
LISTENING AND LEARNING

A Design Thinking
Approach to the CDA®

SOCIAL ISSUES AND THE CDA

"A good teacher can inspire hope, ignite the imagination and instill the love of learning."

—Brad Henry, former governor of Oklahoma and a strong proponent of early childhood education

Successful groups “use a crisis to crystallize their purpose,” author Daniel Coyle pointed out in *The Culture Code*, a roadmap for solving problems and driving positive change. Coyle’s *New York Times* bestseller came out in 2018, just a few years before the world confronted COVID, an especially novel crisis. The pandemic hit the early learning field hard as it forced child care programs to close and caused many early childhood teachers to flee the field. The crisis also led to a turning point at the Council for Professional Recognition, the Washington, DC, nonprofit that administers the Child Development Associate® (CDA) Credential™. Now! New! Next! became the Council’s battle cry as it embarked on a campaign to reimagine its flagship credential and make the CDA® even more faithful to its

purpose: training early childhood teachers who really can inspire hope, ignite the imagination and instill the love of learning in all young children.

Reaching this goal has required the Council to take constant steps to learn more about the early learning sector and strive to keep teachers on the cutting edge of their field. The Council’s mission also has demanded the imagination to come up with responses to the broad social issues that affect children, their families and the teachers who support them. And as the Council works to reimagine the CDA, it draws inspiration from a long, rich past of innovation. Since its beginning nearly 50 years ago, the CDA has constantly adapted in response to challenges and change while staying true to a core conviction: “Whatever their past history or present condition, all kinds of Americans can contribute to their country,” as President Lyndon Baines Johnson said when he declared war on poverty in 1964.¹ And quality early education is the engine of equity that can give every child a fair shot at success.

America’s low-income children are “the inheritors of poverty’s curse and not its creators.” So, “unless we act, these children will pass it on to the next generation like a family birthmark,” LBJ warned.² And his response was to launch Head Start as part of his Great Society program to enhance civil rights by building equity for all, beginning in the first years of life. And equity in early education depends on qualified, competent teachers, as progressive educational thinkers have long understood.



In 1971, a group of leading education experts convened and came up with a way to provide a qualified early childhood workforce for Johnson's massive national program. That was the start of a new professional credential: the CDA.

With federal funding, the CDA Consortium and Bank Street College administered the CDA, leading to the award of the first credential in 1975. Over the next decade, the demand for the CDA grew so much that the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services worked with the National Association for the Education of Young Children to establish the Council for Professional Recognition, a new nonprofit charged with overseeing the credential. Since then, the Council has constantly transformed the CDA to meet society's changing demands. The Council has

expanded its multilingual content and adapted its training to recruit a more diverse early childhood workforce for an increasingly diverse nation. The Council has added coursework that puts a focus on early learning, not simply child care, as brain science proved the importance of the first thousand days for lasting success in school and life. It has strengthened the credentialing process by adding components like candidate self-reflection and built a network of Professional Development Specialists who assess CDA candidates' competence and performance in the classroom. In recent decades, the Council has also embraced the use of technology to make it simpler for candidates to apply online and manage their progress toward earning the credential.³



CONFRONTING AND THE CHILD CARE CRISIS

*"You need
imagination
to imagine a
future that doesn't
exist."*

—Azar Nafisi, Iranian American writer and professor

By 2020, over 800,000 educators worldwide had reached this milestone and envisioned rosy futures in the early childhood field. No one imagined the onset

of COVID, a cataclysm that led to a crisis in the early learning field and deepened problems that already beset the profession in a nation that has always been without a solid child care system. Child care in America is costly and beyond the means of many families it's meant to serve. Even when families can afford child care, they confront long wait lists and limited spaces that may not meet their needs. Some parts of the country are child deserts where there's a glaring lack of programs, and it has become increasingly hard for providers to recruit and retain high-quality teachers—all issues brought to the forefront by the pandemic.

