect with advisors, apply for TEACH or OEC scholarship support, and navigate the full credentialing process.

Council for Professional Recognition (CDA): cdacouncil.org

CT OEC Scholarship Assistance (via Registry): oecregistry.org — Scholarships & Training

TEACH Early Childhood CT Scholarships: connecticut.teach.org/aid

Foreign Degree Verification

Many providers earned degrees in their home countries that are not automatically recognized in CT. Networks can connect providers with credential evaluation services and help them understand how their education aligns with CT's professional registry levels.

CT SDE Foreign Credentials Page: portal.ct.gov/SDE/Certification/Foreign-Credentials

World Education Services (WES): wes.org

Educational Credential Evaluators (ECE): ece.org

Higher Education Navigation

Networks can connect providers with community college advisors, help them understand transfer pathways, apply for financial aid, and access CT's early childhood higher education pipeline — all while continuing to run their programs.

CT State Community Colleges (CSCU): ct.edu

Charter Oak State College (flexible degrees): charteroak.edu

Goodwin University Early Childhood Programs: <https://www.goodwin.edu/enews/early-childhood-education-degree-options/>

Federal Student Aid (FAFSA): studentaid.gov

Connecticut Office of Early Childhood: ctoec.org • OEC Registry: oecregistry.org • 211 CT: 211ct.org

Toolkit Two Conclusion

The services a network offers are where its values become real for providers, children, and families. Toolkit Two has centered the "What" of high-quality home-based childcare networks—the concrete supports that move a network from good intentions to meaningful, measurable impact. Grounded in Benchmarks D through G, the resources in this toolkit are designed to help Connecticut networks build a service array that is coherent, culturally grounded, and outcome driven.

Across these four benchmarks, a common thread emerges: strong services are not isolated programs but interconnected supports that reinforce one another. When a network nurtures provider well-being (Benchmark D), it strengthens the foundation providers need to sustain their work overtime. When it supports economic stability and business sustainability (Benchmark E), it protects the financial viability that makes quality care possible. When it builds on providers' existing knowledge and community-embedded practices (Benchmark F), it honors their expertise while advancing positive outcomes for children. And when it extends holistic services to children and families (Benchmark G), it recognizes that providers are often a family's most trusted connection to the broader systems of support they need.

Together, these services form a model of care that is greater than the sum of its parts. This toolkit is not a compliance checklist or a rating instrument. It is a guide for reflection, planning, and continuous improvement. The reflection tools, resource navigators, and practical guides included here are meant to meet your network where it is—whether you are designing services for the first time, strengthening what already exists, or identifying gaps to address next. Some networks will engage every resource; others will focus on the benchmarks and indicators most relevant to their current priorities and capacity. Both paths are valid. What matters is that service design is intentional, responsive to provider voice, and aligned with clearly defined outcomes for providers, children, and families.

As you move forward, consider how the services you offer connect back to the values and governance explored in Toolkit One and the implementation systems addressed in Toolkit Three. High-quality networks require alignment across all three domains. The work of designing strong services is ongoing, iterative, and shaped by the providers and families you serve. By approaching it with intention, equity, and a commitment to continuous improvement, your network can deliver not just isolated support, but a sustainable, equitable, and high-quality system of care that strengthens family childcare homes across Connecticut.

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