



Developing Research Questions to Get Answers for Policy and Practice

August 4, 2022

Webinar Series on

Building Your Data and Research Skills to Answer Policy Questions



Housekeeping

- We are recording the webinar.
- We will post the recording, slides, and transcript online.
- All participants are muted.
- Type your **questions** or **comments** into the chat box at any time.

We'll have time for questions and a discussion with our panelists at the end of the webinar.

Child Care Research and Evaluation Capacity Building Center

Supported through the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) in the Administration for Children and Families and managed through a contract with the Urban Institute, in partnership with Mathematica

Alysia Blandon, OPRE project officer

Julia Isaacs, project director; Gretchen Kirby, co-principal investigator

Goal: Assess and build the research and evaluation capacity of Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) Lead Agencies

To learn more, see our [Building Child Care Research Capacity](#) web page

The case for asking the right question

“If I had an hour to solve a problem and my life depended on it, I would use the first 55 minutes determining the proper question to ask, for once I know the proper question, I could solve the problem in less than 5 minutes.”

—*Albert Einstein*

What we will cover

1. What's in a Question? [Heather Zaveri, Mathematica](#)
2. CCDF Agency Experience: Developing Research Questions to Get Answers for Policy or Practice. [Kathryn Kigera, Office of the State Superintendent of Education, District of Columbia](#)
3. Panel discussion with [Heather Zaveri, Kathryn Kigera, and Tonya Williams, Director, Division of Child Care and Early Childhood Education, Arkansas Department of Human Services](#)
4. Your questions

What's in a question?

Developing Strong Research Questions for Policy and Practice



Heather Zaveri

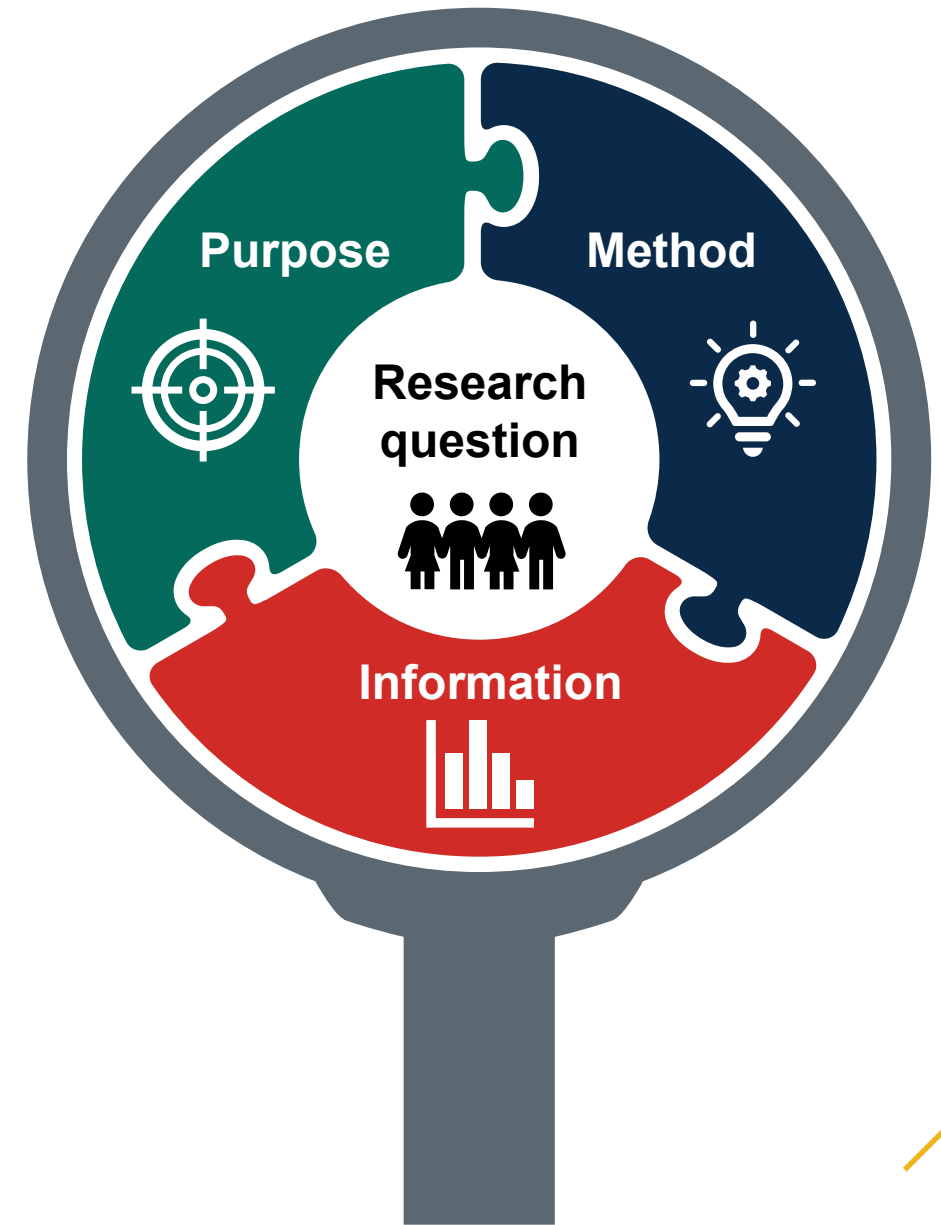
Senior Director of Learning and
Strategy, Human Services,
Mathematica