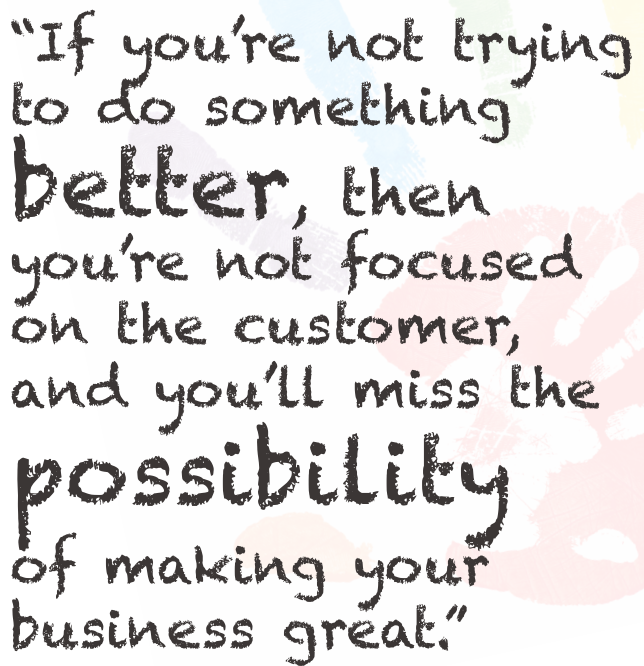
COVID forced centers to close and led millions of parents to leave their jobs due to the lack of child care they needed to go to work. As talk of the child care crisis filled the news, the public became keenly aware of the vital role early childhood teachers

play in serving the workforce of both today and tomorrow. Without competent care and instruction, many children fell behind, as they were doing when LBJ resolved to address their plight by founding Head Start. The CDA was the answer to the teacher shortage in those days—and it also seemed a strong solution to the more recent plummet in the ranks of the early childhood profession. So, in April 2021, the Council embarked on a sweeping effort to reimagine the credentialing process by putting equity and access first. The goal was to bring committed, highly qualified teachers into the classroom when they were needed more than ever before.

Widespread recognition of their vital role was the upside of COVID for the early childhood field. It was time to “stop calling child care a crisis and call it an opportunity,” as *Forbes* magazine pointed out.⁴

Challenging times can be the best times for companies to explore their customers’ unmet needs and place them at the center of strategies to innovate and evolve for the new normal ahead. Companies with the foresight to think ahead move from the “one day at a time focus to a post-crisis and long-term focus by adopting new practices and measures that will improve their service in the long run,” explained Kaizen Institute, a consultant to companies worldwide.⁵ And the Council took this forward-thinking approach as it addressed another problem that had preceded the pandemic: the failure of 3 in 10 CDA candidates to complete the credentialing process.⁶

DISRUPTION AND DESIGN



“If you’re not trying to do something better, then you’re not focused on the customer, and you’ll miss the possibility of making your business great.”

—Jonathan Ive, former chief product designer at Apple

As the Council began to envision new ways to address the problem, it drew on the tactics of design thinking, an approach to innovation that blends people’s needs, the possibilities of technology and the requirements of business. It leads you to empathize with your users, define their needs, create a prototype and then repeatedly test. Taken together, these steps help you think outside the box, as they did at Apple. During Ive’s tenure there, the company launched a dazzling array of groundbreaking products, including every “i” product created in the past two decades.⁷ And Apple isn’t the only well-known company that’s relied on design thinking to grow its consumer base.

Design thinking has become the credo for many big businesses that want to connect better with the customers they serve. Google has a formal process for brainstorming that helps them rapidly solve problems and has built “Google Garages” where employees partner with customers to experiment with new ideas, strategies that led to Google News, Gmail, and AdSense. IBM has set up an in-house innovation lab where employees use design thinking to help clients tackle real-world business problems, leading to clear financial gains for the companies they serve. And former PepsiCo CEO Indra Nooyi transformed the world’s second-largest food and beverage company through design thinking. Looking at the company’s products as a mom instead of a CEO gave her a more human-centered perspective to the product line up, led her to introduce more nutritious foods, and work to change PepsiCo’s culture so employees would put consumers at the center of every decision.⁸

“We are at a critical point where rapid change is forcing us to look not just to new ways of solving problems but to new problems to solve.”

—Tim Brown, executive chair of global design and consulting firm IDEO.

The Council had a lot of decisions to make as the onset of COVID posed roadblocks to several key steps entailed in earning the CDA. Many early learning programs shut down for months or were sorely understaffed. State and local governments put new restrictions on the number of people allowed inside and often didn’t let visitors enter at all, meaning that CDA Professional Development (PD) Specialists™ couldn’t assess candidates by conducting CDA Verification Visits® in the classrooms. The Council, in turn, couldn’t award credentials, centers couldn’t find newly minted CDAs to fill vacant positions and even more children couldn’t get the quality early education they need.

