



# Strengthening Working Families Initiative Learning Community

2019-2020 CHRONICLE

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Authored by:



Families and communities rely on smart policies, programs, and adequate resources to thrive. And families must be at the center of all work to address intergenerational poverty and economic mobility. Two generation (two-gen) approaches build family and community well-being through a variety of strategies that support both caregivers and children by addressing interconnected issues like education, child care, and economic health. The COVID-19 pandemic has further illuminated the critical nature of these issues, which are too often addressed in systemic, institutional, and programmatic silos. The Strengthening Working Families Initiative (SWFI) has addressed these interconnections holistically throughout its four-year process, supporting student parents with wrap-around services and generating learnings and policy recommendations to shift how our systems work on behalf of families.

“Child care is just the biggest thing. I mean being a single mom is the hardest thing you ever do I think, and you don't have anyone else to help.”

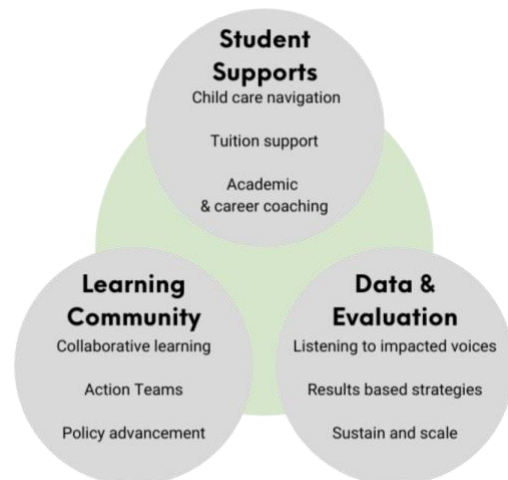
*SWFI Focus Group Findings, The Bell Policy Center, 2019*

The existing child care system in Colorado exhibits significant gaps in addressing the needs of families and providers, and supporting our local economy. The COVID-19 pandemic is pushing Colorado to reexamine how we approach family and community well-being, particularly in the context of child care. For student parents who are working to advance their careers, the complexities of every day needs are underpinned by the demands of schooling. The integrated approach that SWFI has implemented is designed to address the layered challenges community college student parents have to navigate.

This report highlights the key accomplishments of the SWFI Initiative from July 2016-July 2020, and identifies policy and systems building opportunities to build a two-gen approach in family and community strengthening.

## SWFI Structure

The Community College of Aurora and its project partners were awarded a \$3.9 million U.S. Department of Labor Strengthening Working Families Initiative grant in July 2016, coupled with a \$1 million matching grant from Gary Community Investments. The initiative was designed to expand education and access to entry-level, high-demand career pathways for working families while addressing their child care needs through direct services and systemic policy, program and sustainable resource solutions. SWFI brought together community college programming supplemented with community-based expertise, along with a system-focused learning community of two-gen leaders and advocates--the combination of which proved to boost the sustainability of the overall initiative. The flow of information, feedback, and learning across the layers of the effort is a collaborative effort worth replicating. Key elements of the SWFI Learning Community included:



- ▶ A democratic process to identify [shared results and key indicators](#) the group aimed to tackle, which informed the creation of three Action Teams focusing on strategies to move the needle on each indicator.
- ▶ Quarterly meetings of the Learning Community that included shared learning and progress updates, along with voices of student parents and child care providers sharing their experiences and ideas for improving programs and systems.

- ▶ Continuous evaluation, including an annual evaluation, internal assessment of activities and practices with adjustments to course correct or sustain success as needed.

### Spotlight on Success

An Action Team emerged through the Learning Community after listening to voices of providers and student parents, leading to the development of a child care model to increase access to care for families and provide pathways for providers to sustain and grow their business. This idea has grown into Springboard Child Care, a nonprofit organization with a scalable model to support families, children and providers under the same umbrella, offering shared accounting and human resources services, business coaching and support, and quality care for children. Learn more about this in the 'What We've Accomplished' section below.