What is the process for developing research questions?

- / **Pause and reflect on what you want to know, why, and for whom**
- / **Brainstorm a range of topics with staff and partners**
- / **Prioritize based on urgency and likely value to informing program improvement or decision-making**
- / **Assess strength of questions based on the qualities we will discuss; improve as needed!**

A strong research question connects the *purpose* of the research to the *information* and *method* and puts people at the center





Research questions are essential to high-quality research and evaluation



Purpose



What are you trying to do?



Research question



Why is this a key question?



Methods



How can you answer this question?



Information



What information do you have or need to answer it?



Qualities of a strong research question related to *purpose*

Relevant

- Rooted in the interests or needs of the population CCDF serves
- Addresses an issue important to those implementing the program or services

Useful

- Answer would inform decisions or improvements that would help children, families, or providers

Focused

- Focused on a single topic, issue, or problem



Developing a question with purpose: Ask “how might we . . . ?”



Seek or assess solutions to problems

- Attract and support a qualified workforce

Explore assumptions about the need for or provision of services

- Understand the unmet demand for child care for infants and toddlers

Explore or test a change in policy or implementation

- Increase subsidies to help families access quality care

Spark innovation

- Get information to families to help them access and use subsidies



Building strong research questions with *purpose*

/ **Purpose: How might we get information to families to help them access and use subsidies?**

/ **Building your question(s):**

- Example 1: What are ways to get information to families to help them access and use subsidies?

Relevant

- Example 2: What information has been most useful to families who have received subsidies? What do families say confuses them about getting subsidies?

Relevant and useful

- Example 3: What information has been most useful to families with infants who have consistently received subsidies? How and where did they get this information?

Relevant, useful, and focused



Qualities of strong research questions that connect to the *information* you will need and the *method* you will use

Not too simple

- Avoids simple yes/no questions
- Requires you to gather or collect information

Specific

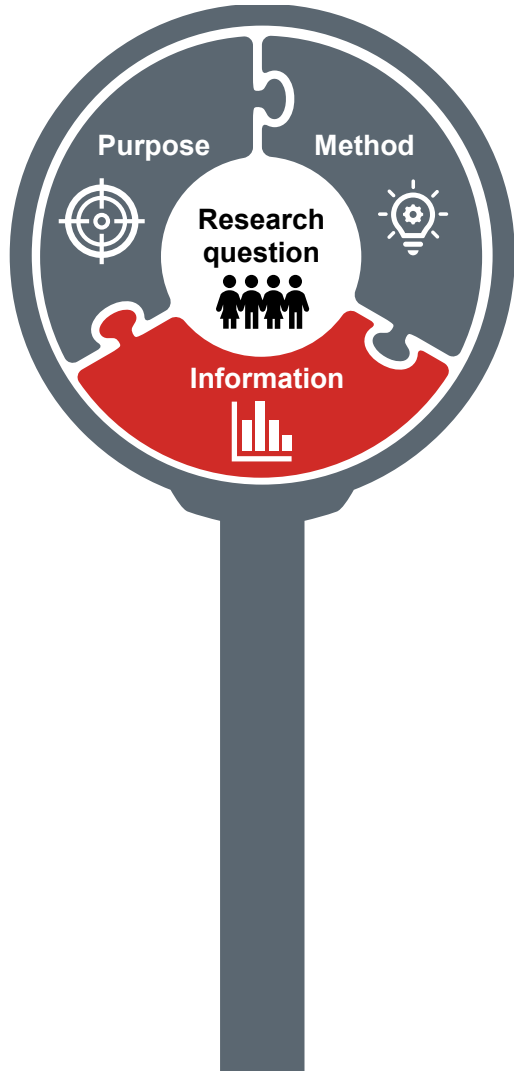
- Connects to clearly defined objectives, outcomes, and time points

Feasible

- Can answer with information collected during the planned period
- Have ability and capacity to analyze the information appropriate to the method



Check research question for feasibility of *information* collection



- How well can the information capture the voices or experiences of those with an interest or investment in the topic?
- How available and easy is it to collect the information?
- How much can the information contribute to refining your program or making decisions?