This chain of disruptive events led the Council to talk with BCT Partners, a dynamic NJ consulting firm, about how to conduct virtual verification visits, a way to reduce wait times and simplify scheduling of the visits. The discussions with BCT also led the Council to explore the promise of design thinking to test all components of the credentialing process. The time had come to reimagine the CDA by seeking to understand stakeholders better, empathize more with their concerns, challenge accepted assumptions, and redefine problems to identify new solutions. The project to reimagine the CDA began with the following goals: ensure equity in credentialing by adopting a candidate-centric process, create a more efficient credentialing process by using all available technology and provide everyone engaged in the process with stellar customer service.



CDA STAKEHOLDERS SPEAK

"I have learned a great deal from listening carefully. Most people never listen."

—Ernest Hemingway, author and journalist

So, the Council sought feedback from the CDA community it served. Over the course of 2021, the Council took a deep dive into its interactions with stakeholders and their reactions to the Council's key products: its website, the CDA exam,

verification visit and the CDA textbook *Essentials for Working with Young Children*.⁹ To explore these components of the CDA process, a team of Council staff members and outside experts worked together to pinpoint strengths, pain points and windows for improvement.

The Council looked for the insights it needed by connecting with over 5,500 CDA stakeholders and two dozen early learning experts. It contacted stakeholder groups and CDAs, both current and prospective, to collect data on their experience of the Council website. It sent out online surveys to educators in different child care settings to gain input on the tasks they routinely perform in their programs. It undertook a job analysis study for three of the Council's CDA exams—infant-toddler, preschool and family child care—to take a critical look at the Council's measures of competence,

make any needed revisions and draft new blueprints for the exams.

In addition, the Council took steps to learn more about the support structure that different groups have while working toward a CDA. So, it constructed profiles of candidates—based on factors like where candidates lived, their level of education, language, experience in teaching and race. Then it used these representative profiles to determine the likelihood of candidates earning a CDA credential and how to increase their chance of success, a way to make the early learning field more inclusive and diverse. In addition, the Council convened focus groups to determine steps in the credentialing process that tended to put up roadblocks to completion.

“The first step in exceeding your customer’s expectations is to know those expectations.”

—Roy H. Williams, bestselling author and marketing consultant known for his *Wizard of Ads* trilogy

The focus groups consisted of discussions with CDA candidates and holders, along with the PD Specialists who assess and guide them. Technology was a recurring theme in the responses. Candidates had

a tough time getting answers to their questions and finding the resources that they needed. Some had internet issues or no access to the internet at all. Many had problems scheduling CDA exams at Pearson VUE testing centers, found it hard to arrange visits with a PD Specialist or couldn’t even find one in the areas where they worked—all issues that just became more daunting with the advance of the pandemic.

As the world became more remote, the Council ramped up its online presence to accommodate candidates for the credential, but the Council website challenged some of its users. “There needs to be a better way to interface with the website so you can get a step-by-step idea of how you’re moving toward completion of your CDA and know what to do if you stall at any stage,” one CDA candidate said. “Simplify the website for the CDA because it’s not user-friendly,” another candidate pleaded. “I couldn’t find the schedules for PD Specialists to come do classroom assessments. I couldn’t figure out where you take the test or how you pay for it. Finding all that out was a nightmare for me,” she moaned.

Candidates like her need extra help from PD Specialists who are adept with computers, like the one who provided this insight in a focus group with her peers. “I definitely have to walk the candidates I work with through the process and make sure they’re taking the right steps while scheduling verification visits in the system.” What made it even harder, she said, is “the words on the website were small, plus the use of colors

made it a little confusing.” And that posed an extra challenge for the many Spanish speakers “who had to use their phones since they couldn’t afford computers” as another PD Specialist added.

And candidates who were immigrants dealt with added issues while trying to complete the credentialing process. “They have to provide a lot of documents and diplomas,” a PD Specialist said, “that they don’t have on hand and find it hard to get if they went to school outside the U.S. So, the CDA application should limit its requests to the documents that are absolutely needed,” she suggested. And one of her colleagues agreed. “The application is too long. Some of the questions don’t apply to applicants who have no experience in the early education field. And this can discourage them from going on to complete their CDA though they’ve already taken all the classes required for the credential.”

