



Colorado Birth Through Five 2023 Needs Assessment

FINAL REPORT

DECEMBER 2023



COLORADO
Department of Early Childhood


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Acknowledgments:

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Colorado

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*“Every day, in a hundred small ways,
our children ask, ‘Do you hear me?
Do you see me? Do I matter?’
Their behavior often reflects our response.”*

L.R. Knost, author and children’s advocate

Of course, our answer to these questions is, “Yes. We hear you. We see you. You matter.” These are easy words to say to a child. Acting on them is harder to put into practice for an entire state full of children.

Colorado is lucky to have loving families, smart and dedicated people who devote their careers to helping young children, and — let’s not forget — amazing children. But the truth is that families often have a hard time getting the help they need to care for themselves and help their children grow.

This is a report about a system that provides care and support for all young children and their families in the state. It’s important to remember that this system is run by people, for people. It should serve the families, teachers, consultants, coaches, and other professionals who surround and uplift our children.

This early childhood system includes a broad range of services. It involves early intervention, preschool, child care, and various other programs to improve well-being and strengthen families, such as mental health consultations, home visiting programs, and parenting classes. It’s important to note that the program areas covered by this report are not inclusive of all programs in the Department of Early Childhood. For example, several programs that aim to prevent child maltreatment are not included. In addition, after research for this report began, Colorado committed to recognizing that the early childhood system also included whole-person health and well-being and economic mobility, in addition to learning and development and family support and education.¹



Scott Dressel-Martin



Scott Dressel-Martin



The Colorado Department of Early Childhood was created by a state law that imagined a comprehensive and community-informed early childhood system whose structure would be data-driven, high-quality, and equitable. Its goal was to support the care, education, and well-being of all of Colorado's young children, their families, and early childhood professionals in diverse settings.²

In 2023, the Department of Early Childhood partnered with the Colorado Health Institute, or CHI, to examine how the early childhood system supports children from birth through age 5, and where there are gaps or opportunities to improve programs and services. This report is the result of that assessment.

This work is funded by the federal Preschool Development Grant Birth Through Five Planning Grant. The Planning Grant's long-term goal is that families can successfully find quality early childhood services and supports. This will result in children who are healthy, thriving, and ready to enter kindergarten. Colorado's Planning Grant focuses on four goals:

- *All families have equitable access to quality and affordable early childhood services to meet the needs of each child at home, in care, and in the community.*
- *Colorado has a diverse, supported, qualified, and well-paid early childhood workforce to provide education and support to all children and their families.*
- *Colorado's birth through 5 system is coordinated and aligned to promote children's, families', and early childhood professionals' overall development, learning, and well-being.*
- *Families and communities are meaningfully and equitably informed, engaged, supported, and empowered in the early childhood system.*

This report examines the state's progress toward these goals. It is meant to inspire improvement and action. Those actions are one way the system can tell children what they need to hear: Yes. You matter.



“Our first year as a family of four stretched the limits of our bodies, our minds, and our marriage. I’m not sure all of us would’ve survived without the support of our family, friends, and therapists. Raising toddlers and babies is hard work. I can’t imagine doing this alone.”

Parent of two children under age 3

Planning for Improvement in the Early Childhood System

For quick reference, key findings from the five topics of this assessment are summarized below. They are explained in more detail in each section of this report.

Family Engagement

Parents can make more informed decisions about their children's care when providers talk with families about the services available to them.

Parents often learn about services like home visiting programs or Early Intervention Colorado through referrals from other service providers, usually doctors. This is an opportunity for families to get involved and make informed decisions about their children's care.

The most effective programs work with parents and children together.

A two-generation approach supports both children and parents by addressing family needs comprehensively. Programs like Head Start go beyond child-focused benefits to tackle broader concerns, encouraging family engagement.

It is hard for families to use early childhood services when their culture is not reflected or their language is not spoken. Early childhood programs need support that will help them include all families.

Services and programs within the early childhood system should reflect the cultural and language needs of the communities they serve.



Scott Dressel-Martin

Sustainability

Aligning and combining funding is challenging for early childhood programs across the system.

State agencies could simplify funding for early childhood programs, potentially by pooling dollars locally. They could encourage the alignment of goals and standards across funding streams to reduce administrative complexity and improve services.

Funding for early childhood programs should come from many sources.

It can be risky for most of the money supporting programs across Colorado's early childhood system to come from just one or two places. While the state can help combine and align funding, the actual funding sources should still vary so that programs do not rely on just one or two resources.

Early care and education providers need ongoing public funding just to stay in business.

Pandemic funding helped early childhood care and education providers stay open during COVID-19. As this extra support ends, many worry they'll have to close their doors.

Family, friend, and neighbor providers of child care need more support and funding.

Families, friends, and neighbors are important parts of the early childhood system. But accessing resources to support their work can be a struggle.

Workforce

Growing the early childhood mental health consultant workforce will support more families and providers.

There are not enough early childhood mental health consultants in the state to meet the demand for these services.

Across the system, the early childhood workforce needs better pay and benefits.

Most early childhood professionals like the work they do but say the jobs don't pay enough. However, Colorado families can't afford to pay more for programs and services.

More funding is needed to give early childhood professionals better development opportunities.

Colorado should provide more free, accessible, and multilingual professional development opportunities for early childhood professionals in all types of roles. This would involve increasing funds for training and paying people for time spent on professional development activities.

Early childhood professionals need training on supporting children who have experienced trauma. They also need to learn more about serving children from various cultural backgrounds.

Early childhood professionals say they need culturally responsive training on early childhood mental health, infant mental health, and trauma-informed care.

Availability

The early childhood system does not meet the needs of families who mostly speak a language other than English or Spanish.

Language can be a major barrier to accessing all types of early childhood services. Some families and service providers also say children who don't speak English or Spanish sometimes get inadequate care.

Children with special health conditions or disabilities need more from Colorado's early childhood care and education programs. However, the state needs more data to understand the scope of the issue and how best to offer support.

About one in five children in Colorado has special health conditions, and it can be hard for their families to find the care they need. More data can help the state address this problem.

Families need child care at all hours.

The need for child care does not always align with a 9-to-5 work day.

Many of the largest preschool providers are participating in Universal Preschool Colorado, but many others have yet to commit.

The Universal Preschool Colorado program began in the fall of 2023, and while we have participation across all provider types, we see a need to increase participation among smaller family child care homes.

Families with infants and toddlers have the greatest needs for child care.

Families with children under 3 have a harder time finding care than families with preschool-aged children.

Quality

In addition to school readiness, early childhood services should emphasize a whole-child approach.

Preparing for kindergarten is a primary focus of this system, but children's access to stable housing, healthy food, and other social factors matters as well.