Building strong research questions that considers *information* you have or can collect

/ **Example question: What information has been most useful to families with infants who have consistently received subsidies? How and where did they get this information?**

✓ **Not too simple**

Specific

— Define outcome and time period: What does “consistently received” mean?
Over what period?

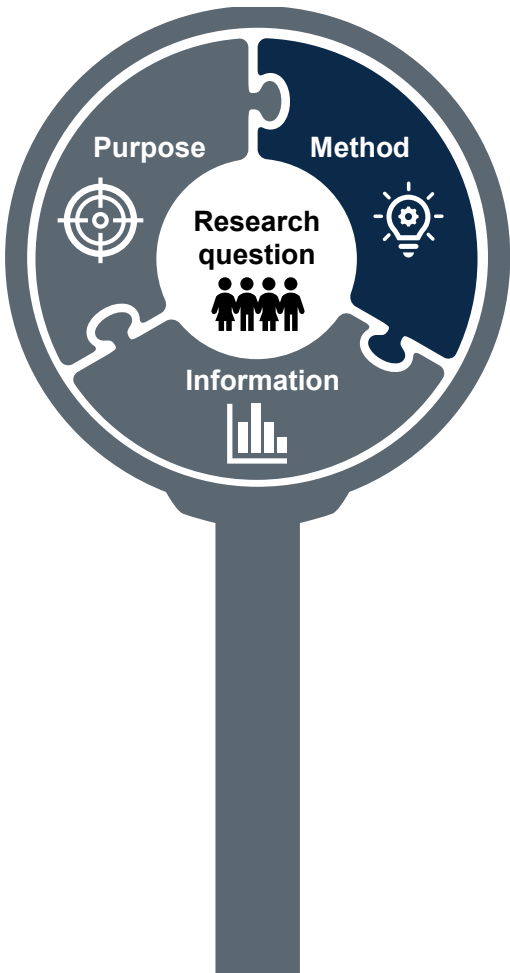
✓ *Improved: What information has been most useful to families with infants who have received subsidies without a break over the past six months?*

? **Feasible for information collection**

- ✓ Information can be collected in reasonable time period
- ✓ Captures voices of families
- ✓ Available or easy to collect information
- ✓ Will information help point to next steps



Construct your question to align with feasibility of your *method* to collect and analyze the information



- / Describing how the program or services are provided and what can be improved
- / Assessing changes in outcomes to identify promising strategies
- / Determining whether a policy change or intervention causes a positive effect



Building strong research questions that considers the *method* you will use

/ Describing services to learn about what can be improved

- Example question 1: What information has been most useful to families with infants who have consistently received subsidies without a break over the past 6 months?

/ Assessing outcomes

- Example question 2: How does consistency in subsidy use over a 6-month period change for families with infants after we introduce tailored help navigating the subsidy system?

/ Determining effect

- Example question 3: How does consistency in subsidy use over a 6-month period for families with infants who receive tailored help navigating the subsidy system compare to families that do not receive this help?



How should we think about equity?

/ High-quality research and evaluation must consider issues related to equity

/ Develop research questions that will allow you to:

- Dig deep—seek to understand more than about the “average” experience
- Understand children, families, and providers with a range of characteristics and experiences

/ Think about:

- Whom a policy or practice will work for and how
- Why a policy or practice might be experienced differently or produce different outcomes for some children, families, or providers but not others
- Whether services are equitably delivered or benefits equitably realized



Building a research question that considers *equity*

/ **Example question: What information has been most useful to families with infants who have consistently received subsidies?**

/ **Addressing equity:**

- What are the characteristics of families with infants who have received subsidies without a break over the past six months?
- How might their experience be different from other families?



Which of the example research questions is stronger?

