

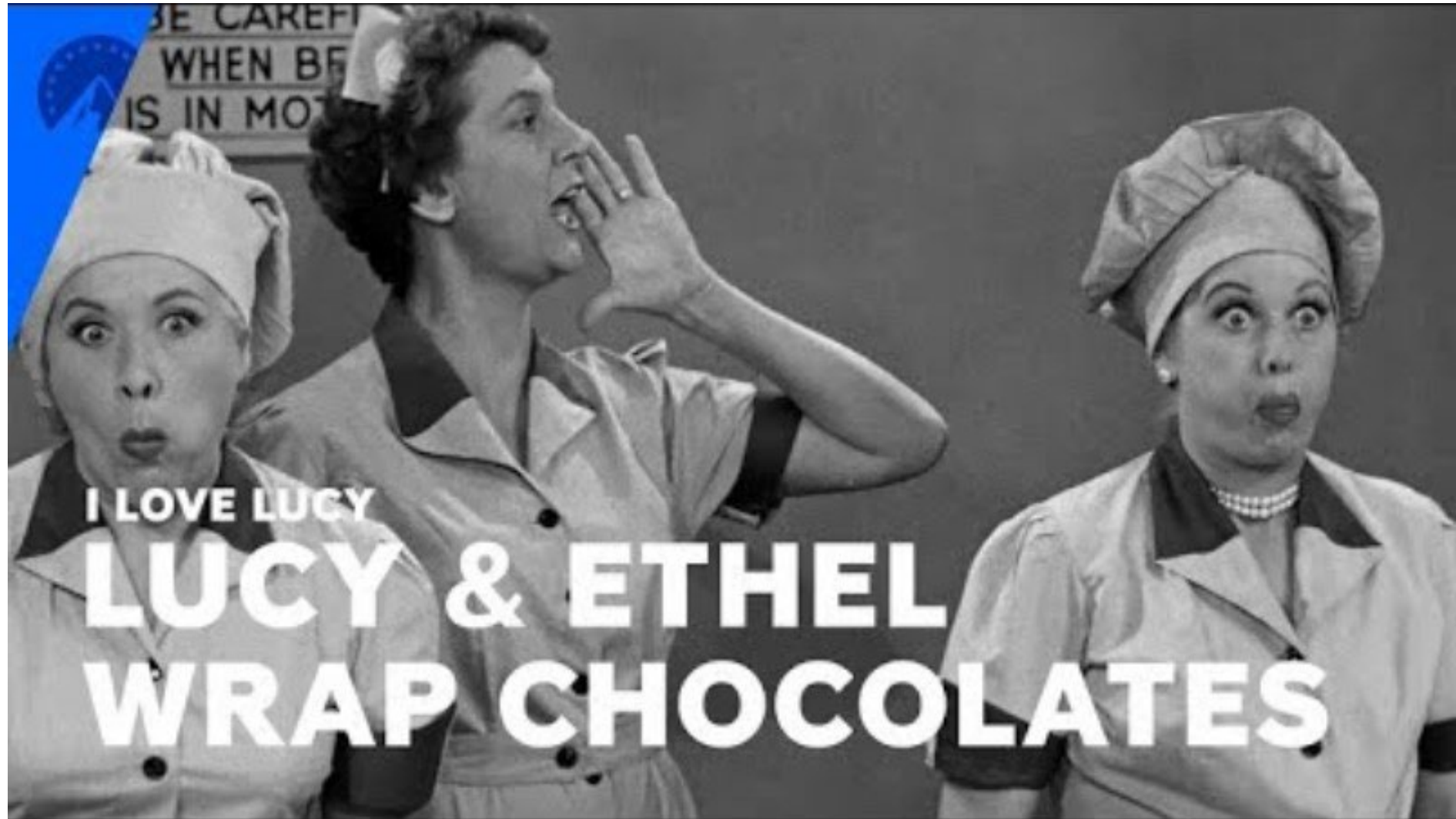
Moving Systems for Rural Communities

Arizona Rural Health Conference



Tuesday, June 3, 2025

Systems Change: Addressing the Root Cause



Vitalyst #SystemsChangeSeries w/ FSG



SPARK REPORT

Understanding Systems Change

An Approach to Impact Outcomes in Arizona



August 2024 This report introduces key concepts for understanding systems, systems change, and how to get started in improving health inequities.



