COLORADO
Department of Early Childhood

CDEC Organizational Theories of Change

Background

This series of theories of change (TOCs) explicitly aligns the Colorado Department of Early Childhood's (CDEC's) programmatic efforts with the goals from its strategic plan. A TOC is a model: a simplification of a real world system that helps stakeholders understand complex processes. A high-quality TOC captures the essence of a system without being overwhelming or missing essential elements of the work. It shows the pathways through which a system impacts an organization's ultimate long-term outcome.

The Colorado Evaluation and Action Lab at the University of Denver supported development of these TOCs through its role as the Early Childhood (EC) Evaluation Hub. The EC Evaluation Hub is working with CDEC to strengthen processes around building and using evidence for more informed decision making for stimulus-funded activities and beyond. These efforts require a systems approach, as reflected in these TOCs.

Purpose

This package includes four TOCs. The first is the Unifying TOC which displays the entirety of CDEC's strategic plan at a high level. It includes all four foundational goals and the three mission-driven goals. The following three models zoom in on each mission-driven goal to provide more detail on how their strategies and objectives contribute to longer-term outcomes.

Internally, these TOCs can be used to:

- Ensure every CDEC employee sees how their work fits in the overall Department strategy.
- Validate CDEC is doing what it says it's doing and that there is balance across the three mission-driven goals.
- Help identify programs that rely on one another for success and consider this interdependence for implementation and budgeting.
- Establish common measures for programs with similar outcomes to facilitate progress tracking across divisions.

Externally, these TOCs can be used to:

- Communicate CDEC's strategy and priorities to stakeholders.
- Facilitate alignment of CDEC's efforts with the broader state early childhood system.
- Identify similar outcomes among programs external to CDEC to establish common measures and facilitate progress tracking across the entire state early childhood system.

Underlying assumptions

There are several important assumptions underlying these organizational TOCs:

- "Programs and services" refer to all the programs and services CDEC supports, not just those related to child care.
  - TOCs do not refer to "licensed" programs since licensure is specific to child care.
  - "EC workforce" refers to all EC professionals, not just those in child care settings.
- Equity and being family and community focused are both values at CDEC. As such, neither is explicitly called out in any strategy. Rather, they are expected to be woven throughout every strategy.

Underlying assumptions (continued)

- These TOCs reflect CDEC's entire scope of work and does not identify any single program or service. Each program and service CDEC supports should fit under at least one strategy within one or more of the mission-driven goals.
  - Ideally, each program and service would have its own TOC that demonstrates which strategy it fits within and its pathway to the ultimate outcome.
  - When multiple programs or services fall within the same strategy box, opportunities arise for collaboration and alignment of outcome measures to track progress at the department and/or state level.
- Conversations across divisions confirm that each division hosts programs or services that align with strategies across the three TOCs. Thus, when situating programs and services within the TOCs, the mission-driven goal is less important than the description of the particular strategy.

A note on terminology

These TOCs provide a shared understanding and common language for the work of the department. The TOCs do not provide definitions for every term. In general, terms should be defined in the strategic plan, and the TOCs simply provide a visual representation of the strategic plan. In cases where the absence of a clear definition is likely to lead to confusion, we provide the broadest possible definition here that clarifies the intention behind how the term is used within the TOC. While we believe these definitions are consistent with the strategic plan, in the next planned revision of the strategic plan, we encourage CDEC leadership to provide clarification on how they intend these terms be used.

- **Availability** refers to the number of open slots or vacancies for a given program or service (i.e., the supply of a program or service).
- **Accessibility** refers to the removal of barriers so that a family or child can more easily participate in a given program or service (i.e., considering factors such as affordability, language, location, and transportation, among others).
- **Sustainability** refers to the ability of providers to remain financially viable (i.e., to keep programs and services open and operating).