/ In the chat:

- Identify the question, by number, that you think is the strongest
- Name the qualities you would improve for a question (list the question #)

1. Is there unmet demand for child care slots for infants and toddlers?
2. How do families learn about subsidies and what information do they use to select quality care?
3. How will completion of training and education among teachers in child care centers that receive CCDF subsidies change over the next year with the launch of our new professional development system?

Qualities to look for

- Relevant
- Useful
- Focused
- Not too simple
- Specific
- Feasible



Let's look at the qualities of some example research questions

/ In the chat:

- Name the qualities you see in these research questions
- Name the qualities you think are missing; what would you improve?

What is the difference in costs of center-based care between centers with a low QRIS rating and centers with a high QRIS rating?

How does access to families' care of their choice vary for families that receive subsidies across geographic areas or by race and ethnicity? What are the reasons for the differences?



Questions?

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CCDF Agency Experience: Developing Research Questions to Get Answers for Policy or Practice



Kathryn Kigera

Director of Quality Initiatives
Division of Early Learning,
Office of the State
Superintendent of Education,
District of Columbia



Developing Research Questions to Get Answers for Policy and Practice

Dr. Kathryn Kigera, Director of Quality
Initiatives

Aug. 4, 2022

Agenda

- DC Child Care Landscape
- Development of Research Questions
- Lessons Learned



DC Child Care Landscape

DC Child Care Landscape



488 OSSE
licensed child
development
facilities



105 Home-
based child
development
facilities

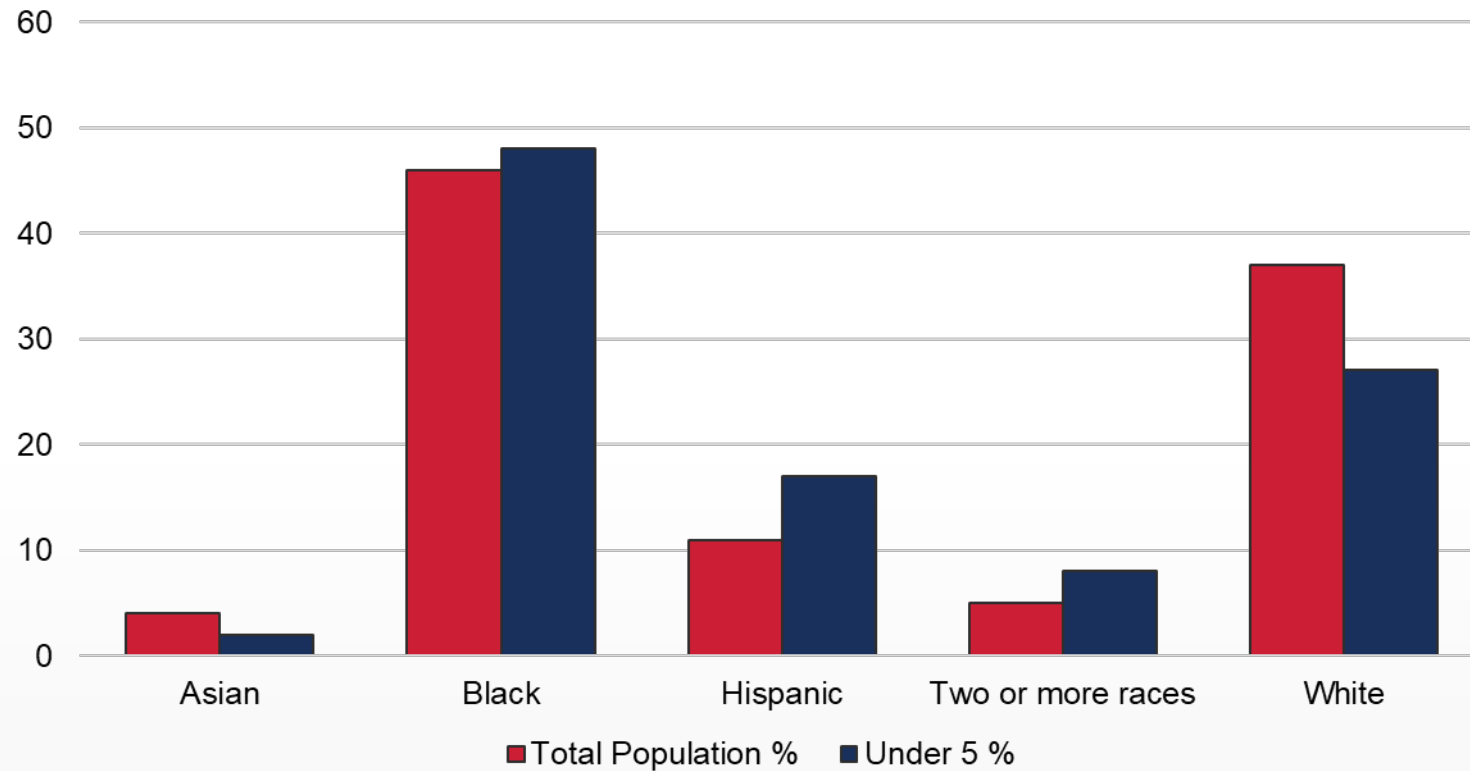


383 Center-
based child
development
facilities



267 Facilities
accepting subsidy
vouchers

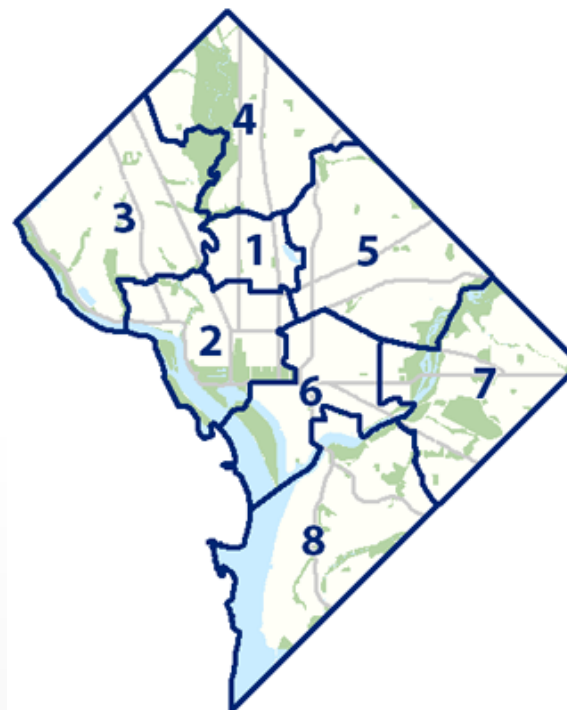
Race/Ethnicity of Total Population and Children Under 5



Note: Groupings with NA or 0% were excluded.
Retrieved from: [Kids Count Data Center, DC](#) and based on 2020 data.

Median Income of Families with Children Ages 0-17 Varies by Ward

Ward	Income
1	\$146,196
2	\$208,900
3	\$250,000+
4	\$130,114
5	\$89,810
6	\$185,142
7	\$41,735
8	\$35,907