The SWFI Learning Community has captured its shared learning, accomplishments, and sustainability vehicles through annual chronicle reports. For a comprehensive history of the Learning Community, see previous Chronicles, linked below.

#### 2018 Chronicle

- ▶ Highlight the collaborative process to develop the SWFI Learning Community
- ▶ Development of results and action map driving the process

#### 2019 Chronicle

- ▶ Share accomplishments of three action teams from 2018-2019
- ▶ Spotlights on vehicles of sustainability beyond the SWFI Initiative

For this third and final Chronicle, the report focuses on key accomplishments and calls to action for policy and systems change opportunities. The recommendations include suggested policy shifts across various levels of two-gen work--from state and federal legislation and regulations to scaling and expanding best practices for supporting student parents in college and university systems. Additionally, the Learning Community is calling on fellow agencies, organizations, and advocates to expand on two-gen efforts, including supporting student parents to remove barriers to achieving higher education and career goals, along with maximizing children's healthy development. While the SWFI Initiative focused on student parents, a two-gen approach fits into any system or organization supporting children or adults across a variety of issues.

## What We've Accomplished

### Supporting Parents and Providers in Navigating Child Care

While supporting students with child care navigation is a beneficial aspect of a two-gen approach in college systems, our larger system of child care was not built to adequately address the needs of the range of families in our community, particularly lower income families and those needing care outside of traditional working hours. This acts as a significant barrier for student parents working to achieve academic and career goals.



The Awareness and Availability Action Team worked in 2018-2019 to gather input on needed improvements to the Colorado Shines website operated through the Colorado Department of Human Services (CDHS). A platform for available care options, Colorado Shines serves to allow providers to create profiles with quality improvement ratings while parents are able to search providers and find care that fits their needs. The Action Team worked to identify what worked through the website, along with barriers and challenges for both providers and parents and share feedback and recommendations with CDHS (see highlights below). Many of the recommendations included were also reflected in the Colorado Shines Brighter Preschool Development Grant Strategic Plan.<sup>1</sup> SWFI is eager to see progress made on these recommendations.

### SWFI Recommendations for Colorado Shines Improvements

What Works for Parents and Providers	Needed Improvements for Parents	Needed Improvements for Providers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ It's a free resource to access and navigate</li> <li>▶ Location-specific navigation like filtering by zip code</li> <li>▶ Quality messaging around early childhood development</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Clear definitions of the types of child care families can choose (i.e. center-based, family home, FFN)</li> <li>▶ Add options for care outside of traditional work hours</li> <li>▶ Add options for care for children with special needs</li> <li>▶ Costs of care need to be clear for parents up front</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Increase ability for providers to market themselves (i.e. photos of space, headshots, fliers)</li> <li>▶ Improve mobile accessibility</li> <li>▶ Create a referral process where parents can provide testimonials for providers</li> </ul>

### Resources for Ongoing Learning and Action

The Awareness and Availability Action Team worked with Joining Vision and Action (JVA) to develop a series of resources to support student parents and educate the broader decision-making community about the needs of student parents. Key resources include:

#### Resource Toolkit for Supporting Student Parents

[The Resource Toolkit for Supporting Student Parents and Their Families](#), developed through the SWFI Initiative, is a promising tool that can be replicated in other communities. This toolkit includes a comprehensive catalog of services and supports for families, including child care, housing, economic well-being, and many other supports families continuously navigate. It is meant to serve as a resource that agencies can use as they help families find and access resources, along with families themselves. Focusing on the Denver-Metro community surrounding the colleges, a partnership between the Community Colleges of Denver and Aurora, Early Childhood Partnership of Adams County and Arapahoe County Early Childhood Council made this work possible.

<sup>1</sup> [Colorado Shines Brighter Preschool Development Grant Strategic Plan](#). 2019. Colorado Department of Human Services.

