



The Early Childhood Experience Center

Initial Concept

FEBRUARY 2015



Context



Over the last decade, the methods used to influence public policy have undergone significant innovation at the hands of well-resourced organizations with high-stakes agendas.

Fortune 100 companies have developed **EXPERIENCE CENTERS**, often located steps from the U.S. Capitol that contain sophisticated interactive exhibits where policymakers experience company products.

In one 30-minute tour, policymakers learn about a company's positive impact on job creation, the environment, consumer safety, and other salient policy areas. Tours are guided by government relations staff, who relate the experiences back to the company's policy agenda.

When influencing policy, such tools place those who advocate for the well-being of children at a significant disadvantage compared to their well-resourced peers.

Vision: A National Focus



To afford those who advocate on behalf of children a tool to promote policies that support child and family well-being, the Early Childhood Experience Center will be an interactive exhibit located on Capitol Hill.

THE EARLY CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCE CENTER will include policy-relevant experiences chosen and created using an established methodology grounded in cognitive science. Experiences will highlight the latest advances in brain development and child health, the relationship between early experiences and later life outcomes, the importance of family engagement and economic security, the return on early childhood investments, and the strengths and weaknesses of current U.S. early childhood policies. It will also contain state-by-state statistics and testimonials from key Congressional districts.

In addition, the Experience Center will be used as a training center for early childhood advocates, as a resource center for policymakers and philanthropists, and as a recruiting tool to encourage the country's brightest students to enter the early childhood field.

Vision: A Community Focus



The Early Childhood Experience Center will also have a mobile component that will take key early childhood messages to communities across the country.

THE MOBILE EXPERIENCE will be a set of traveling exhibits that allow the key messages of the Early Childhood Experience Center to be deployed to advocates in communities across the country, maximizing the impact at the state and local levels. This mobile experience will:

- Set the agenda for key 2016 national and state elections by educating candidates and stakeholders about the importance of early childhood.
- Expand the reach of the Early Childhood Experience Center to state capitals when important state-level early childhood policies are considered.
- Travel to under-resourced areas such as impoverished communities and tribal lands to ensure that early childhood initiatives and investments are incorporated into community development and rebuilding efforts.

Objectives



The Early Childhood Experience Center will:

- Move from one-dimensional descriptions of early childhood policy issues to persuasive arguments for policy change that can be seen and experienced by policymakers.
- Be a consistent force for comprehensive early childhood policy reform among an ever-changing set of policymakers.
- Offer practical, individualized policy arguments and solutions tailored to the specific audience experiencing the center.
- Bring the research to life, presenting potential outcomes of various early childhood environments and interventions.
- Demonstrate how the cumulative effects of early experiences contribute to the dramatic disparities in school readiness and how they predict future academic, social, and health outcomes across the lifespan.
- Weave a narrative that integrates the multiple arguments for the importance of early childhood into one story that can be used to inform the development of a comprehensive, integrated early childhood system.

Audience



There are four primary audiences for the Early Childhood Experience Center:



Educating Policymakers



The Early Childhood Experience Center will focus on federal and state policymakers, who have the opportunity to influence the lives of millions of children and their families and represent the best hope for systemic change.

THE EXPERIENCE CENTER will take a centrist approach that acknowledges the political realities policymakers face. It will also reveal that those who advocate on behalf of the early care and education of America's children are well-informed, clear on their messaging, and a politically powerful constituency.

Policymakers familiar with the importance of the early childhood years and who may believe they've "heard all the arguments" will be given a fresh perspective and new inspiration in supporting this cause. Policymakers new to the conversation will be introduced to the science of early child development and the research regarding the long-term economic impact of high-quality early care and education.

Supporting Advocates



The fragmented nature of the early childhood system has created an early childhood advocacy community where groups compete for limited funds and a discussion of comprehensive reform is nearly impossible.

THE EARLY CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCE CENTER will serve as a tool for those who advocate on behalf of early care and education, but will not represent one singular point of view. Instead, the Experience Center will bring the field together by weaving a narrative that outlines the importance and collective influence of multiple programs and policies. Advocates will more effectively be able to leverage comprehensive changes in funding and policies by increasing policymakers' understanding of the early childhood landscape as a whole.

Recruiting Practitioners



Early childhood educators are the “point of impact” for early learning. The research indicates that teacher–child interactions are the primary mechanism through which early care and education programs produce positive child outcomes.