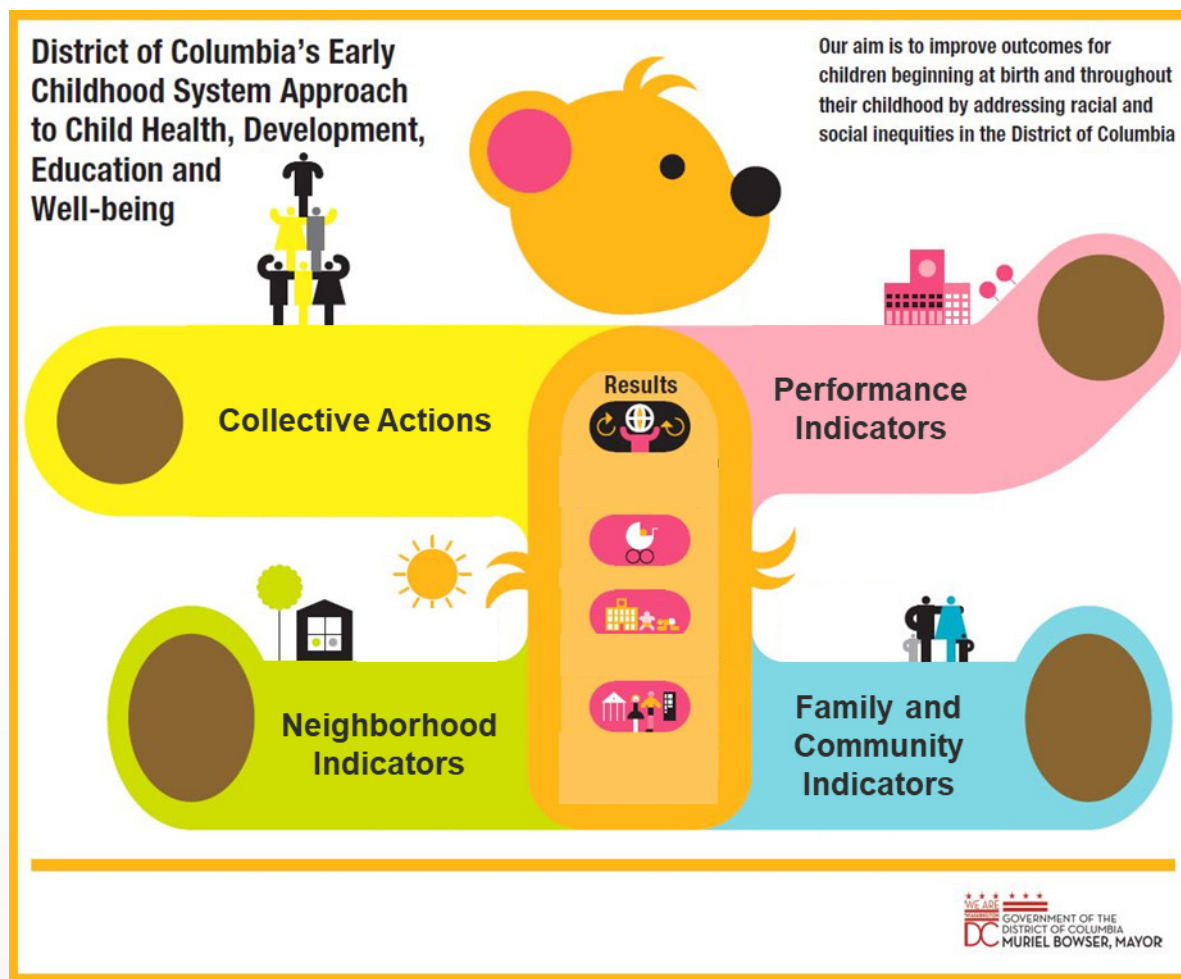


Retrieved from: [Kids Count Data Center, DC](#) and based on 2020 data.