What is a system?

*A system is a set of **interconnected, interdependent and interacting parts** that form a complex, unified whole*

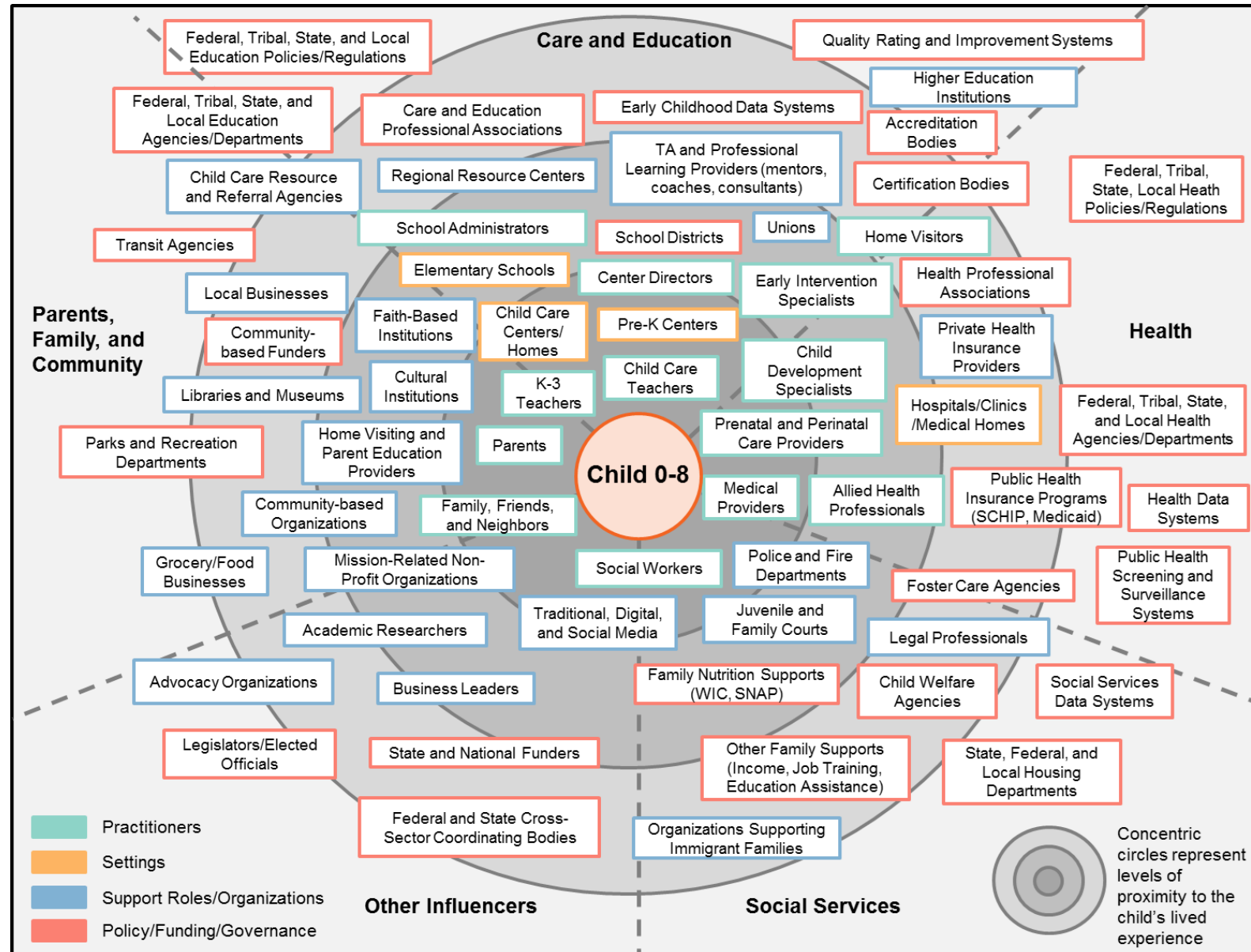
More simply: A system is a set of parts working together to form a more complex whole.