Early childhood programs have an opportunity to think broadly about what they mean by quality improvement.

Quality can mean different things to different people. Individual programs can consider what "quality" might mean to them and to the people they serve.

About half of early child care and education providers have not advanced their Colorado Shines rating beyond a Level 1.

Colorado Shines ratings are intended to give families insight into early childhood care and education quality, but about half of providers have not engaged with this rating system.

Families say quality is important, but they do not use quality ratings to make decisions about child care.

When it comes to early childhood care and education, families value quality and quality ratings such as Colorado Shines. However, cost and availability often end up as the main considerations for families selecting a care provider.

About This Report



Scott Dressel-Martin

Why This Report Was Created

Colorado receives an important part of its funding to improve early childhood services from a federal program called the Preschool Development Grant (PDG). This report is part of the state's work for the PDG Birth Through Five Planning Grant. This report looks at the needs of Colorado's system to support children birth through age 5 and their families. A companion report from Start Early Consulting will set out a strategic plan for improving the system over the next five years.

The Department of Early Childhood launched in 2022 as the state's newest department. These Birth Through Five assessment and planning reports come at an ideal time as this department's work gets underway. They provide an opportunity to understand the needs of Colorado families and the professionals who serve them.

This report is for Colorado's entire early childhood system, which includes the Department of Early Childhood, other state and local agencies, and the families of young children themselves. As much as possible, it avoids government jargon and presents ideas in plain language. Families and early childhood professionals make up the heart of the system. This report is not only about them, but for them. In addition to guiding organizational change, the goal is that families and professionals can use it to better understand the system and advocate for improvements.

Methods

CHI relied on three types of resources to better understand the needs of families and early childhood professionals discussed in this assessment.

Surveys. The Butler Institute for Families at the University of Denver surveyed parents and early childhood professionals in 2022. Responses to those surveys provide many of the numbers in this report.

Conversations. CHI conducted interviews and focus groups with parents, providers, program leads, and other early childhood experts across the state. Insights from those conversations are noted throughout this assessment.

Existing data and research. The Department of Early Childhood provided statistics and reports about Colorado programs. CHI analysts conducted a national scan of research on early childhood program availability, quality, sustainability, and the workforce. They also added numbers from other data sources, such as the Colorado Health Access Survey.

Please see Appendix A of this report for more detail on research methods.

The Department of Early Childhood, CHI, the Family Voice Council, and Early Childhood Leadership Commission subcommittees worked in partnership to create a research plan for this assessment. They identified five sections to focus on:

1. **Family engagement**
2. **Sustainability**
3. **Workforce**
4. **Availability**
5. **Quality**

Each section examines the state's needs across four areas of the early childhood system. They are:

- ▶ **Early childhood mental health programs**
- ▶ **Family strengthening, which includes several home visiting programs**
- ▶ **Early care and education, which includes preschool and child care**
- ▶ **Early Intervention Colorado**

See the box at right for a list of all programs included in this report.

Finally, Colorado's Birth Through Five Planning Grant identifies different family circumstances that should be addressed in additional detail. They are:



Language and Culture

Families whose primary language is not English, families from various cultures, and immigrant families.



Health

Children who need additional support due to chronic physical, mental, or emotional conditions.



Resources

Families who live in rural areas or high-poverty areas, and families experiencing homelessness.



Infants and Toddlers

Families with children 2 and under.

The select family circumstances are discussed in the final part of each section, labeled Planning for Improvement. These parts of the report offer suggestions for addressing needs that the report identifies.

To help navigate this report, CHI has used bold white text on a blue background to show where the report talks about each of the four areas of the early childhood system. Icons indicate when a suggestion could especially impact families experiencing one or more of the select circumstances — language and culture, health, resources, and infants and toddlers.

Early Childhood Program Areas

This is a list of program areas covered by this report. It does not include all programs in the department. In particular, several programs that aim to prevent child maltreatment are not included.

Early Childhood Mental Health

- ▶ Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation and Support Line
- ▶ The Incredible Years
- ▶ Child First

Family Strengthening

- ▶ Family Resource Centers
- ▶ HealthySteps for Young Children
- ▶ Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters
- ▶ Nurse-Family Partnership
- ▶ Parents As Teachers
- ▶ SafeCare Colorado
- ▶ Colorado Fatherhood Program

Early Care and Education

- ▶ Licensed Child Care
- ▶ Informal early care and education
- ▶ Colorado Shines
- ▶ Head Start
- ▶ Colorado Child Care Assistance Program
- ▶ Targeted Preschool for 3-Year-Olds
- ▶ Individuals with Disabilities Act Part B Preschool Special Education
- ▶ Universal Preschool Colorado

Early Intervention

- ▶ Early Intervention Colorado

Identifying and Meeting Colorado's Needs

The following five sections of this report delve into the five topics outlined in the research plan: family engagement, sustainability, workforce, availability, and quality. Each section concludes with suggestions on how the state could plan for an improved system.

1. Family Engagement

The big picture: The best way to help young children is often to help the whole family.

What needs work: Many families don't know about all of the resources available to them. This is especially true for families whose primary language is not English.

What's working: Trust is everything. Someone who has earned a family's trust, such as a doctor, can connect people with programs that can support them.

Nothing is more important to young children than their families. In Colorado, early childhood programs support families by providing education for parents, health and mental health care for children, and quality child care. All these programs work best when parents are involved. This section of the assessment examines Colorado's successes in engaging families and places where the system can improve.

What We Learned

Raising young children is hard. Parents say they value having someone to talk to about these challenges. They need to connect with other parents who are going through the same thing. They also need support from the community. Colorado has programs that offer free parenting classes — with child care — and social opportunities for parents. Families find these programs valuable, but many are not aware they exist.

"I knew that becoming a parent would be wonderful but challenging, and while the highs are high, the lows can feel pretty low. It's meant so much to me to have a support system in place that keeps me feeling sane and grounded when things get overwhelming."

Parent of a 2-year-old



Families also need advocates and guides — people to stick up for them and help them navigate the early childhood system. Support groups and family advocates can help parents figure out a confusing system.

Families in Colorado also say the names of some programs can make them anxious to sign up. Early childhood programs use terms like “intervention” and “visitation” to describe family strengthening efforts. But families don't always see it the same way. Words like “early intervention” and “home visiting” can trigger fears of punishment and reporting to authorities. This is especially true for families who have suffered from systemic biases due to disability, race, or poverty. Public messages about these programs should stress that they aim to support, not punish, families.

Finally, families could benefit from closer relationships with their child care providers. The 2022 Butler survey asked families to rate their satisfaction on four child care elements — basic logistics, staffing, family inclusion, and program offerings. Family inclusion had the lowest scores.³ Child care providers may benefit from more training or support to help them involve families.