## Increase Awareness of Opportunities for Two Generations

Two white papers were developed to reach policymakers, practitioners, and advocates to highlight data and voices of student parents, along with recommendations for shifts in policy and practice across agencies and through legislation. Key recommendations include more flexible funding for child care and scholarships, investments in career growth through coaching and counseling, and creating more family friendly spaces on college campuses. Read more via the two resources below:

- ▶ [Creating Opportunities for Two Generations](#) (2-pager for policymakers)
- ▶ [Creating Opportunities for Two Generations](#) (6-pager for practitioners and advocates)



### Springboard Child Care: Enabling children, families, and child care providers to thrive, TOGETHER

The Child Care Economics Action Team of SWFI observed a significant unmet need for child care in the Denver and Aurora communities targeted for the project for student parents from Community Colleges of Aurora and Denver and for low-income and working class families in general. Colorado's current system lacks sufficient affordable, available, high quality care for low- and middle-income

families, and providers are struggling to stay afloat, especially in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, over half of Colorado families lived in a child care desert, and many parents experience issues with the ability to be present and productive at work because of child care issues. Furthermore, a lack of available child care provides a major strain on Colorado's economy, with a \$2.2 billion annual impact in lost earnings, productivity, and revenue.<sup>2</sup>

As noted in the 2019 Chronicle, the Economics Action Team utilized data analyzed by The Bell Policy Center on gaps in available care in north Denver and Aurora and commissioned Augenblich, Palaich and Associates Consulting (APA) to conduct focus groups with providers to assess the need and viability of a new child care service model.<sup>3</sup> The Action Team garnered feedback from parents who expressed the need for reliable, quality care offered at flexible times, support in finding the right fit for care, and connections to resources like the Colorado Child Care Assistance Program (CCCAP) and special needs resources.

From these observations, an idea emerged for a model of care that not only increases the availability of care for families, but creates a distributed network of providers, investors, and professional development partners across the community. This unique addition to Colorado's child care marketplace, combining the benefits of a micro-center and family child care network under a single, staffed umbrella, has taken shape as Springboard Child Care Inc. As of Summer 2020, Springboard has been established as an independent

<sup>2</sup> [Want to Fix Colorado's Economy? Fix the Child Care Crisis](#). 2020. Council for a Strong America.

<sup>3</sup> [Investigating the Need for a Shared Services Organization for Preschool Providers in Three Communities](#). 2019. Augenblich, Palaich, and Associates (APA).

nonprofit and is raising funds to hire staff, establish the initial co-working space, and set up the shared services infrastructure. If interested in learning more and getting involved, use the contact form [on the Springboard website](#).

## Building Bridges Between Best Practices and Policy Change

The SWFI Policy Action Team worked throughout the SWFI Initiative to identify areas of opportunity, track key legislation, and build relationships with key state agencies to expand two-gen practices, specifically for student parents. This action team was facilitated by the Bell Policy Center, a research and advocacy organization working to support economic mobility, including a heavy focus on policies that support children and families



holistically. This partnership ensured a direct connection with organizations active at the State Capitol, along with those versed in national two-gen research and best practices. At the same time, while not directly supported through SWFI, the work informed state agencies like the Colorado Department of Higher Education and Colorado Department of Labor and Employment in their efforts to expand career pipelines through efforts like My Colorado Journey and Onward Colorado.

The Policy Action Team outlined a series of policy recommendations for the higher education system in Colorado and beyond to consider to support the unique needs of student parents. These key supports include identifying student parents at the time of enrollment, providing career and academic support, and providing financial resources and navigation for child care needs. For comprehensive recommendations and learnings from SWFI, see the [SWFI Policy Action Team's recommendations here](#).

## Where We Go from Here: Calls to Action and Opportunities to Learn

As SWFI comes to a close, there is an abundance of opportunity to sustain its efforts and build upon the successes. Especially as Colorado moves forward with ongoing response to and economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, prioritizing the needs of our families, including our student parents, is vital to a future where Colorado's families, businesses, and economy can thrive. The SWFI Learning Community has developed opportunities for action and sustainability that span the higher education system, legislative and regulatory spaces, and for the advocacy and foundation community.