THE EXPERIENCE CENTER will bring to life the important role and responsibility that early care and education providers have in supporting the future success of America. For current early childhood practitioners who visit the Experience Center, the experiences will validate the important work that they do to sustain our country's place of leadership on the world stage. For those considering the field of early childhood, the experiences will highlight the important impact they can have on children, families, and the country through a career in early childhood education.

Engaging Philanthropy & Business Leaders



Each year, individual philanthropists and corporate foundations provide millions of dollars in grants to support the education, health, and well-being of our youngest children.

THE EARLY CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCE CENTER will engage philanthropists, corporate foundations, and business leaders in conversation regarding the benefits of funding and advocating for high-quality early care and education. For those organizations and individuals already actively promoting early childhood, the Experience Center will serve as a tool to amplify their message. It will also draw new funders into the early childhood space by presenting the compelling case for the value of investing in high-quality early childhood education.

Takeaways



This will take my leadership. We either pay for this now, or pay as a society for decades to come.

I didn't know there was a need this big in my home district. Why haven't I heard it this clearly before?

I had no idea how much was happening so early in a child's brain and body, and how much it impacts who they become.

This is going to be an electoral issue.

Now I better understand why we need to reform the early childhood system.

Those who advocate for early care and education are politically powerful, well-funded, innovative, and sophisticated in their approach to advocacy.

There will be consequences for me politically and for our country if I fail to act after experiencing this.

Story Line



Childhood is not an adventure we choose.

It is chosen for us, by people and policies familiar and forever unknown.

DETERMINED BY FATE ALONE, we are born into a world of unknown challenges and circumstances we do not control. Although our brains and bodies begin life ready for any number of possibilities and hold nearly unlimited potential, who we become is ultimately shaped by a complex relationship with the environments we experience. The trajectory that is set for us during the early years often predicts our future course in life.

Although childhood is universal, children's early environments and experiences are not. Some children encounter minor bumps in the road while others face major obstacles. How children develop and learn in light of these circumstances is determined by the quality and richness of the support they receive from adults and policies, both familiar and forever unknown.

Chapter 1

Prenatal–I’m 18 months



My brain and body are adapting to the world even before I’m born.

Chapter 1 sets the stage for the overall experience, revealing how critically interdependent the ecosystem of early childhood is in preparing a child for a lifetime of learning and development. Common themes introduced here will be repeated throughout the Experience Center, highlighting developmental milestones, the interplay of environment and development, and the role of language in influencing development.

This chapter also explores a child’s amazing capacity for adaptation even before birth. This plasticity allows brain and body development to be responsive to the environmental conditions into which a child is born. We will demonstrate that although children are born with nearly unlimited potential, signals from their environment ultimately shape how development unfolds. We will address issues related to prenatal care, caregiver mental health, nutrition, activity-dependent stimulation, and language development.



Participants physically enter a space simulating a child’s brain and experience the inner workings of how our brains respond to both positive and negative environments and caregiver interactions, as well as how these interactions affect the brain’s foundational “wiring.”