Planning for Improvement

Parents can make more informed decisions about their children's care when providers talk with families about the services available to them.

Many parents don't know about services such as home visiting or Early Intervention Colorado. They often learn about these programs through other providers.³ Family doctors make more referrals to early childhood services than any other resource.⁴

Every time a provider makes a referral, it's a chance to get the family more involved and engaged in shared decision-making. This is true for doctors, child care providers, and other professionals. The conversation can point families to services and help them decide what's right for them.

To do this, service providers need to know about all the programs available and how to connect families with them. Outreach, education, and resource inventories can help increase service providers' awareness of the programs that are available. Sharing the Program Profiles at the end of this report is one potential starting point.



Families of children with special health conditions may already have close relationships with their doctors. These doctors can serve as trusted guides to finding other services that families may need.



Some families face challenges with unstable or unsafe housing. Many are connected to social services and community resources that support people experiencing housing instability or homelessness. Staff at those programs could tell families about early childhood services that can give the families much-needed help.

The most effective programs work with parents and their children together.

A two-generation approach helps children and parents at the same time by addressing the whole family's needs.⁵ For example, Head Start and home visitation programs help not only children, but their families and communities as well.⁶

Everyone wants the best education and care for their children, of course, but families have other

concerns as well. Parents have to put food on the table. They need time to commute to work. They need to look after their own mental health. Parents want to be more involved with early childhood programs when the programs can help address the whole family's needs.

The Department of Early Childhood can look at all its programs to identify which use a two-generation approach. The ones that don't use this approach can be encouraged to do more to address the whole family's needs.

It is hard for families to use early childhood services when their culture is not reflected or their language is not spoken. Early childhood programs need support that will help them include all families.



Parents often don't know about early childhood services. They might qualify for Early Intervention Colorado or a home visiting service, but it won't do them any good unless they know how to ask for help. It's especially hard for families to understand what's available if they speak a language other than English, which is the primary language of most program staff.⁷

Many Colorado families speak primarily English or Spanish, but many others speak Vietnamese, French, Amharic, Korean, Arabic, and more. Brochures, forms, and professional support should be available in these languages as well. They should be written in a way that makes sense to people from various cultures. Parents say there should be a central place to get information on all the different early childhood programs. Additional support or funding can help programs accomplish this.



2. Sustainability

The big picture: Early childhood program leaders must cobble together funds from multiple sources.

What needs work: Many people who run early childhood programs don't have the business expertise to deal with complex funding streams and requirements.

What's working: Federal pandemic funding helped early childhood programs survive a perilous time.

What We Learned

Colorado's early childhood system receives funding from many different sources. Federal, state, and local governments all play a role, as do community groups and charities. And each early childhood program has a different mix of funding. For example, childhood mental health has different funding sources than home visiting programs.

It's hard to keep track of the various funding streams. More importantly, it's hard to get them to work together for children and families. One family may need early intervention and child care, while the family next door needs mental health services and parenting support. Families told CHI that they don't care where the money comes from. They just need a system that can quickly connect them with help for all their needs.

This is easier said than done. It's especially hard for program leaders to manage different sources of funds, all of which have different rules. Changes to state funding are usually up to policymakers in Colorado's legislature, while federal funding changes must happen on a much larger scale.

The Preschool Development Grant Birth Through Five program gives states an opportunity to simplify this system. It's a chance to step back and see if funds are going to the right places.⁸ With careful choices, Colorado can do more with the same amount of money. The state can help child care providers spend more time with children and less time with paperwork. Programs can be given a solid foundation so they will be there for children who haven't been born yet.



The system is so disjointed. Resources are so spread out and watered down.

Colorado Department of Human Services employee

The COVID-19 pandemic shook the early childhood system. Early childhood care and education programs were forced to shut their doors, and some never reopened. In response, the federal government injected hundreds of millions of dollars into Colorado's early childhood programs to keep them afloat. Still, more than three years after the pandemic began, it's difficult for these care providers to find staff, and the emergency funding is about to end. The next few pages summarize what CHI and our partners have learned about financial and operational sustainability in the four areas of Colorado's early childhood system discussed in this report.

► Early Childhood Mental Health

Most of the mental health funding that supports young children comes from federal resources. In 2023, Colorado's Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation program had a budget of just over \$6 million, with three-quarters of it from the federal government.⁹ During the pandemic, Congress sent an extra \$1.4 million. About 60 cents of every dollar of this extra funding went to hiring more early childhood mental health consultants.¹⁰

The Incredible Years gets the largest part of its funding from the state government. Foundations provide more than a quarter of the total (see Table 1).¹¹

Table 1. The Incredible Years Funding Is Mostly Public

The Incredible Years Program Funding by Source, State Fiscal Year (SFY) 2021-2022

Funding Source	Funds	Percentage*
State	\$458,000	39%
Federal	\$361,000	31%
Foundations	\$326,000	28%
Individuals	\$33,000	3%
Earned Income	\$5,000	0.4%
Total	\$1,183,000	100%

Source: Invest in Kids 2021-2022 Report of The Incredible Years in Colorado *Percentage exceeds 100% due to rounding



► Family Strengthening Efforts

Home visiting programs in Colorado receive \$40 million a year, mostly from the state (see Table 2).¹² The home visiting system includes the Nurse-Family Partnership, Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters, Parents as Teachers, SafeCare Colorado, and HealthySteps for Young Children programs. (See the Program Profiles at the end of this report for more information on each of these.) Most state funding comes from the Nurse Home Visitor Program Fund.¹³ This fund gets its money from national lawsuit settlements against tobacco companies. The amount gets a little smaller every year as fewer and fewer people smoke or use tobacco products.¹⁴

The federal government also provides an important part of home visitation funding. The Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program accounts for about a fifth of this budget.¹⁵ It will be up to Congress, the president, and agency leads to keep sending money in future years. Decisions in Washington could affect the stability of home visiting programs here in Colorado.