CDEC UNIFYING THEORY OF CHANGE

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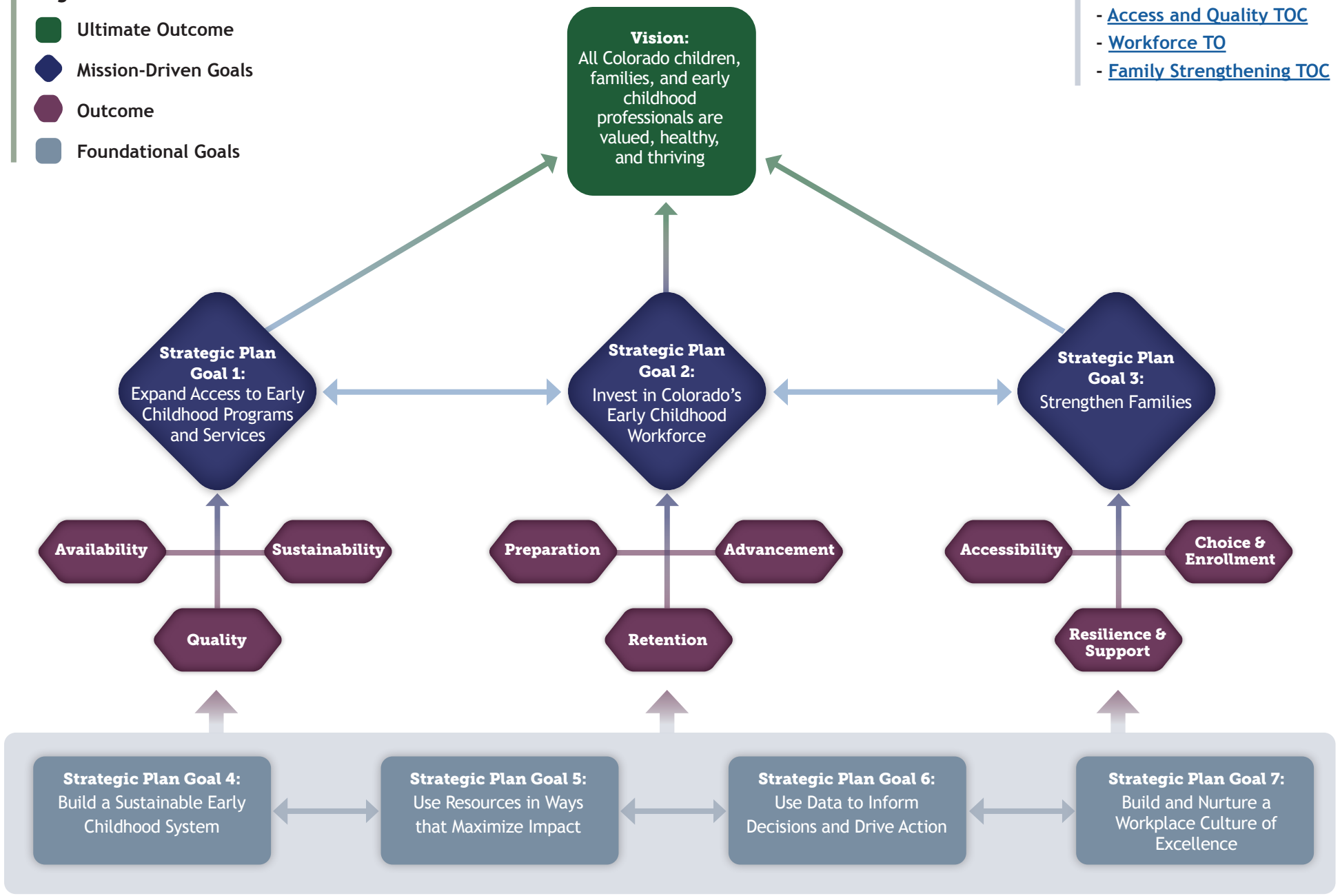
Legend