Chapter 2

I'm 18 months–I'm 3



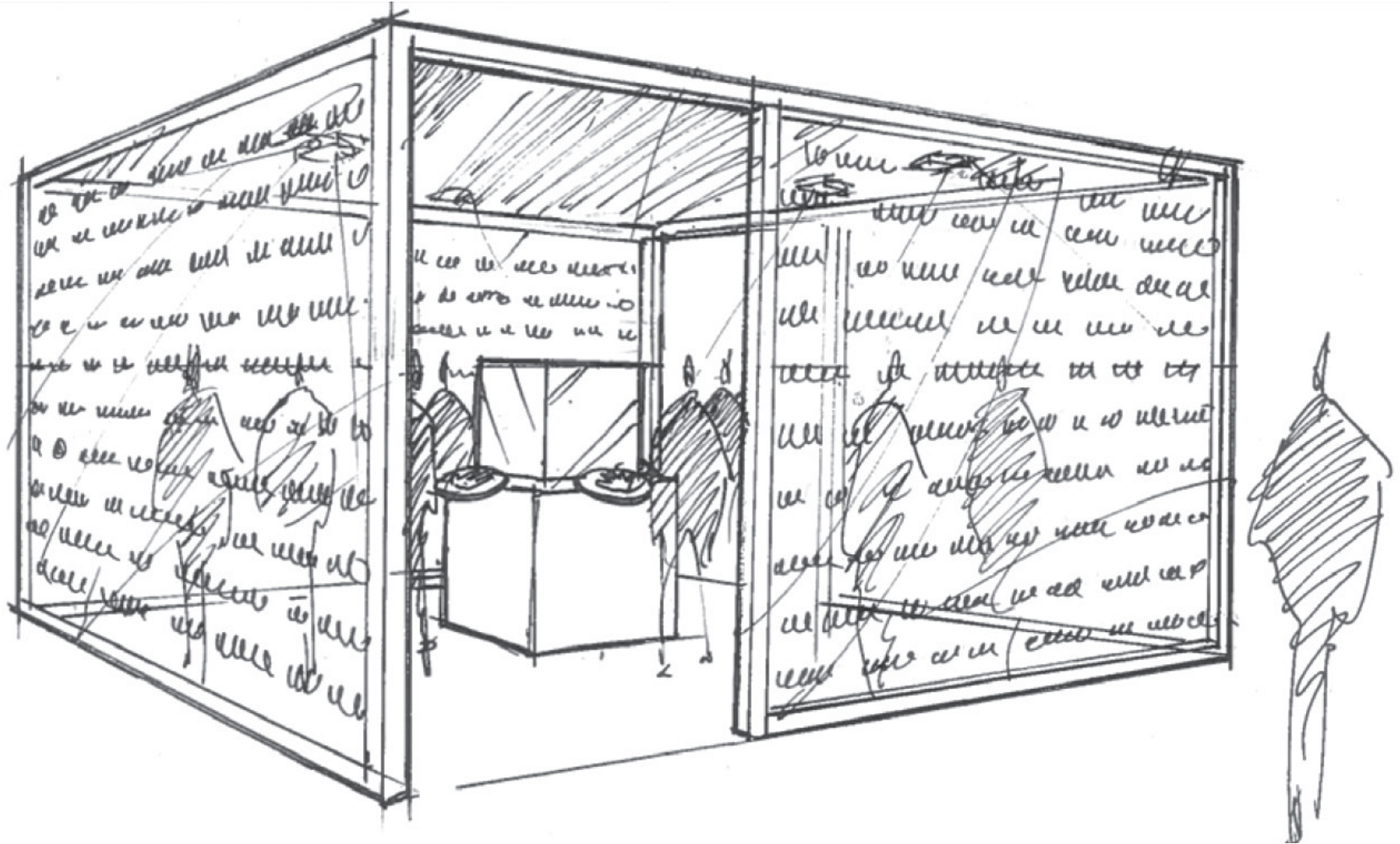
Early experiences and relationships matter because my brain is building connections rapidly.

Children's environments play a critical role in building the foundations of later development. Participants will experience how both supportive and toxic environmental conditions can influence children's brain development, behavioral patterns, social-emotional competence, and long-term health and mental health outcomes.

Participants will be educated on the language gap that emerges among children as early as nine months of age that results from differences in the quality and quantity of language to which children are exposed. Experiences will also highlight the growing body of research that shows the direct relationship between the cumulative number of adverse childhood experiences ("ACEs")—including family conflict, exposure to violence, disruptions in caregiving relationships, and economic hardship—and the likelihood of experiencing negative outcomes later in life, such as heart disease, diabetes, and obesity.



Participants experience how short-term responses to stress can be beneficial for children, whereas chronic exposure to high levels of stress can have a "toxic" effect on children's long-term brain development, capacity to learn, and physical health. A participant's biometrics are measured while being exposed to both soothing and stressful experiences to better understand the impact of stressful environments on the body and brain.



Participants' attention is drawn to the importance of a child's language environment. Projections on the walls immerse the entire room in language and participants learn about how the quality and quantity of language children are exposed to during the first few years of life affects long-term developmental outcomes.



Throughout the Early Childhood Experience Center, participants learn about the dramatic brain development that occurs in the first few years of life and how this development is actively responsive to and is shaped by children's environments and early relationships.