Family Resource Centers get nearly half of their funding from the state government.⁹ They raise the rest from private sources — mainly foundations (see Table 3).¹⁶ Family Resource Center leaders say state funding is important because philanthropic priorities at foundations can change.¹⁷

Table 2. Most Home Visiting Funding Comes from the State

Colorado Home Visiting System Funding by Source, SFY 2021-2022

Funding Source	Funds	Percentage
State	\$31,735,000	72%
Federal	\$7,303,000	17%
Foundations and private donations	\$3,133,000	7%
County	\$1,719,000	4%
Total	\$43,890,000	100%

Source: Colorado Home Visiting Investment Taskforce

Table 3. Family Resource Centers Blend Private and Public Funding

Family Resource Center Funding by Source, 2021

Funding Source	Percentage
State government	42%
Foundations	31%
Earned income	10%
Individual donations	9%
Events	3%
Other	5%

Source: Family Resource Center Association Memo

Intermediary Organizations: Critical Roles, Key Challenges

Colorado's early childhood system is a complex landscape of programs and services. While many programs are run directly by the Department of Early Childhood, others are administered by separate organizations. Examples include:

- Early Childhood Councils, local nonprofit organizations that bring together programs and perspectives to make the early childhood system work better for communities. There are 35 Early Childhood Councils across the state.
- Invest In Kids, a nonprofit that contracts with individual sites to run The Incredible Years, Nurse-Family Partnership, and Child First programming.
- Assuring Better Child Health and Development, the home visitation program state coordinator for HealthySteps.
- Parent Possible, a nonprofit responsible for administering Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters and Parents as Teachers.
- Local Coordinating Organizations, early education sites in a community that are a direct point of contact for families and providers and provide local systems-building work throughout their area.

These groups, known as intermediary organizations, are critical components of the early childhood system. Yet they face many of the same funding and sustainability challenges as state-run programs. Intermediary organization financing often comes from a variety of complex sources. In a recent evaluation, Early Childhood Councils cited inflexible funding as a major barrier in fulfilling their missions.⁶⁸ Restructured and less restrictive funding could ease this burden by allowing organizations to use funds for more than one purpose or easily combine them with other funding streams when this best suits a program's needs.

► Early Care and Education

Early care and education providers must work hard to put together the money they need to sustain their business operations. At least three in four early childhood education programs in the U.S. coordinate more than one funding source. The most common funding sources include:

- Federal programs such as Head Start, Early Head Start, Title 1, the Individuals with Disabilities Act, and child care subsidies
- State sources such as preschool programs
- Local taxes
- Local education agencies
- Charities
- Tuition paid by parents¹⁸

Combining funding sources requires a great deal of paperwork and strong business planning. However, just half of child care centers and less than a third of home-based care providers say they have a business plan, according to the 2022 Butler Institute for Families Workforce Survey. Nearly a quarter of child care centers and two-thirds of home providers don't have a budget (see Table 4).⁷ This indicates that they may not have the business skills, time, or other resources, such as software, that are needed to best handle complicated funding.

The state is currently beginning an assessment of what child care facilities need in order to remain open and operating. That study will be finished in 2024. It should provide more insight into sustainability considerations for early childhood care and education providers.





Table 4. Many Child Care Providers Lack Business Plans and Budgets

Self-Reported Business and Budgeting Practices

Percentage of Respondents Saying Their Program . . .	Center-Based Administrators	Home-Based Providers	All Providers
Has a business plan	51%	30%	41%
Implements a business plan	42%	22%	33%
Has a budget	77%	36%	58%
Implements a budget	61%	26%	45%
Has a dedicated business manager	56%	9%	34%
Has a business coach / consultant	14%	9%	12%

Source: 2022 Butler Workforce Survey

► **Early Intervention Colorado**

Early Intervention Colorado has a \$91 million budget. The state legislature provides almost two-thirds of it through the general fund.⁹ About \$10 million comes from the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Part C.¹⁹ Medicaid also covers early intervention services, and some private health insurance plans pay for early intervention services through an Early Intervention Services Trust fund.^{20,21} Some programs are supported by other funding sources such as grants and local mill levies.

Funding has grown substantially in the past few years, mostly because the legislature has decided to invest heavily and cover services under Medicaid (see Table 5).²² The Early Intervention Colorado program worked closely with the Department of Health Care Policy and Financing to leverage Medicaid funding to the fullest extent possible. This interagency collaboration could serve as a model for state programs seeking additional federal funding supports.

Table 5. Early Intervention Colorado Funding Has Increased Since 2017

Early Intervention Colorado Funding by Source, SFY 2017-2018 and SFY 2023-2024

Funding Source	SFY 2017-2018	SFY 2023-2024
State general fund	\$23,631,000	\$58,097,000
State Early Intervention Services Trust Fund	\$4,578,000	\$4,074,000*
State Medicaid funds	\$10,986,000	\$18,297,000*
Federal funds	\$8,273,000**	\$10,164,000**
Total	\$47,468,000	\$90,632,000

Sources: Federal Grant Awards, Long Appropriations Bill, Colorado Department of Early Childhood, Early Intervention Services Trust Accountant

*Data on Early Intervention Services Trust Fund and Medicaid funding reflects SFY 2022-2023

**Excludes personal services staffing costs for the Early Intervention Colorado program





Planning for Improvement

Aligning and combining funding is challenging for early childhood programs across the system.

Right now, early childhood funding is disjointed. Program managers have to piece together funding from wherever they can find it, making administration complicated and expensive. Specifically, people who work in early childhood mental health consultation or child care settings told CHI that simplified funding would help them connect children to services more easily.

State agencies can ease the administrative burdens placed on program managers by helping combine funding from different sources to make it easier to handle. (Federal rules sometimes get in the way by limiting how funds can be used.)

People interviewed for this report said the kindergarten through 12th grade school system does

a nice job managing multiple funding sources. But multiple sources are a burden for child care centers and family child care homes that care for younger children and are not part of a school district. Early childhood care and education leaders said the current funding system is too focused on individual early childhood programs, not the big picture. They say Colorado should take a step back and think about how to refocus on a broader system instead of responding to specific problems when they come up.

The state could align goals, rules, and standards across all its funding streams. And it could unify authority over the various funding streams.⁸ Examples of successful state efforts to braid and blend funding include the Virginia Children's Services Act and the Louisiana Permanent Supportive Housing program.^{23, 24} Guidance documents summarizing key success factors in these approaches can serve as a starting point for state policymakers.²⁵

Funding for early childhood programs should come from many sources.

While using funds from multiple sources can make administration complex, variety in funding sources can also have advantages. For example, much of the money in Colorado's early childhood system comes from the state general fund. This is risky because the amount can vary from year to year. Legislators might change their minds, or the Taxpayer's Bill of Rights could limit funding in future years.

Dealing with different funding sources can become difficult quickly. Yet diverse sources make funding more stable and sustainable. The key is a diversification of resources combined with the braiding and blending approaches that simplify this complexity. Different forms of state, federal, and private funding could offer a buffer in the event of problems with the state general fund, changes in federal administrations, or shifts in philanthropic priorities. At the same time, administrative burdens and paperwork should not get worse as a result.

Early care and education providers need ongoing public funding just to stay in business.