Technology also led to glitches at different stages of the CDA process, such as scheduling the verification visit. “Once you have requested a visit, you don’t get a quick answer,” one CDA candidate said. “I felt the system was a little slow, so I would have felt more relaxed if I had received a message that my request was being processed while waiting for a PD Specialist to set a specific date.” And even when there was a firm date, there could still be glitches. “Sometimes when I send candidates a proposal for a visit, they have trouble responding,” a PD Specialist explained. “So, I tell them where they need to go on the website and what buttons they need to

press. Then they manage to do it. But I still feel that technology has been one of the biggest weaknesses of the process for the community we serve.”

Another complaint was the lack of adequate feedback after the classroom assessment, as one candidate pointed out. “I know the results have to be confidential,” she acknowledged, “but they could at least give us a sheet with some areas in which we need to improve,” she said. And other candidates had deep concerns before the verification visit, as a PD Specialist had seen. “Candidates feel a lot of trepidation before we show up, though we tell them that it’s going to be okay. So, it would help to have a video that goes through the steps involved in the visit,” she explained.

“It would also be nice,” as this PD Specialist added, “for candidates to have a better idea about what’s going to happen during the exam, another trigger word that fills many of them with dread.” One candidate said she wasn’t sure what to do when she took the exam online at a Pearson VUE testing center “because the proctor didn’t give us any instructions.” And technology also posed problems when some candidates took the test. “I understand that the proctors have several tasks to deal with, but I feel they should be on hand to make sure people are comfortable with the system and don’t have any problems,” she explained. Having more Pearson VUE testing sites would also help, said a teacher who had recently taken the exam. “The site where my program sent its teachers to take the test was not accessible to all of us,” she said. “So being

able to take the exam online without going to a Pearson VUE center would be very helpful to a lot of folks,” as a PD Specialist added.

Another suggestion was to let PD Specialists conduct virtual verification visits and have a virtual option for the CDA portfolio, a requirement that includes documentation of training, resource materials for working with children and families, reflective statements of competence and a professional philosophy statement. Putting all this material online would allow PD Specialists to “verify that candidates have done all the required classes and writing before you arrive at their center for the verification visit,” as one PD Specialist said. And the idea of an online portfolio had a special appeal for a CDA candidate with a young child. “I have a one-year-old son, so I had trouble making sure he didn’t get at my papers and cover them with crayon marks once he happened to notice that I was writing on them”—not a tale of woe that came up in any other focus group. Still, it’s not a stretch to assume other rising CDAs with young kids may face the same conundrum. There are many moms among the thousands of candidates who the Council is serving around the world.

People are working to earn their CDA everywhere from the United Arab Emirates to Alabama. And there are candidates in Pennsylvania and Puerto Rico, like one participant in a bilingual focus group. “I wanted to do a bilingual CDA,” she explained, “but I had trouble finding a bilingual PD Specialist to assess me.

So, I would advise the Council to have somewhere on the website where CDA candidates can discuss this language issue and get advice from those who have resolved it. I also think that Pearson VUE should offer the exam in several languages, besides English and Spanish as now, so there are more opportunities for people who want to earn their credential. We really need a diverse group of teachers for the diverse population of children in the U.S. and beyond,” she explained, since children learn best from teachers who look like them. And that’s at the heart of equity in early learning, the social value that led to the launch of Head Start—and the CDA.

INPUT AND INNOVATION

“You have to do the research. If you don’t know about something, then you have to ask the right people who do.”

—Spike Lee, filmmaker and actor whose work has explored race relations

Since the start, the CDA has changed to reflect the input of many folks from early learning experts to the rising teachers who earn the credential. That remained the case

as the Council took an even deeper dive into ways to surmount the roadblocks candidates face in earning a CDA. After listening to its stakeholders' concerns, the Council came up with a list of potential solutions and asked for their perceptions of these proposed ideas. What were the innovations that would best meet candidates' needs as they progressed through the different steps of the CDA process? And how could the Council bring more equity to the education of our teachers?