Chapter 3

I'm 3–preschool and beyond

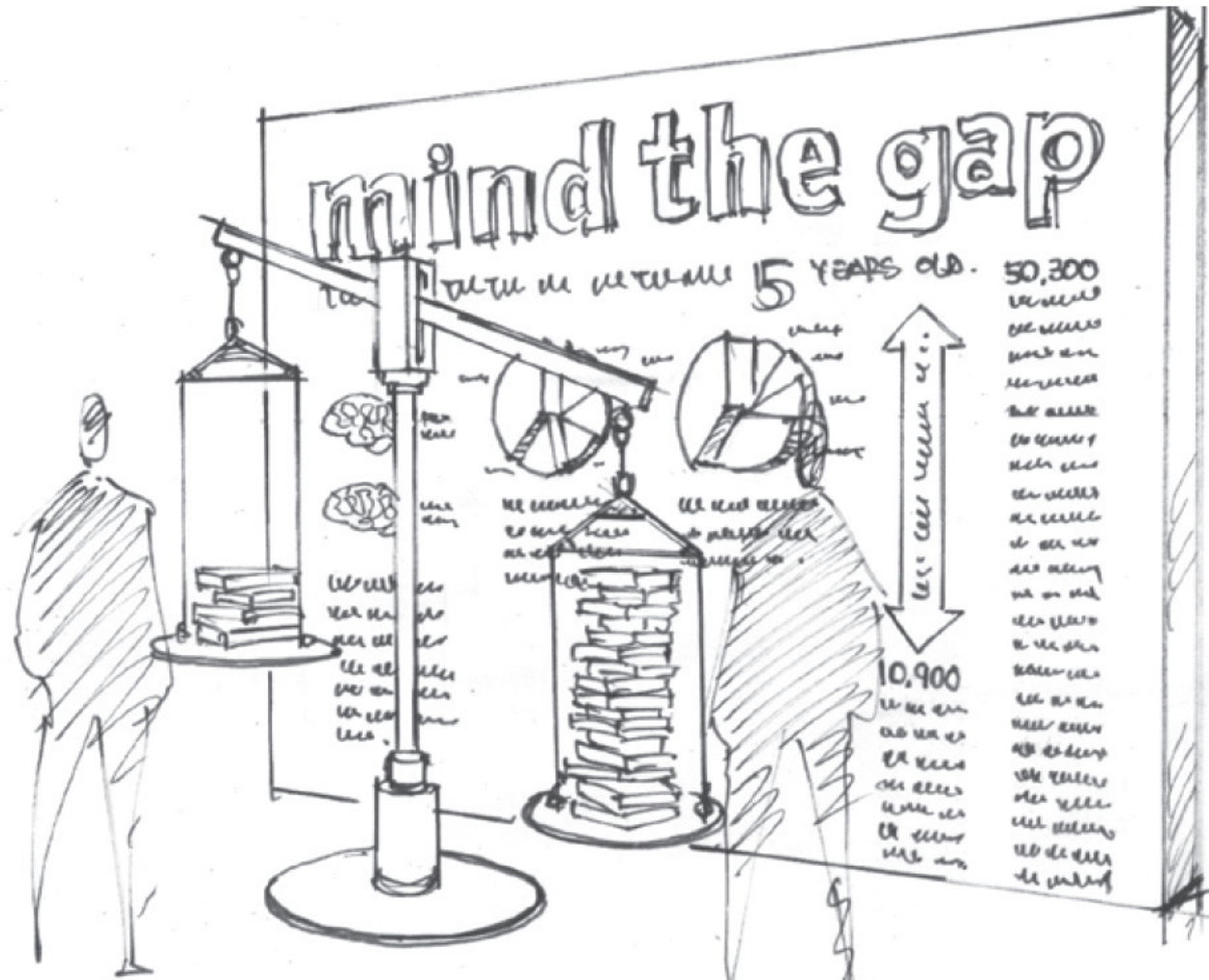


High-quality early care and education can change my future.

We will give participants a simulated side-by-side look at high- and low-quality early childhood environments, reflecting both the physical considerations and the teacher-child interactions within classrooms. We include indicators of the emotional climate, teacher sensitivity, teacher regard for child perspectives, language modeling, and the quality of the teacher's feedback for children. Participants will experience how moving various policy levers such as teacher-child ratios, teacher compensation, and other supports for programs affects the capacity of early childhood providers to offer high-quality experiences. The experiences will also highlight the knowledge, competencies, and skills required of early childhood professionals to achieve high levels of quality and how variations in quality translate into dramatic differences in child outcomes.



The back wall of the Early Childhood Experience Center displays side-by-side high-quality and low-quality classroom environments, which allows participants to experience differences in how each space looks and sounds. Indicators of quality, such as the number of words spoken by both teachers and children, are recorded as the teachers interact with children during typical classroom routines.



Scales are set off to the right-hand side of the classroom. Hanging in the balance on one side is the printed number of words a child in a low-income environment hears (approximately 15 million) by age 3.

On the other side is the number of words a child in a higher income family will hear (approximately 45 million). Participants will be asked to physically lift the scales in order to overcome the weight of the gap, and to experience this deficit for themselves.