- Ultimate Outcome
- Mission-Driven Goals
- Outcome
- Foundational Goals

Other Organizational TOCs

- Access and Quality TOC
- Workforce TO
- Family Strengthening TOC



ACCESS AND QUALITY THEORY OF CHANGE

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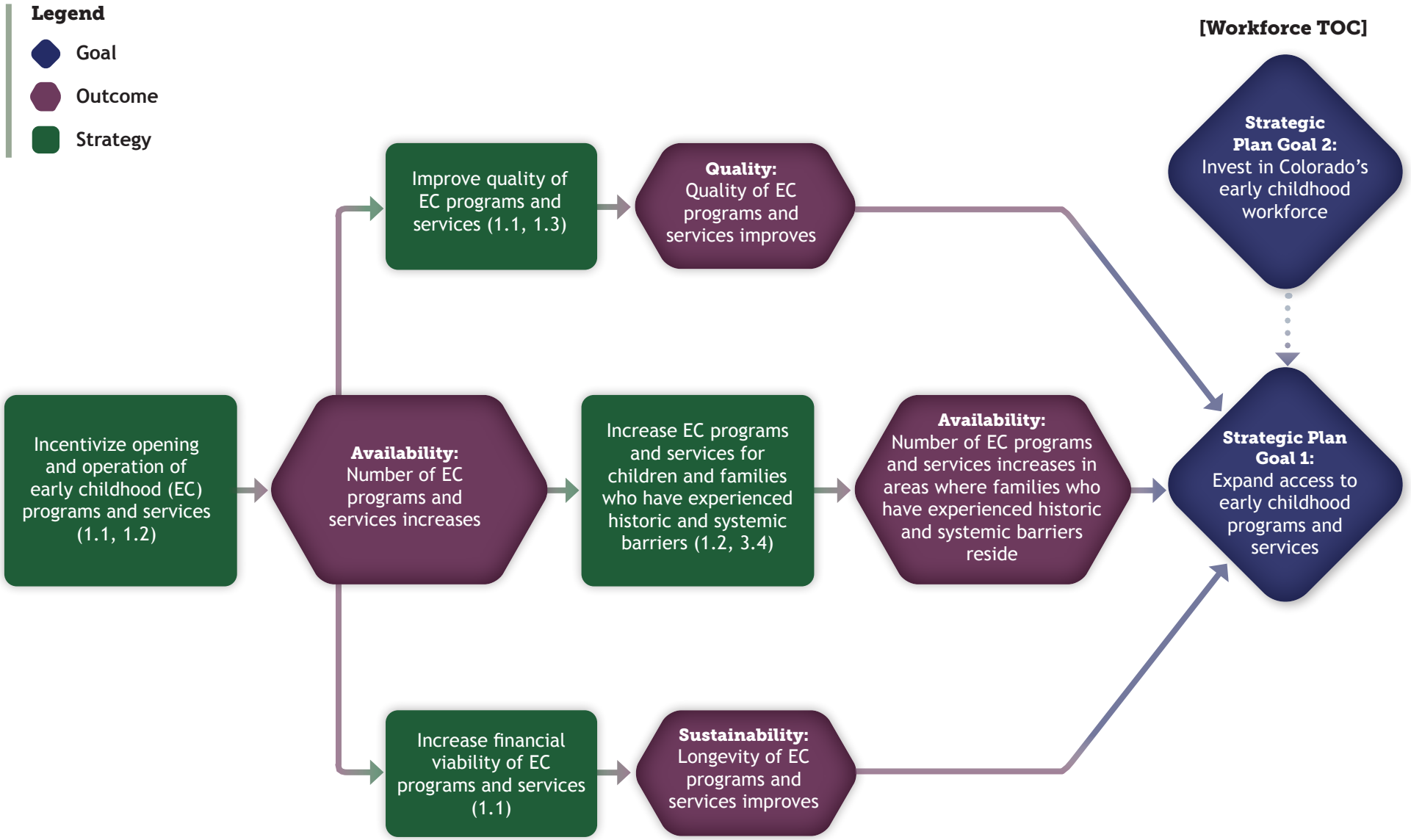

Note: Numbers in parentheses in the green strategy boxes represent objectives from the CDEC Strategic Plan.