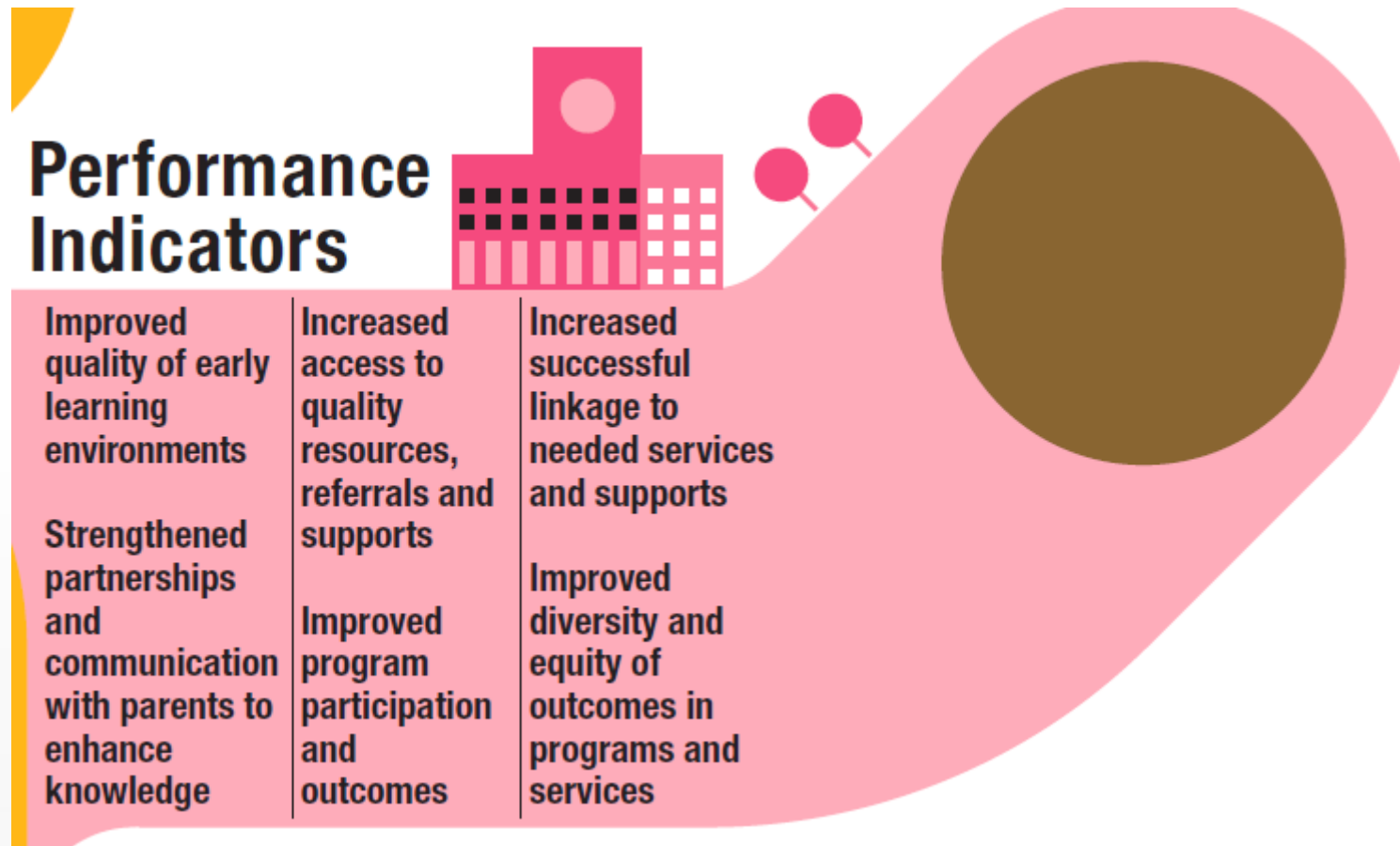


Development of Research Questions

System Approach to Child Health, Development, Education and Well-being



How do we move from the big picture to research questions?



How can OSSE further understand if we are on a path toward meeting performance indicators?