Characteristics of a System

- A unified whole whose goals and results emerge from the interaction of its components (which could be people, organizations, ideas, resources, policies, etc.)
- Nonlinear and often counterintuitive behavior
- Dynamic and constantly evolving
- Decentralized control with results emerging from the bottom-up as well as the top down

Illustrative Systems Map



Systems Change

Systems Change: “Shifting the conditions that are holding the problem in place.” - Social Innovation Generation in Canada

Systems change is an approach that influences root cause factors to create large-scale, long-term impacts on how these systems function and the outcomes they generate.

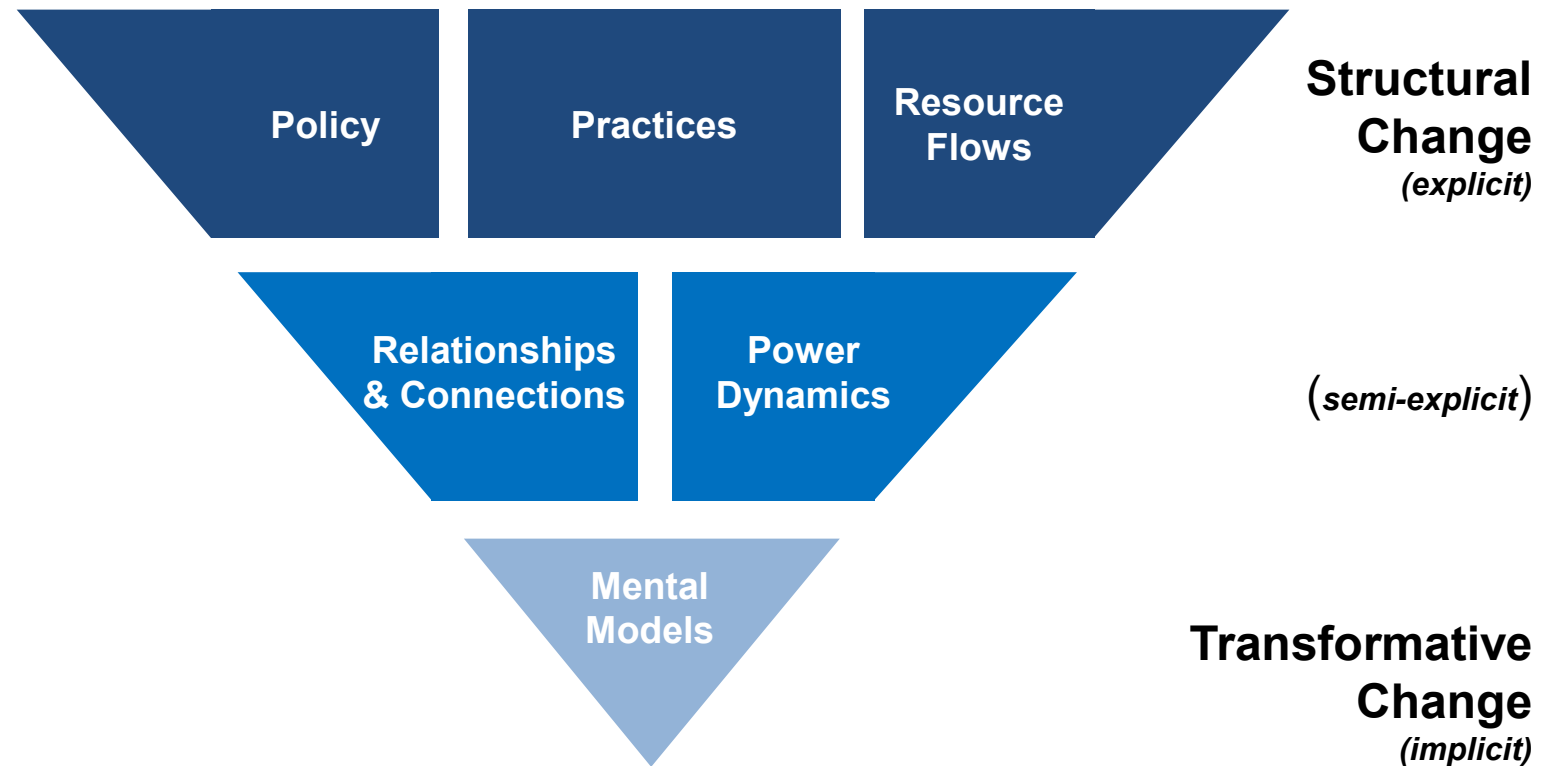
More simply: Systems change involves influencing how the parts of a system interact to alter the system's outcomes.