Other Organizational TOCs

- Workforce TOC
- Family Strengthening TOC
- Unifying TOC

WORKFORCE THEORY OF CHANGE

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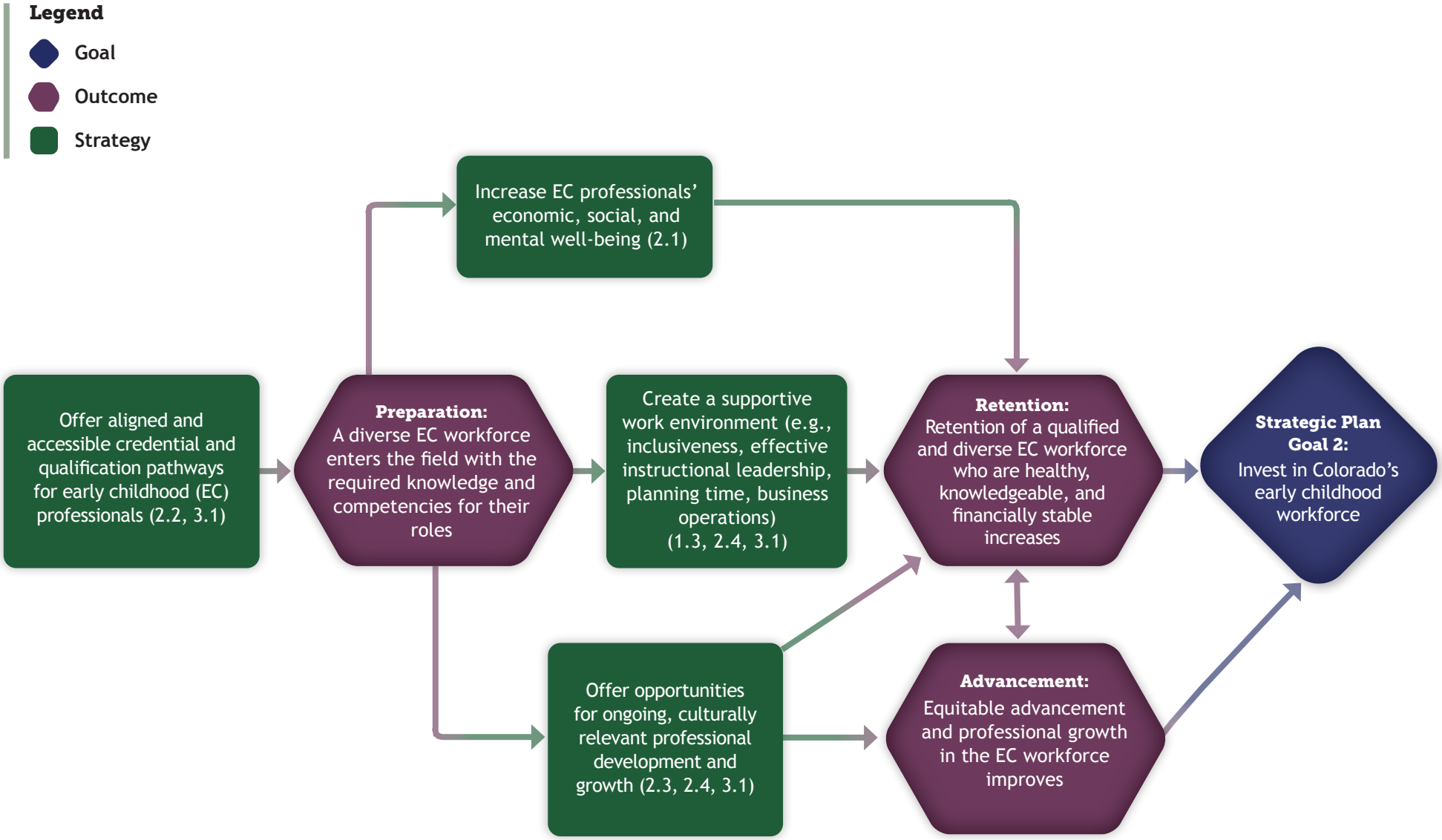

Note: Numbers in parentheses in the green strategy boxes represent objectives from the CDEC Strategic Plan.

Other Organizational TOCs

- Access and Quality TOC
- Workforce TOC
- Unifying TOC

FAMILY STRENGTHENING THEORY OF CHANGE

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Legend

- Goal
- Outcome
- Strategy

[Access & Quality TOC]

Strategic Plan Goal 1: Expand access to early childhood programs and services

Reduce barriers to accessing early childhood (EC) programs and services, particularly for families who have experienced historic and systemic barriers (3.2, 3.3, 3.4)

Accessibility: Number of families able to afford and access EC programs and support services for their young children increases

Support families in selecting best-fitting EC programs for young children (1.4)

Choice & Enrollment: Number of families enrolling their children in their preferred EC program increases

Strategic Plan Goal 3: Strengthen families

Connect families with culturally responsive and linguistically appropriate family support services (3.1,3.2, 3.4)

Resilience & Support: The number of families better equipped to support young children in all domains of functioning increases

Note: Numbers in parentheses in the green strategy boxes represent objectives from the CDEC Strategic Plan.

Other Organizational TOCs

- Access and Quality TOC
- Family Strengthening TOC
- Unifying TOC