Pandemic relief funding brought an extra \$271 million to Colorado's early childhood care and education providers in 2022 and 2023.²⁶ These providers spent two-thirds of it on payroll and about a quarter on personal protective equipment. This underscores that even during the pandemic, finding and retaining staff was the biggest need of child care providers.²⁷


Providers say the pandemic funding was crucial for continuing to provide services, but they need more than a temporary fix — even now that the worst of COVID-19 has subsided. Workforce shortages existed prior to the pandemic and continue to be a challenge. Without additional support, early childhood care and education providers won't be able to hold onto their staff and stay open. The same story is playing out across the country. Many child care programs are worried they will have to close when federal emergency funding runs out.²⁸

Family, friend, and neighbor providers of child care need more support and funding.

Family members, friends, and neighbors are key components of the early childhood system, but many don't think of themselves as part of a system at all. They see themselves as grandparents, aunts, brothers, or friends.²⁹ Still, they collectively make up an important workforce. The state has made some good progress in supporting these informal care providers, and it could do more to help by making more supports easy for them to access.

Families often seek out these informal care providers because they are convenient and flexible. Some parents may want their children to be with a family member who speaks their language and shares their cultural values. Families who use families, friends, and neighbors for child care are more likely than the Colorado population overall to be people of color, immigrants, refugees, and others who haven't been served well by our health and education systems.³⁰

Family, friend, and neighbor child care providers are less likely to access programs like the Child and Adult Care Food Program, which pays for healthy meals and snacks, and the Colorado Child Care Assistance Program. While the programs are available to them, informal providers face some additional barriers in using them. The state requires extra approval for these caregivers to use these programs.³¹ People interviewed for this report said the state should make it easier for this overlooked workforce to access these programs. This could mean simplifying the approval process or helping providers understand when they qualify for these programs.

 ***Over the past few years, there's been a noticeable change in support of families, friends, and neighbors. Colorado now has people in leadership positions who can implement programs for family, friend, and neighbor providers, who understand the contributions and the necessity of investing in family, friend, and neighbor providers."***

Colorado Statewide Parent Coalition staff member



MSU Denver/Alyson McClaran

3. Workforce

The big picture: An underpaid workforce with high turnover is one of the biggest challenges for Colorado's early childhood system.

What needs work: The system needs more funding to increase salaries, benefits, and training because families can't pay more.

What's working: Despite low pay, most early childhood professionals like their jobs.

What We Learned

Early childhood professionals are in short supply across the nation. It's easy to see why — salaries in this field tend to be low, and many of these professionals don't get benefits. In Colorado, a third of early childhood professionals make so little money that they receive public assistance such as food stamps or Medicaid.³²

Still, most early childhood professionals like what they do. A Colorado survey found that 94% of this workforce was satisfied or very satisfied with their jobs. But less than three-quarters of them said the same about their pay and benefits.³³

Child care providers have always had a hard time recruiting and retaining staff, but the problem got worse during the COVID-19 pandemic. Employers said that many people left the field for new careers with higher pay and fewer training requirements.

Educating and caring for young children is a hands-on job. Decades of neuroscience and behavioral health research illustrate why a child's first five years of life are the most critical periods in their brain development.³⁴ When early childhood professionals are thriving themselves, they are able to positively influence children's cognitive, social, and emotional needs. Through dedication, lived experience, and specialized training, professionals have a lifelong impact on the development of strong brains. Early childhood programs only work because of their people — from preschool teachers to nurses to mental health consultants. None of Colorado's early childhood programs can improve without taking care of their staff. On the other hand, Colorado can increase the quality and availability of its services if early childhood programs can attract new people to the workforce and retain those they have. Options for doing this include offering paid time off and retirement benefits or revisiting salary scales with the goal of increasing pay.³⁵

► Early Childhood Mental Health

Colorado needs more professionals in its programs that focus on early childhood mental health. Program leaders within the Department of Early Childhood told CHI the state has too few early childhood mental health consultants. In June 2023, the waitlist for early childhood mental health consultations had 62 referrals that hadn't been filled, indicating a notably higher demand for those services than current resources can support.³⁶

Colorado policymakers have been trying to support this workforce. The state used money from federal pandemic funds to improve training and professional development for early childhood mental health consultants. More than 100 people joined some of these trainings, which taught consultants how to use new tools or take new approaches to caring for children.¹⁰ Two-thirds (67%) of early childhood mental health consultants have a positive opinion of the state's professional development system.³⁴

In general, early childhood mental health consultants enjoy the roles and responsibilities of their jobs. Most consultants (62%) said they're satisfied with their pay. The majority have been in their job for at least four years.³⁴



However, these professionals are not always representative of the people they serve. Colorado has a continuing need for diverse providers in early childhood mental health consultations and The Incredible Years. Only 5% of childhood mental health consultants are people of color. Fewer than one in 10 speak another language.³⁷ Incredible Years staff are somewhat more diverse, but 59% are white, compared with 38% of students and parents in the program. Table 6 shows the racial and ethnic makeup of students and staff in the three The Incredible Years programs offered in Colorado.¹¹ The Incredible Years does not have data on language needs, but the program has expanded its Spanish outreach in the past few years.³⁸ For a description of The Incredible Years, see Program Profiles at the end of this report.

Table 6. The Incredible Years Families Are More Racially Diverse Than Its Workforce

The Incredible Years Program Participants and Workforce by Race/Ethnicity, 2021-2022

Race/Ethnicity	Dinosaur School		Teacher Classroom Management		Preschool BASIC Parent Program	
	Participants	Staff	Participants	Staff	Participants	Staff
Hispanic/Latino	42%	24%	44%	25%	40%	33%
White	40%	63%	26%	51%	43%	41%
Two or More Races	9%	4%	12%	2%	5%	5%
Black or African American	5%	2%	14%	15%	2%	0%
Asian	2%	2%	3%	0%	3%	4%
American Indian/Alaska Native	1%	2%	1%	4%	2%	1%
Other/Unknown	1%	3%	0%	3%	5%	16%

Source: Invest in Kids 2021-2022 Report of The Incredible Years in Colorado

► **Family Strengthening Efforts**

New parents can learn a lot from the parent support professionals who visit them in their homes. However, employers have a hard time finding qualified home visiting professionals at the salaries they offer. Even when people take a job, their tenures are often short due to limited career growth opportunities. Employers say they try to help their staff by giving them close supervision — one-on-one talks, team-building activities, support that encourages them to reflect on their experiences at work.³⁹ Two of Colorado's home visiting programs had an Enhanced Home Visiting initiative that provided more than 450 of these “reflective consultation sessions” in 2021-2022.⁴⁰ However, this funding was tied to the federal stimulus and may not be sustained in the long term.