One way, as the Council proposed, was to standardize CDA training, a suggestion that most stakeholders endorsed. There was widespread agreement that this would raise the quality of training. And that matters because teachers, like the children they serve, should get the head start everyone deserves. Participants from all focus groups acknowledged that there is a wide range of variation in the quality of training options, putting candidates who get lower-quality training at a disadvantage from the beginning. And the best way to boost the quality of training across the board is to focus on building the skills of trainers. Not only should they know their subject; they should also have the cultural competence to be attuned to candidates' needs. In addition, they should have the proper language skills if working with non-English speaking groups of CDAs. And that's an important qualification since the Council works with educators who speak 24 different languages in communities nationwide.

Immigrant teachers play a key role because immigrant children are the country's fastest-growing group under age 18. Yet non-English

speakers are at a particular loss when it comes to putting together their portfolios and doing all the writing that involves. So, immigrant candidates would derive special benefits from the Council's idea for an interactive portfolio option, another idea that was met with general applause. Focus group participants thought this change would give them more room to be creative by uploading pictures and videos to showcase their skills. And pictures certainly would be worth more than a thousand words when it comes to teachers whose first language isn't English.

Videos also played a part in some of the Council's other ideas for helping more candidates to complete the CDA process. One well-received proposal was to make the CDA application simpler to go through and include video instructions to appeal to different learning styles and needs. Another suggestion was to help candidates prepare for the exam by providing walk-through videos of the testing site and videos on the technology used in the exam, as well as practice tests that mirror the actual exam. These were all ideas that struck a positive chord, especially among the non-English speaking CDAs. And they, like many native speakers, admitted to being anxious about the CDA exam.

Taking the exam is often the biggest roadblock to completing a CDA, so the Council proposed some ways to help candidates feel less stressed out about the test. Having more time to answer the questions would help, as the focus groups widely agreed. Simplifying the language of the exam was another likely

way to allow more candidates to get a passing score. And some candidates might also benefit from working with a support coach. The coach would help them prepare for the exam by making sure they understand the questions and scenarios in practice exams, along with the technology used in the actual exam.

In addition, the coach could help candidates solve issues that arise in locating testing sites, scheduling the exam and finding PD Specialists to observe them. For the more routine questions, having access to a 24/7 chatbot would help, as the Council proposed. And participants in all focus groups thought this would be better than having to wait on the phone for questions about the CDA process that are simple to answer. Still, they wanted the chatbot to also serve as a way to reach a live person at the Council when needed.

Sometimes, it just helps to have someone to talk to since the credentialing process can be intense. So, many folks liked the Council's suggestion for connecting them with an advisor who could serve as a mentor and guide. Many organizations and programs have a model that includes this role, as the participants pointed out. The Council once did, too, in an earlier version of the CDA process. And the advisors were a valuable resource, according to several PD Specialists who'd served the Council for some time. Based on their remarks, the Council would encourage candidates to find mentors who can share past experiences of the CDA process and shepherd folks to the finish line.

EQUITY IS ESSENTIAL

"Vision without execution is a hallucination."

—Thomas Alva Edison, inventor and businessman

We should retrieve things of value from our knowledge of the past, according to Sankofa, a concept that the Akan people of Ghana have long embraced. Sometimes you do need to look back to move ahead. And the lessons of the past are now guiding the Council as it builds the future. The Council's vision has always been an early learning system based on equity for both children and the teachers who serve them. It's a far-reaching goal that has increasingly come to the forefront as current leadership peers through an equity lens to review Council policies, procedures and plans. The Council is now taking concrete steps to embed equity in its publications, throughout its website and in all its other content.

The Council has partnered with the Children's Equity Project to scrutinize the CDA Competency Standards: establishing a safe, healthy learning environment; advancing physical and cognitive progress; supporting social and emotional growth; building relationships with families; ensuring a well-run, purposeful program and maintaining a commitment to professionalism. All these requirements for



the early childhood profession were subject to a close look to determine whether they contained the most current equity-specific content. So was *Essentials for Working with Young Children*, the Council's premier publication, for its approach to equity in every aspect of teaching that early childhood teachers need to advance in their classroom practice and help children advance, too.

The early childhood classroom is a place where teachers can lay a solid foundation for lifelong learning, wellness and success. Yet too many young children suffer bias in the classroom that holds them back. A solid body of research shows that Black, Indigenous and Latino children are often the victims of harsh discipline and low expectations. So, it's important to increase educators' knowledge, understanding and awareness of issues related to equity, bias and systemic racism in the classroom.

Making these issues a central part of the CDA program sends a vital message to rising teachers: building equity is at the heart of the early childhood profession.