Further understand the implementation and impacts of Capital Quality, DC's quality rating and improvement program

Further understand subsidy innovations and perceived impacts



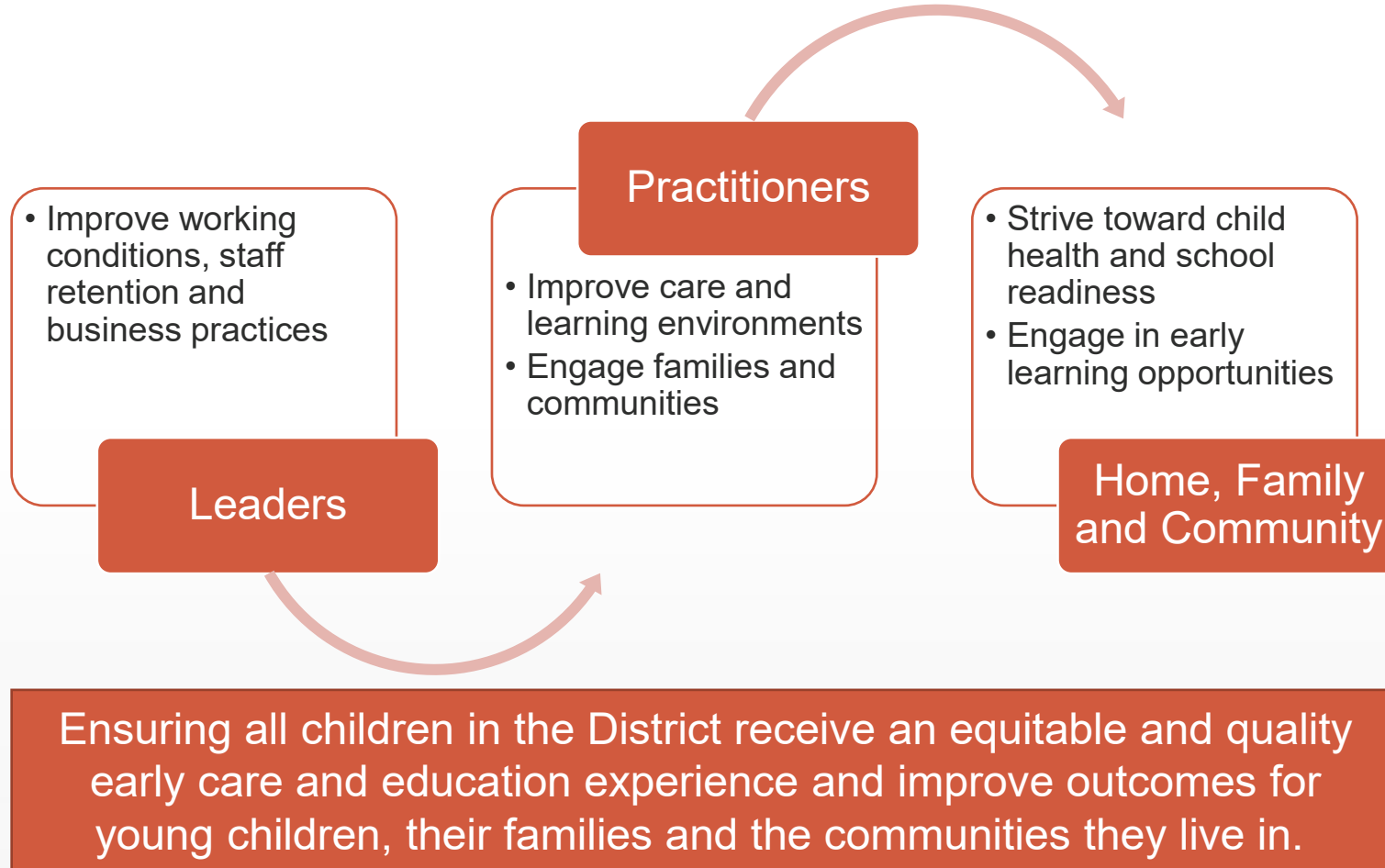
**Example: Development
of Research Questions:
Capital Quality**