Chapter 4

Outcomes

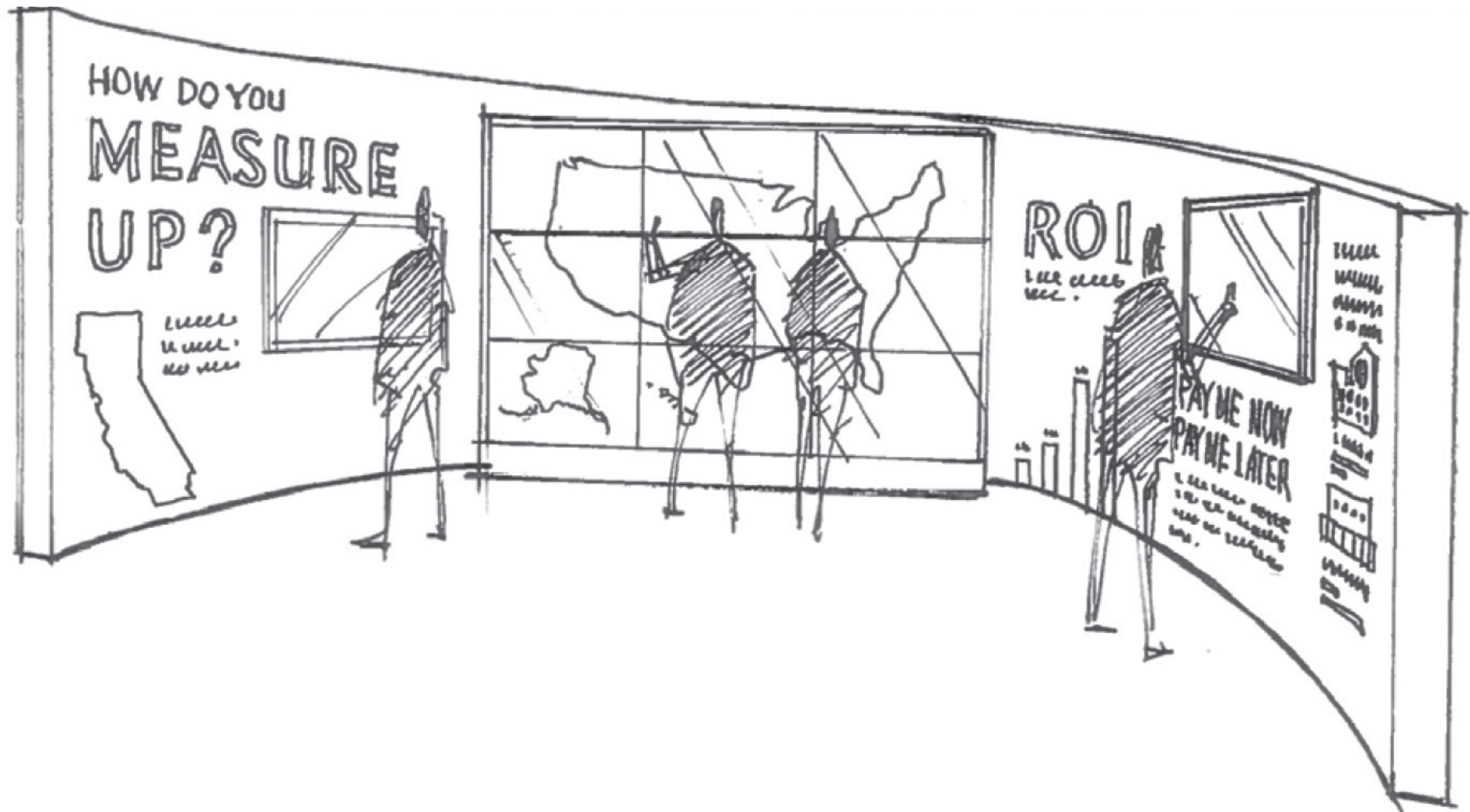


How does my district measure up, and what can I do to improve child and family outcomes?

As participants enter the "outcome space", the screens roll into a set of data ranking the U.S. on either a global scale (as related to other countries regarding early childhood education) or a state-specific ranking (dependent on audience). On the wall is a screen with a large map of the U.S. allowing a participant to discover the reality of young children and their caregivers on the ground in their home district/state.