Yet home visiting staff had different ideas about the supports that would help them stay at their jobs. They said they want better pay, more benefits, and increased options for flexible schedules or remote work.³⁹

Family Resource Centers, which help connect families with other services, have similar issues. The cost of living is rising, and the centers cannot increase salaries quickly enough to keep up. This makes it hard to attract and hold onto good professionals.¹⁷ (For a description of Family Resource Centers, see Program Profiles at the end of this report.)

Many of these jobs are emotionally draining. Home visitors work with families in extreme situations. They often feel the families' trauma and take it home with them. Sometimes they feel like they don't have enough time and energy for their own families.¹⁷

► **Early Care and Education**

Hiring and retaining staff, especially since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, is a major challenge among early childhood care and education providers. Between the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years, turnover among this workforce was as high as 34%.⁴¹

Pay is very low for early childhood care and education professionals. The median salary is \$36,397, or about \$18 per hour.³⁴ While these salaries can vary by the type of early childhood care and



education professional, most are still low relative to the state living wage — one study found that assistant teachers average \$16.35 per hour and lead teachers average \$20.75 per hour.⁴¹ The living wage for a single person in Colorado is \$19 an hour, and twice that for one adult and one child.⁴² Even so, almost all professionals in this area (93%) are satisfied with their jobs. But only 63% are happy with their pay, and just 53% with their benefits.³⁴

Early childhood care and education providers want to learn. In a survey, they said they felt most knowledgeable about child development and social-emotional learning. They said they knew less about working with children from cultures that were different from theirs or caring for children who have had trauma in their lives. They would like more training on these topics and coaching to support implementation of what they learned.⁴³

You can train until you're blue in the face, but unless you can implement it, you need to have some coaching and follow-up."

Early childhood educator

► **Early Intervention Colorado**

Most professionals who deliver Early Intervention Colorado services (82%) are satisfied with their roles and responsibilities. And 72% are content with their job overall. They also are happy with their training opportunities.³⁴

However, recruiting and retaining early intervention professionals remains a challenge. Only 54% report satisfaction with their pay, and 52% are content with their benefits. The median salary among these professionals in Colorado is \$66,040.³⁴

There is also a need to diversify the languages spoken by the Early Intervention Colorado workforce to make these services more accessible to families. The program gets more requests for services in Spanish and other languages than they are able to provide. While early intervention services must be provided in the primary language of the child, this could create longer wait times for families in need of a provider who speaks a language other than English.

Planning for Improvement

Growing the early childhood mental health consultant workforce will support more families and providers.

Information collected by the state, including waitlists and feedback from program leaders, indicates that there are too few early childhood mental health consultants in Colorado. But caution should be taken when considering solutions to this shortage. Everyone wants to make sure that the parts of the system that work well can keep working.

People who run the early childhood mental health programs have a suggestion: increase the workforce by 10% every two to three years. If they keep doing this, it should be enough to meet the needs of people in Colorado after about 10 years, when it has grown by 35%.

Across the system, the early childhood workforce needs better pay and benefits.

Low pay is one of the most difficult challenges faced by the early childhood system. The need for increased wages is obvious, but child care is already expensive and state funding options for

it and other early childhood programs have to compete against other public needs such as health care and public safety. Most families couldn't afford the increase in costs that would be needed to raise salaries.⁴⁴

Early childhood professionals say their pay should reflect their experience, training, and credentials, rather than being a flat rate for everyone. This idea isn't new — for early childhood care and education providers, the Colorado Early Childhood Compensation and Benefits Task Force has already proposed a three-part salary scale.³⁵ Pay would be based on job duties, training, and the cost of living. Colorado could adopt a system like this. However, raising salaries probably would require government funding so that families could still afford the monthly cost. The Colorado Early Childhood Compensation and Benefits Task Force identified next steps for exploring this approach including cost modeling studies, federal advocacy, and transitioning stipends to long-term salary increases.³⁵

Professionals also need to be paid back for their on-the-job expenses, such as travel by home visitation staff to meet families.

The state could also look for ways to subsidize benefits, such as:

- Physical and mental health coverage
- Child care
- Planning time during their day
- Training opportunities
- Student loan repayment³⁵



Scott Dressel-Martin

The good news is that most early childhood providers are happy with the work that they do. But when it comes to pay and benefits, they are less satisfied. This is especially true for early childhood care and education providers.³⁴ Better pay and benefits mean more people would stay in this role. Keeping good professionals on the job will improve the quality of care, too.

More funding is needed to give early childhood professionals better development opportunities.

Early childhood professionals told CHI that they sometimes have to cover their own professional training costs when they take classes outside of the Colorado Shines Professional Development Information System. They usually use unpaid time off to take these classes as well. And although they want to learn, they don't have much incentive if the training doesn't advance their careers or wages. All of this discourages professional development among this workforce, which can lower the quality of care.

Colorado needs to offer more professional development opportunities that are free, convenient, and available in many languages. This will make them more likely to stay in their jobs. The Colorado Shines Professional Development Information System currently offers some free trainings, but providers said the system doesn't have all the classes they need, such as those that equip them to serve children with special needs, who speak another language, or who could benefit from trauma-informed approaches. Also, online trainings aren't as engaging as in-person classes for many people. Having a balance of in-person opportunities, which can be more engaging for some people, and online trainings, which are more accessible for others, can help professionals find the classes and supports that best fit their needs.

Training through the Colorado Shines Professional Development Information System is currently available to anyone in the state, including unlicensed and family, friend, or neighbor child care providers. Ideally, any expansion of the trainings offered to the licensed providers would also be available to these individuals, as they too play a crucial role in looking after Colorado's young children.

Some Coloradans are taking on this challenge. Colorado Mountain College and the Rocky Mountain Early Childhood Council have set up a workplace-based learning program. This program

gives teachers time off during the work day to attend virtual classes. A substitute teacher or early childhood care and education provider steps in to facilitate this. This program could serve as a model for other communities. In addition, the Department of Early Childhood offers an apprenticeship program that provides an alternative career pathway for people entering the early childhood field or continuing their careers as early childhood professionals. These apprenticeships include opportunities for paid work experience and mentorship while participants pursue credentials or degrees. Red Rocks Community College, Colorado Mesa University, and University of Colorado Colorado Springs all participate in this program.⁴⁵

The Department of Early Childhood also offers numerous scholarship programs, including T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood Colorado scholarships, Child Development Associate scholarships, and more.⁴⁷

Early childhood professionals need training on supporting children who have experienced trauma. They also need to learn more about serving children from various cultural backgrounds.