What is Capital Quality?

- DC's quality rating and improvement system for child care facilities, piloted in 2016 and reached full implementation in fiscal year 2019.
- Four major program components:
 - One-on-one technical assistance by a quality facilitator
 - Completion of a continuous quality improvement plan
 - Public facing profile on My Child Care DC
 - Capital Quality designation
- The Capital Quality designation is based on observation data using the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) and Environment Rating Scales (ERS)

Capital Quality Theory of Change



Getting to effective research questions and lessons learned

Original research questions developed in partnership with the Urban Institute

- How does the overall supply and distribution of child development centers and homes change as Capital Quality rolls out across the District?
- How does Capital Quality affect teacher job satisfaction and retention?
- How does Capital Quality affect parental choice?
- Do children attending programs with higher quality ratings have better developmental outcomes than those attending programs with lower quality ratings?

Updated research questions based on changing climate and needs

- How does the overall supply and distribution of child development centers and homes change as Capital Quality rolls out across the District?
- How do center directors and home caregivers perceive Capital Quality and its relation to quality and supply?
- How does Capital Quality affect career pathways and staff retention?
- How does Capital Quality affect parental child care search and selection?

Getting to effective research questions and lessons learned

Lessons Learned

- People are more likely to respond if incentives are offered.
- Vetting and testing research tools (i.e., surveys, interview/focus group prompts) prior to fielding widely is key.
- It is important to maintain interim communication with the research partner, as well as external stakeholders, while research remains ongoing.
- Anecdotally, coronavirus (COVID-19) affected research activities and response rates.
- Changes in policy can affect applicability of research findings to the current landscape.

Did we get the results we expected from the research question?

Question: How does Capital Quality affect career pathways and staff retention?

Findings

- Child care providers noted that the program should focus more resources on program staff.
- Some educators are not familiar with Capital Quality



Reflection on Findings

- Does this align with the theory of change? **No**
- Does this mean the question is bad? **No**
- Does this mean the theory of change needs to be adjusted? **Not necessarily.**

Programmatic Response

Identified need to better communicate the Capital Quality program, the model, supports in place and the theory of change.

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Panel discussion on developing research questions



Heather Zaveri

Senior Director of Learning and Strategy, Human Services, Mathematica



Kathryn Kigera

Director of Quality Initiatives
Division of Early Learning,
Office of the State Superintendent of Education, District of Columbia



Tonya Williams

Director, Division of Child Care and Early Childhood Education, Arkansas Department of Human Services

Panel questions and discussion

- What is an example of a recent research question you explored and how the results led you to change your program implementation or next steps for research?
- How have you built equity for children, families, or providers into your development of research questions?
- Whom have you involved in developing the questions? How would you conduct this process differently in the future?

We welcome your questions for the panel. To ask a question, please type it into the chat box.

Related resources

See [How to Develop the Right Research Questions for Program Evaluation](#) for steps for developing research questions and logic models and writing research questions for different types of evaluations

See [How to Write a Research Question](#) for types, steps, and examples for writing research questions

See the [Building Child Care Research Capacity](#) web page and [OPRE website](#) for slides, audio recordings, and transcripts of webinars, (posted a few months after each webinar)

If you have questions, feel free to email me (Gretchen Kirby) at gkirby@mathematica-mpr.org

Thank you for joining us!