Systems Change Can Be Applied to Systems Impacting Every Element of a Healthy Community



To shift systems, **cross-sector leaders can influence the conditions for systems change**

Systems Change Conditions



These conditions represent **leverage points** in the system, some of which are more explicit than others

**STRUCTURAL
CHANGE**

explicit

Policies

Government rules, regulations and priorities that guide its and others' actions

Practices

Organizational and practitioner activities that reflect their values and priorities

Resource Flows

How money, people, knowledge and information are allocated and distributed

**RELATIONAL
CHANGE**

semi-explicit

Relationships & Connections

Quality of connections and communication occurring between system players

Power Dynamics

Which individuals and organizations hold decision-making power, authority, influence

**TRANSFORMATIVE
CHANGE**

implicit

Mental Models

Deeply held beliefs and assumptions that influence one's actions

most explicit

most implicit

Six Conditions of Systems Change

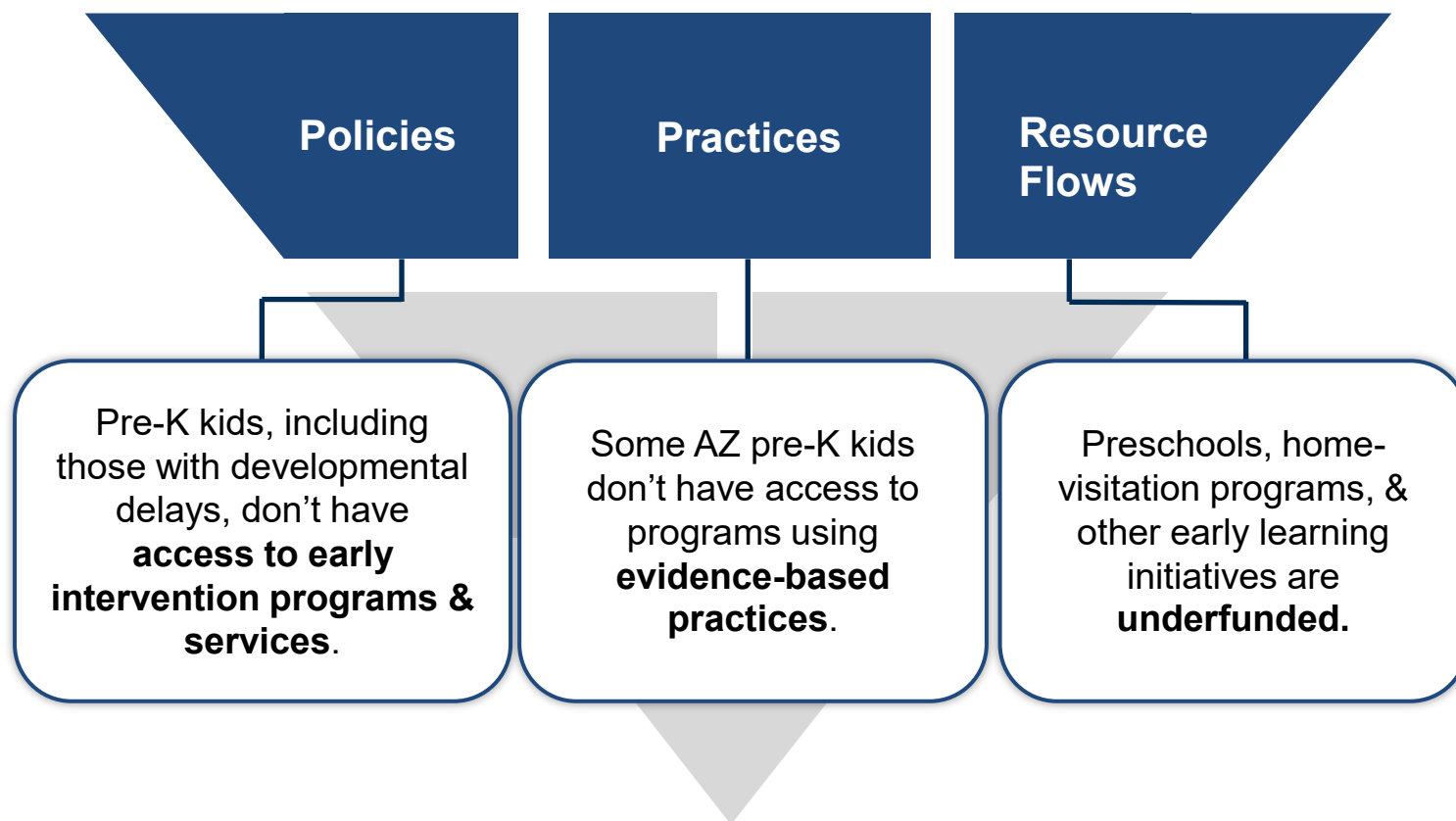
Framework in Action: Diagnosing the Problem