### Resource Hubs

One promising practice for college and university systems to consider is developing central resource hubs within colleges to support student parents in navigating child care, along with other needs for their children like developmental screenings, interventions for children with special needs, and parent education. Additionally, student parents often navigate other public support systems like SNAP

(Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program), Medicaid, and safe and stable housing options. Support in navigation of these systems and quicker connections to resources and services can remove barriers so students are able to achieve their goals.

## Stackable Credentials Pathway Programs

A stackable credentials model also benefits student parents. The model which includes short-term credentials sequenced in a pathway program to help recognize milestones and skill building as students complete their higher education experience allows students to leverage previous experience and industry credentials and obtain formal education credentials in an iterative manner. Through on-the-job training or skill development, these credentials can “stack” into a larger degree program and help students enter or advance in an industry using credentials.<sup>4</sup> The Community College of Aurora, in coordination with the SWFI team, launched a one-semester accelerated IT Tech and Support program that allows students to earn two industry-recognized credentials and enter the workforce in less than six months. The CCA and SWFI teams are now looking at bootcamp style trainings that include industry recognized credentials as Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) options for students interested in furthering their education. This option will reduce time and cost for students. The Bell Policy Center also examined the design and components of a stackable credentials pathway (SCP) model in the banking and financial services industry which specifically eliminates equity barriers like cost and time for adult learners. The banking and financial services SCP model uses existing structures like PLA as vehicles to recognize prior experience and demonstrated competencies to earn college credit to reduce the time and cost of credentials.<sup>5</sup>

## Legislative and Regulatory Opportunities

Several legislative and regulatory opportunities emerged from all three of SWFI’s Learning Community Action Teams. These opportunities span multiple decision-making bodies, including state agencies, the Colorado State Legislature and others. The Learning Community also calls upon advocates and the foundation community to increase our commitment to learning about and embedding two-gen approaches into work, which involves building new partnerships and collaborations, and for many, a new way of thinking about the issues we care about.

## A Thriving Child Care System in Colorado

Child care is an essential element of our economic and community infrastructure. Child care keeps businesses running, families working, schools operating, and provides a foundation of growth and success for our children. If we want to rebuild our economy to serve the needs of all Coloradans, we need to build a robust child care system.

We need policymakers, agencies, and funders to join families, providers and early childhood experts to rethink the structure and funding of our child care system as we recover and rebuild from the pandemic. Our state has the ability to come out of this stronger than before if we forge a path forward that is strategic and focused on ensuring high-quality care so all Colorado families can not only survive, but thrive. One key piece of legislation that highlighted areas of opportunity to support working

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Department of Education, Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education, [Stackable Credentials Tool Kit](#), Washington, D.C., 2018.

<sup>5</sup> [Creating Stackable Credentials Programs](#). 2020. The Bell Policy Center

families with child care options is Senate Bill 19-063, which led to the development of a stakeholder engagement process and report that outlined potential improvements to support both working families and child care providers.<sup>6</sup>

Additionally, promising practices which have seen small investments and pilots need to see increased support from policymakers, especially for working families and child care providers as the pandemic continues and recovery begins. Shifting child care subsidies like the Colorado Child Care Assistance Program (CCCAP) from being based on attendance to based on enrollment can ensure continuous and reliable income for providers, who function as small businesses. Reimbursement of these subsidies based on attendance has severely limited the ability of providers to continue caring for children and has put many at risk of closing permanently. At the same time, families struggle to find consistent care as they continue their careers, education, and job searches. For more information on Colorado's efforts to expand enrollment-based funding structures, see the work of Early Milestones Colorado on the CCCAP Contracted Slots Pilot.<sup>7</sup>

## SWFI On the Ground: Supporting Student Parents

Secondary education is one of the strongest pathways to economic stability for adults, creating opportunities for career advancement and income growth. At the same time, access to high-quality early learning experiences brings significant benefits to children and communities, both in a child's immediate growth and development and long-term success in school and life.

SWFI boosts the power of community college education, child care and employment systems in Metro Denver by working closely with students who are parents. Student parents receive support to navigate complex areas of their lives, including the following:

- ▶ Tuition support
- ▶ College preparation
- ▶ Academic coaching
- ▶ Child care navigation
- ▶ Career advising

As families are supported through SWFI, parents get access to education and jobs at the same time their children enter higher quality child care, which together create building blocks for a brighter future.