In the Butler Institute for Families' surveys, early childhood professionals reported that they need training on early childhood mental health, infant mental health, and trauma-informed care to support children who have experienced trauma.⁴³



Cultural sensitivity is an identified training need in the Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation program.⁴⁶ Consultants feel least equipped to handle matters related to:

- Special education law
- Finding nearby programs that are a good fit for a child's culture
- Family substance use disorders
- Sensory processing needs
- Finding public and private support for families
- Countering inequity and bias⁴⁷

Early childhood staff should be treated like professionals. That means paying for their training and raising their pay when they advance their education.

4. Availability

The big picture: Demand for early childhood services often exceeds the supply. This is especially true for mental health, family strengthening services, and care for infants and toddlers.

What needs work: Colorado needs more providers who speak different languages, who can care for children with special health conditions, and who care for infants and toddlers.

What's working: Overall, most parents are satisfied with their care arrangements.

What We Learned

One of the hardest problems for Colorado parents is that early childhood services are hard to find. Child care centers often lack capacity, especially for infants and toddlers. Many home visiting services do not cover large areas of the state. And families often have to wait to get early childhood mental health because of a lack of providers.

► Early Childhood Mental Health

Colorado offers many programs to support new parents. These programs are evidence-based and available in many parts of the state. However, not every family that could benefit from these supports receives them.

Early childhood mental health consultants managed 1,836 active cases in 2022-23, almost as many as before the pandemic.^{48,10} But there are acute shortages of these services in rural areas, and

too few consultants speak other languages or are people of color.³⁷

Online consultations, also known as telehealth, are helping meet the demand. In 2022, 8% of families received early childhood mental health consultations. Three-quarters of them got help online. And most of them (80%) said they were satisfied with the quality when they got care online.⁷

The Incredible Years served 5,800 children and parents across 21 counties in the 2021-22 school year.³⁸ This is a little less than in earlier years, which might be due to the pandemic.⁴⁹ The program is reaching out to Spanish-speaking family, friend, and neighbor care providers to make sure they are connecting more people with services in their primary or preferred language. Twelve Spanish-speaking people completed the 20-week training in 2021-22.³⁸

A new program called Child First served 200 children in 2021-22.³⁸ But the demand is much greater. In September 2023, more than 70 families were on a waitlist for 40 available Child First spots in the Front Range and central mountains. New agencies are opening to support more people, yet the agencies that offer Child First have a hard time keeping staff. Sometimes, half their jobs are unfilled.

► Family Strengthening Efforts

Colorado has many programs that support families, and they reach thousands of parents every year. In 2022, one in five families surveyed received a family support or parenting education service in



their home. These supports and services include home visitation programs such as Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY), Nurse-Family Partnership, or Parents as Teachers, as well as kinship care, adaptive software, respite services, sibling care, and more. Families whose primary language was not English were more likely to receive these services than those who speak English. The services were also more likely to be used by the families of children with special health conditions than by the families of children who do not have these needs (see Table 7).⁷ Specifically, Colorado's home visiting programs served 11,000 families with almost 100,000 visits in 2021-22.⁵³

However, they are not available everywhere in the state.⁵⁰ Nurse-Family Partnership works in all 64 counties. But much of northwest Colorado does not have a Family Resource Center.⁵² Other programs do not cover large swaths of the state:

- HIPPY is not in 47 counties.
- Parents as Teachers is not in 34 counties.
- HealthySteps is not in 56 counties.
- SafeCare Colorado is not in 27 counties.⁵¹

A new program called Family Connects Colorado aims to offer home visiting to any family with a newborn in the state. Right now, it is operating in Boulder, Denver, Eagle, and Jefferson counties.⁵²

Here is a look at some family strengthening programs and their challenges:

Nurse-Family Partnership. More than 3,600 children and 4,290 parents and guardians were served by the Nurse-Family Partnership in 2021-2022. Yet the program is being hit by the statewide nursing shortage. Program leaders are working to recruit more nurses in high-need areas to provide this care.³⁸

Family Resource Centers. Leaders of these centers have the same problem with staffing. They say they could help more families if they had more funding — and the flexibility to use funds to address local needs.¹⁷

Parents as Teachers. In 2022, more than 1,700 children in 30 counties benefited from this service. Most (84%) lived in families with incomes at or below 200% of the federal poverty level, which is

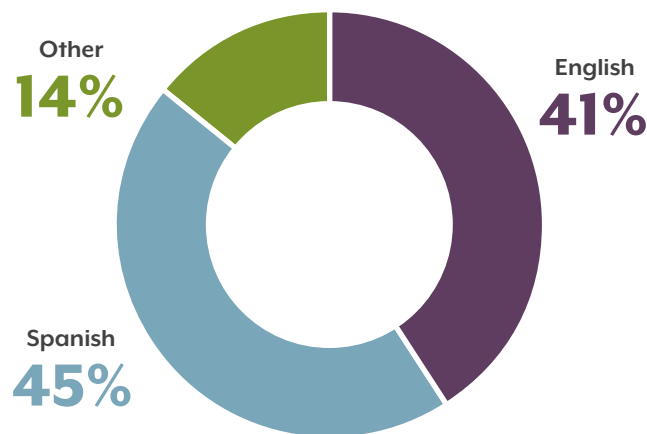
\$60,000 for a family of four. Two-thirds (63%) of the parents were Hispanic or Latino. Almost half (45%) preferred a language other than English. Usually, this was Spanish.⁴⁰

Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY). This program served 775 children in 2022, yet access is limited across the state. HIPPY exists at nine sites across 17 counties. None of these are on the Western Slope and only a few are in the Eastern Plains. Similar to Parents as Teachers, most households served by HIPPY (87%) had incomes at or below 200% of the federal poverty level, and two-thirds (65%) of parents were Hispanic or Latino. Most of the children who participated in HIPPY spoke a language other than English at home (see Figure 1).⁴⁰

Colorado Fatherhood Program. This new program supported nearly 300 fathers at its seven sites in 2022-23. The Colorado Fatherhood Program is reaching fathers, who often are overlooked as caregivers. Most of the fathers served were in rural areas, including 78 fathers in Lamar, 53 in Denver, 47 in Cortez, 46 in Pueblo, 30 in Mesa and Montrose counties, 24 in Boulder, and eight in Durango. More than a third (37%) were Hispanic or Latino. Another 12% were American Indian or Alaska Native.⁵⁴

Figure 1. Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters Mostly Serves Non-English-Speaking Participants

Children Served by Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters by Primary Language, Program Year 2021-2022



Source: Parent Possible Annual Report

Table 7. Not All Families Receive Home Family Supports at Similar Rates
Percentage of Families Receiving Family Supports at Home by Language, Race/Ethnicity, and Special Needs Status, 2022