THE CHALLENGE

AZ's pre-K kids, especially in rural & tribal communities, are not kindergarten-ready



DIAGNOSING STRUCTURAL CONDITIONS



Six Conditions of Systems Change Framework in Action: Developing Strategies

THE AMBITION

Arizona kids
begin elementary
kindergarten-ready



STRATEGIES FOR STRUCTURAL CHANGE

Policies

Practices

Resource Flows

- ☐ **Pass HB2137** to enhance AZ's early intervention programs & services for infants & toddlers with developmental delays.

- ☐ Programs offered are typically based on **research demonstrating effectiveness** in promoting early childhood development.

- ☐ **Funding for access** to early childhood education.

Six Conditions of Systems Change

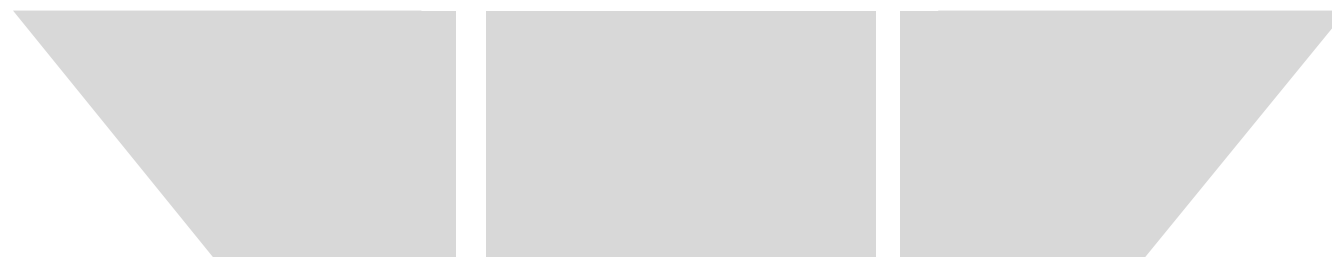
Framework in Action: Diagnosing the Problem

THE CHALLENGE

AZ's pre-K kids, especially in rural & tribal communities, are not kindergarten-ready



DIAGNOSING RELATIONAL CONDITIONS



Relationships

Power Dynamics

Early childhood programs **do not have a trained, well-compensated workforce** to improve the quality of care.

Families aren't connected with necessary resources.
Local communities do not play a key role in deciding how to best utilize funds based on their specific needs.

Six Conditions of Systems Change Framework in Action: Developing Strategies

THE AMBITION

Arizona kids
begin elementary
kindergarten-ready



STRATEGIES FOR RELATIONAL CHANGE

Relationships

Power
Dynamics

- ☐ **Invest in early childhood workforce** development for educators to improve the quality of care.

- ☐ **Provide family support services and programs** that strengthen parenting skills and promote healthy family dynamics.
- ☐ Have a **community-driven approach**.

Illustrative Only

Six Conditions of Systems Change Framework in Action: Diagnosing the Problem

THE CHALLENGE

AZ's pre-K kids, especially in rural & tribal communities, are not kindergarten-ready

DIAGNOSING MENTAL MODELS

AZ's pre-K kids and their families **feel unsupported** during the critical early childhood developmental window.

Not enough Arizonans **know the importance** of early childhood in local communities.