*The SWFI pilot program supports student parents to access careers in high demand industries by providing key supports to remove barriers and allow them to achieve their goals in school and in life.*

<sup>6</sup> [Colorado Senate Bill 19-063: Infant and Family Child Care Action Plan](#). 2019. Colorado Department of Human Services.

<sup>7</sup> [CCCAP Contracted Slots Pilot](#). 2020. Early Milestones Colorado.



## Student Level Data

In 2016, the U.S. Department of Labor worked with MDRC, a national social policy and research organization, to evaluate the national SWFI grant programs to learn more about how to improve employment and training programs in key industries, including information technology, advanced manufacturing, health care and financial services. The evaluation included implementation analysis, random assignment impact evaluation, and a quasi-experimental impact analysis. Below is longitudinal data over the course of the SWFI project at Community Colleges of Aurora and Denver.

SWFI Summary Data 7/1/2016 to 8/4/2020		
Metric	Community College of Aurora	Community College of Denver
Total Initiating Program Enrollment	356	272
Total Enrolled in Classes	292 (82%)	255 (93%)
Certificate/Credential Attainment	161 (45%) (+85 in progress)	129 (47%) (+15 in progress)
Job Placement	103 (29%)	83 (30%)
% Usage of Informal Care	262 (75%)	277 (59%)
Age of Children	0-4yrs = 239; 5-13 = 305	0-5yrs= 222; 6-13=234

Early results from MDRC's Random Assignment Evaluation of the SWFI project include several promising findings. After initial intake, 84 percent of CCA SWFI participants started classes as compared with only 25 percent of those in the CCA control group, and 77 percent of CCD SWFI participants started classes as compared to only 43 percent in the CCD control group. In addition, preliminary data on completion rates shows SWFI participants completing their academic programs at significantly higher rates: 38 percent of CCA SWFI participants completed versus 27 percent of CCA control group students, and 38 percent of CCD SWFI participants versus 30 percent of CCD control group students. These results point to the importance of the child care, academic navigation and coaching support, and financial resources provided by the SWFI project in motivating prospective students to take action on their education and career goals.

## A Call for Committing to a Two-Gen Approach to Supporting Families

Another key component of two-gen efforts is the understanding that no issue impacts families in an isolated way--they are interwoven. And if our issues do not exist in silos, neither should the approaches to solve them. We cannot address providing quality and supportive environments for children's health and development without ensuring their caregivers have what they need to access jobs with living wages, and that those who provide care for them outside of the home are able to provide safe and supportive spaces for kids to thrive. Similarly, we cannot address a thriving population of adults who can achieve higher education and career goals without making sure they are supported in other areas of their lives, including student parents, who need additional supports.

Additionally, integrating two-gen solutions involves approaches across systemic, policy, program and data and evaluation layers of social change efforts. It requires organizations, agencies and communities to look strategically at outcomes they seek for families, engage the voices and perspectives of those whom their outcomes impact, and weave equitable approaches into solving deeply ingrained and systemic problems that affect both children and the adults who care for them. The SWFI Learning Community has leaned heavily on the research and expertise from the Aspen Institute in our shared learning process, and encourage others interested in two-gen practices to do the same, starting with the *Two-Gen Toolbox*.<sup>8</sup>

As a concluding call to action, SWFI encourages anyone who cares for the well-being of families and communities--early childhood advocates, state agencies, funders, and policy and decision makers--to join in a commitment to learning about and embedding two-gen approaches into our work to support families to thrive in Colorado. Because in order to advance outcomes for children and adults, we must commit to programs, policies, and systems that view and support them *together*.

To learn more about the Strengthening Working Families Initiative, [visit the website](#) or reach out to Janel Highfill ([janel.highfill@ccaaurora.edu](mailto:janel.highfill@ccaaurora.edu)).

<sup>8</sup> [Two-Gen Toolbox](#). 2020. Ascend at the Aspen Institute.