That's the Council's mantra so Council staff threw their hearts into the task of reading the CDA curriculum through an equity lens. This ambitious, time-consuming project involved reviewing all 500 pages of *Essentials* to ensure they contained the most inclusive language and up-to-date guidance to ward off bias in the classroom. The goal was to ensure that educators would embark on their work with a strong grasp of systemic racism in society at large and the way it shows up in early childhood programs. Teachers also need to know what they can do to prevent it, so the Council convened a group of experts to give teachers concrete steps they can take to ensure that all children get a fair shot at a rich, productive experience in the classroom.

MOVING THE MISSION AHEAD

“Disneyland will never be completed. It will continue to grow as long as there is imagination left in the world.”

—Walt Disney, founder of “the happiest place on earth”

This is the ultimate reason behind the Council’s work to reimagine the CDA, based on design thinking. And it’s not the first use of design thinking to benefit children. GE HealthCare used it to make having an MRI scan a less distressing experience for children, who often cried during a scan. The chief designer at GE Imaging Machines felt something had to change. So, he observed children going through the scanner while talking with them, educators and doctors. These observations and conversations led him to conclude that children saw the scanner as a scary monster instead of a harmless piece of equipment that could help them. This insight into young patients’ heads led him to make the MRI look like a pirate ship and create the CT Pirate Island Adventure, a story in which children played a starring role. And this led to dramatic results. Before the

transformation, about 80 percent of children needed to be sedated prior to a scan, and after the change this high figure dropped to a mere 10 percent. The use of design thinking had transformed an MRI scan from a terrifying ordeal to a creative journey for children.¹⁰

The Council is also going through its own creative journey as it works to reimagine its flagship credential. And it has made progress in answering some of the concerns brought up by the focus groups. The Council has a new website that offers a streamlined, user-friendly experience for visitors old and new. Revised exams in English and Spanish are now on hand, and Pearson VUE is preparing to put them into its system. A design team is working on mockups for a new dashboard that will let candidates track their steps toward completion and provide ways for PD Specialists to monitor candidates’ progress. PD Specialists have also begun conducting virtual verification visits, subject to Council approval. The Council’s board agreed to the purchase of an electronic portfolio and design of the English version is nearly complete, with a Spanish one to follow. Most important of all, the first months of 2023 brought the publication of a new edition of *Essentials* with a fresh stress on equity in early education.

And the Council will keep honing its efforts as it sees how well these innovations succeed. That’s part of design thinking, according to IDEO’s Tim Brown, who speaks frequently to business leaders on design thinking, creative leadership and innovation. Brown believes that “design is all about learning from doing. That’s how we evolve to the best solution.” And it helps to have creative confidence in your design

kit, according to IDEO founder David Kelley. “Creative confidence is the quality that human-centered designers rely on when it comes to making leaps, trusting their intuition and chasing solutions that they haven’t totally figured out yet,” he says. “Creative confidence is the notion that you have big ideas, and that you have the ability to act on them,” like some great visionaries of our time.¹¹

This strong sense of conviction helped Walt Disney surmount poverty to create an empire of entertainment that’s touched the hearts and minds of millions. Disney believed that “if you can dream it, you can do it.” So did Martin Luther King, Jr., a great champion of equity for all. King had a dream that “my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character,” as he told a crowd of over a quarter million people in 1963. And King understood that reaching our dreams sometimes requires a long, hard march ahead.

The Council has realized this, too, as we review the now, reflect on the next and revise our thinking to design the new. We’ll be using the insights we’ve gained to transform the CDA over the next year. Then we’ll continue this process since our work, too, will never be completed. Sure, there may come an end to the long child care crisis that COVID simply made worse. But new concerns will arise for the early learning field in coming years since nothing ever stays the same.

“The times they are a-changin,” as Bob Dylan sang in 1964, the year LBJ launched Head Start, leading to the birth of the CDA.

Since then, the CDA has always responded to changing times and the challenges they bring. Still, the more things change, the more they stay the same. So, the Council’s efforts to move ahead will also enhance its original mission: promoting equity in early education. As new issues confront our field, we will again need to reimagine the CDA so our teachers can serve young learners even better. We’ll keep listening and learning from our CDA community members, so we can someday reach our own dream: make the early childhood classroom, like Disney’s beloved theme park, the happiest place on earth for *all* young children.



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