Arizona doesn't **prioritize and invest** enough in early childhood programs.

Mental
Models

Six Conditions of Systems Change Framework in Action: Developing Strategies

THE AMBITION

Arizona kids
begin elementary
kindergarten-ready



STRATEGIES FOR SHIFTING MINDSETS

- ❑ Collaborate with business, education, and community leaders to **emphasize the importance** of early childhood in local communities.
- ❑ **Raise awareness** by sharing how the childcare crisis has affected your family, business, or community.

Mental
Models

Systems Change Is Different than Programmatic Work

Systems Change Efforts Often Include:

- A collaborative, unified effort whose bold goals and strategies are achieved by each partner playing its specific role
- A focus on addressing the root causes of social challenges, not just symptoms
- Inclusion of impacted communities and understanding of how current systems create unjust outcomes
- Shared leadership with community engagement and solutions at the core of the work
- Continuous improvement and learning in an ever-changing environment

Systems Change Efforts Do Not Include:

- Only addressing the “symptoms” of social challenges
- (e.g., subsidizing healthcare costs, distributing food boxes)
- Deliver programs through a single organization without coordinating with or influencing others in the system
- Only pursue “outputs” and incremental progress



Pop Quiz!

- Systems Change or Program Change?
 - A coalition collaborates to design and execute an awareness campaign to destigmatize the best feeding parents may provide to their babies based on their needs.
 - A school partners with a local dentist to provide free or low-cost dental/oral health.
 - Prenatal service providers implement a one-stop-shop referral system to better coordinate services and supports for pregnant mothers.

Common pitfalls associated with applying the systems change triangle

You Don't Need to Do It All

One actor is unlikely to meaningfully impact all six conditions; the triangle can help pinpoint persisting gaps to inform and advance new targeted action and/or strengthen the impact of existing activities

Don't Demonize the Top Row or Programmatic Work

Efforts focused on policies, practices, and resources flows (top row) help meet immediate needs in a community and are deeply important to continue supporting on the path to systems change

Remember that Systems Change Is Nonlinear

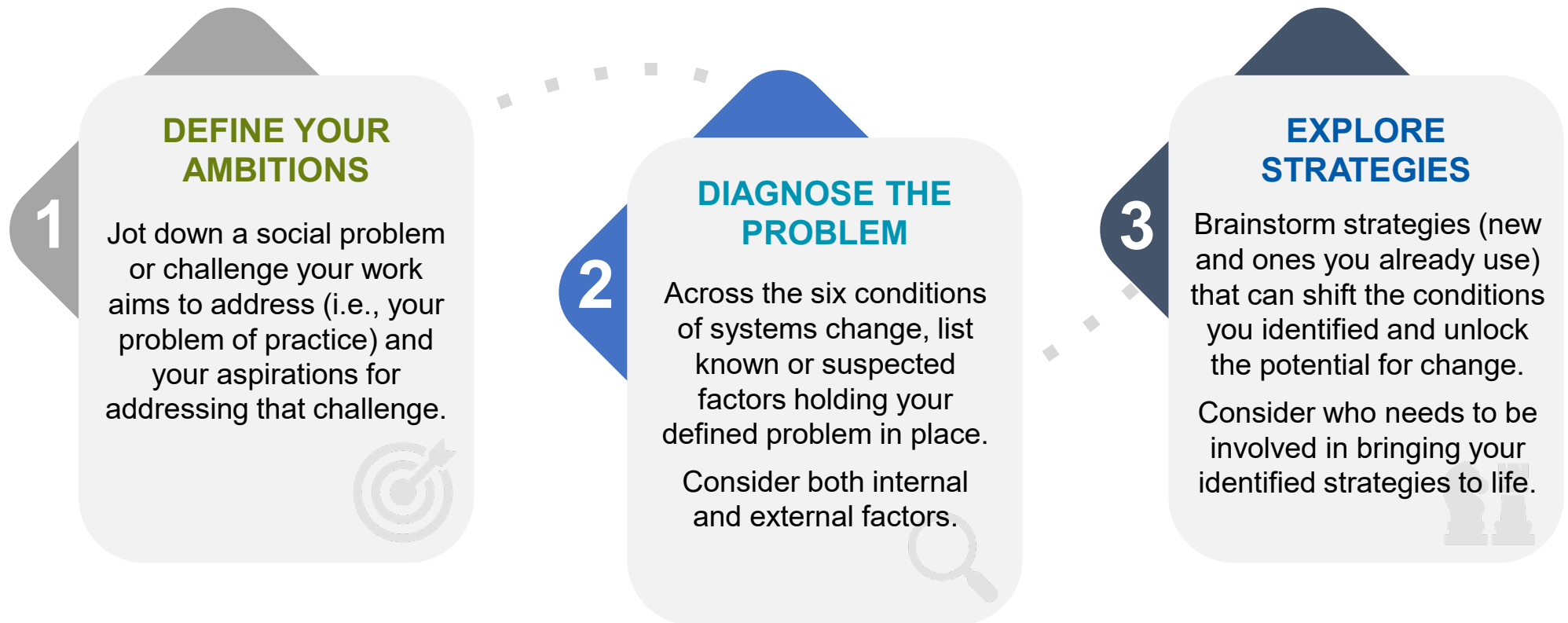
Change does not unfold linearly; the prioritization of efforts to shift systemic conditions should be informed by an external (opportunities/needs) and internal assessment (assets/capabilities) of the current reality