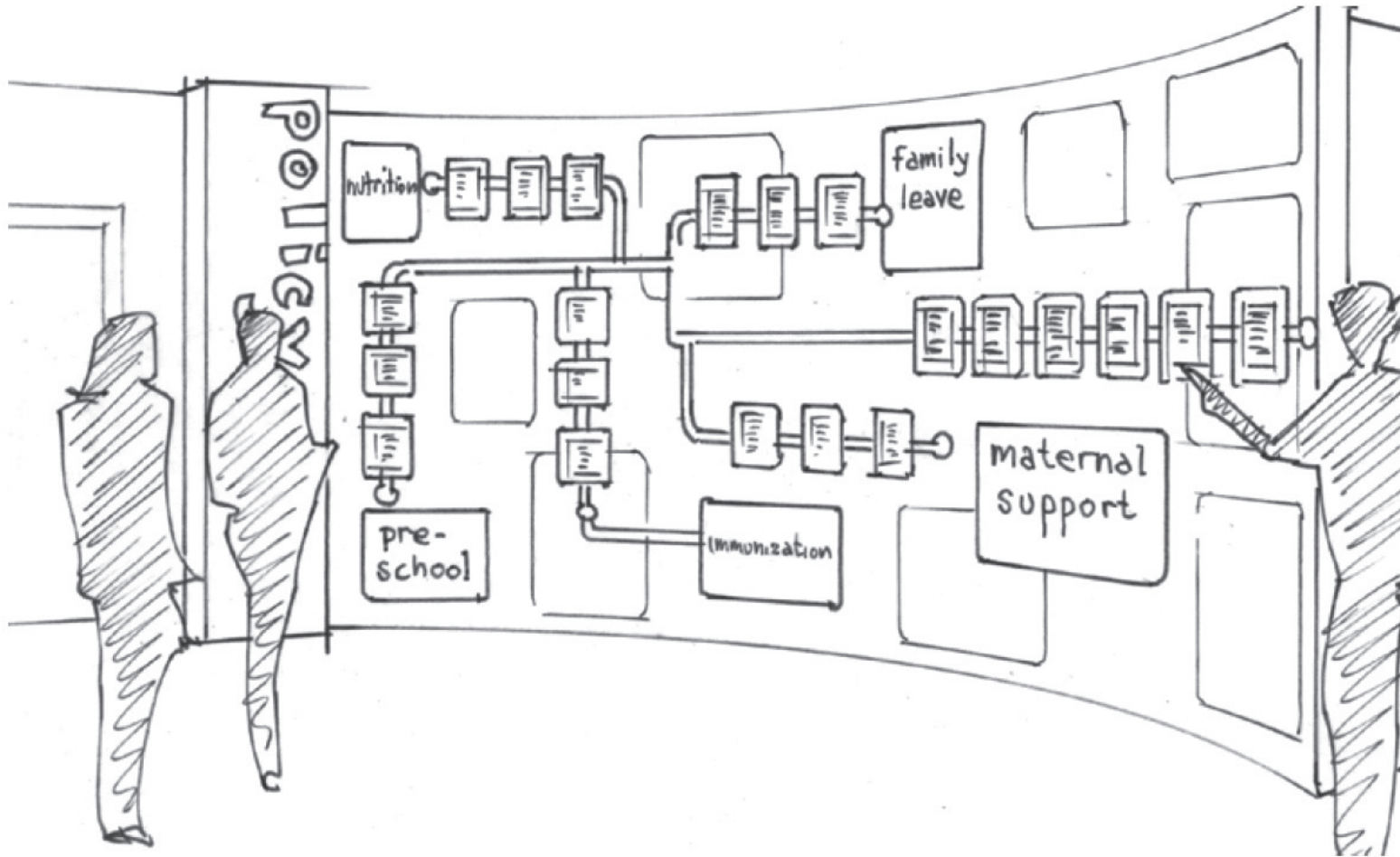


Throughout the Early Childhood Experience Center, participants have learned how early environments and experiences shape children's immediate and long-term development. In the culminating chapter, this information is synthesized with what policy "levers" can be moved to create high-quality, supportive environments for children and families.



Imagine discovering as a policymaker that there are 2,000 children under the age of 5 in your district, but there are only two high-quality early child care facilities there, representing 40 total spots.

This area will also demonstrate the potential short-term and long-term economic return on investment in a policymaker's district, as supported by current research. Business leaders can discover how their investment in early childhood yields economic advantages for the workforce.



This wall represents what comprehensive early childhood policy should cover in America, as described by the Early Childhood Experience Center Advisory Board. Actual bills would be printed and displayed, and certain buckets (e.g., family leave) would be conspicuously empty, demonstrating the need for a more strategic approach to the policy conversation.

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