Always Look Around the Table

It is critically important to have a diverse group of stakeholders involved, especially as personal dimensions (e.g., positional authority, lived experience) impact one's ability to see certain aspects of the system

Reflection: Applying Systems Thinking to Your Work

We will walk through the three steps outlined below to evaluate a social change issue relevant to your work



Reflection Activity Worksheet

Systems Change Condition	What existing elements are reinforcing the current conditions and hindering our progress?	What strategies can help advance our systems change efforts? Who would need to be involved?
Policies		
Practices		
Resource Flows		
Relationships & Connections		
Power Dynamics		
Mental Models		

Final Reflection



- **What's going on in the system** you seek to shift? What **systemic conditions** might be holding problems in place?
- **Who is connected in your system?** Where might **strengthening relationships** enhance your transformation effort?
- **Who are your collaborators?** How do you maintain a **shared vision** for change?

Resources

- Understanding Systems Change: An Approach to Impact Outcomes in Arizona
 - <https://vitalysthealth.org/understanding-systems-change/>
- Leverage Points: Places to Intervene in a System, Donella Meadows: A landmark article on systems change that goes deeper on the different conditions in systems and how they are related.
 - <https://donellameadows.org/archives/leverage-points-places-to-intervene-in-a-system>
- Habits of a Systems Thinker, Waters Center for Systems Thinking: An illustrated guide of important systems thinking practices.
 - <https://ttsfilestore.blob.core.windows.net/ttsfiles/habits-single-page-2020.pdf>
- The Groundwater Approach, Racial Equity Institute: A tool that illustrates how structural racism shows up across systems.
 - <https://racialequityinstitute.org/groundwater-approach>
- The Relational Work of Systems Change, Katherine Milligan, Juanita Zerda & John Kania: A recent article by one of the authors of the Water of Systems Change article emphasizing the role of relationships in systems change.
 - https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the_relational_work_of_systems_change

FSG: *For Social Good*

Stay Connected and Learn More

The Water of Systems Change



White Paper

Read more about FSG's actionable model for social sector institutions interested in creating systems change



Action Learning Exercise

Conduct this activity to explore how you and your organization can pursue large-scale change in a disciplined and holistic manner

Systems Thinking Toolkit



Explore our toolkit for putting systems thinking into practice in your organization



Collective Impact Forum

Connect with CIF for resources, learning events, and coaching that can help advance your collective impact work

SUPPORT THROUGH
RESPONSIVE GRANTS

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

SPARK

SYSTEMS CHANGE



A close-up, shallow depth-of-field photograph of a person's hand typing on a silver laptop keyboard. The laptop is open, and the screen is visible but out of focus. The background is a plain, light-colored surface.

DISCOVERY

THE DISCOVERY
PROCESS WAS CREATED
TO HELP CONNECT
PARTNERS WITH
APPROPRIATE SUPPORT.



vitalysthealth.org

602.385.6500

Central Park Square
2020 N Central Ave
Suite 720
Phoenix Arizona 85004