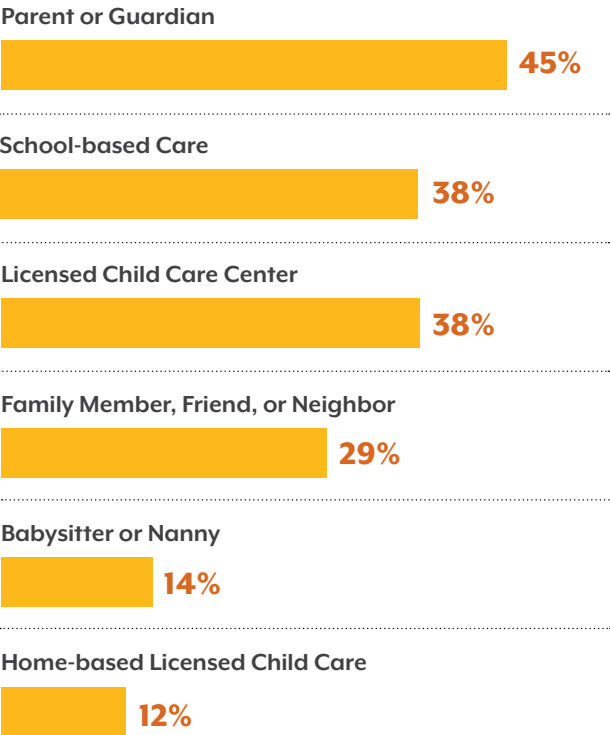
Language	
English	20%
Spanish	31%
Other	27%

Race/Ethnicity	
Hispanic, Latino(a), or of Latin American origin	22%
White or European American	19%
Asian	22%
African, African American, or Black	30%
American Indian, Indigenous, or Alaska Native	34%

Special Needs Status of Children	
None	19%
Multiple special needs	31%
Intellectual, developmental, behavioral health	20%
Physical	25%

Source: Butler Institute for Families Family Survey, 2022

Figure 2. Most Families Rely on Parent, School-Based, or Licensed Child Care
*Percentage of Parents Using Each Type of Child Care or Early Education Arrangement**



Source: Butler Institute for Families Family Survey, 2022
 *Note that parents could select more than one option

► **Early Care and Education**

Child care in Colorado has two hard-to-solve problems: care is hard to find, and it’s expensive.

More than half of Colorado families need more than one type of child care. The most common type of caregiver for children under 6 is the parent or parents themselves. More than a third (38%) use a licensed child care center. About 29% rely on family, friends, or neighbors.⁷ (See Figure 2.)

Colorado has a shortage of licensed care spots available for younger children. There are only enough licensed spots to serve 12% of the infants and 27% of the toddlers in the state. On the other hand, licensed providers have enough capacity for 97% of preschool-age children.⁵⁵

However, those numbers can be misleading. There might be room in a building for more

children, but a center can’t take more children if it doesn’t have enough care professionals — and often they don’t. Sometimes, this is because it is difficult to recruit for these positions. Other times, it is because child care and education providers keep staff-to-child ratios low in order to ease provider burden and hold onto the workforce they currently have. Because of this, families continue to face limited options and long waitlists for child care even though “licensed capacity” appears sufficient.

“I started to get on waitlists one week after finding out I was pregnant. One place ... called me when he was 3.5 years old to tell me a spot opened up.”
 Parent of a three-year-old



Scott Dressel-Martin

Table 8. Parents Often Cite Location, Cost, Trustworthiness, and Schedules as Important Factors

Percentage of Parents Selecting Each Factor as Important in Choosing Child Care

Factor	Percentage
Location	77%
Cost/affordability	70%
Trustworthiness of teachers/caregivers	67%
Hours and days of operation/schedule	66%
Reliability of schedule and availability	56%
Supportive teachers/caregivers	55%
Health and safety procedures	52%
Whether the child care facility is licensed	44%
Teaching methods (such as Reggio Emilia, Montessori, Waldorf)	36%
Availability of spots/openings	36%
Quality rating/Colorado Shines rating	35%
Teachers/caregivers with similar values to my family	34%
Serves multiple ages of children	25%
Support for children with special needs	22%
Languages spoken	21%
Additional support and resources for families	21%

Source: Butler Institute for Families Family Survey, 2022

“The affordability is outrageous. It’s more than our mortgage.”
“It’s really unfortunate that the limiting factor in our family planning is, can we afford child care?”

Parents of an 8-month-old

In 2021, one in five Colorado families (21%) had at least a week when they couldn’t get the child care they needed.⁵⁶ The problem was even bigger for families with infants, with more than a quarter (27%) not being able to get child care.⁵⁷

Cost is the biggest barrier to child care, whether it’s licensed or informal.⁵⁸ Cost is also one of the biggest factors families consider when they make child care decisions.⁷ The state has tried to make child care more affordable through Universal Preschool and the Colorado Child Care Assistance Program. But only around half of eligible licensed child care providers participate in those programs, and not all families qualify for the Colorado Child Care Assistance Program.

Families also need care at different times of day. Some parents work early morning or late evening shifts. A center’s operating hours are a major consideration for many families (see Table 8). Most parents (61%) need care during weekday business hours, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. But one in five need care outside the typical workday.⁷

Many other factors matter to families, including teaching styles, languages spoken, and help for children with special needs (see Table 8).

Care can be hard to find, but Colorado parents are mostly happy with their arrangements. Overall, three-quarters of parents (75%) say they’re satisfied or very satisfied. But satisfaction is lower for families who don’t speak English or Spanish, or are Black, American Indian, or Asian. Families of children with both physical and emotional, development, or behavioral special health conditions also were less satisfied with their care situations. Individualized Education Programs and Individualized Family Service Plans may help support these families.⁵⁹ And despite the overall lower satisfaction among some people, almost all families think their children are safe and happy in their child care settings. It’s worth noting that fewer than nine in 10 American Indian families felt their children were safe — slightly lower than other groups (see Table 9).⁷



Table 9. Satisfaction with Child Care Arrangements Varies by Language, Race/Ethnicity, and Special Needs Status

Parent Satisfaction and Assessments of Child Happiness and Safety by Demographic

	Percentage Satisfied or Very Satisfied	Percentage Saying Child Is Happy	Percentage Saying Child Is Safe
Language			
English	74%	96%	98%
Spanish	84%	98%	98%
Other	65%	91%	96%
Race/Ethnicity			
Hispanic, Latino(a), or of Latin American origin	79%	97%	99%
White or European American	76%	96%	98%
Asian	63%	96%	100%
African, African American, or Black	59%	94%	99%
American Indian, Indigenous, or Alaska Native	41%	97%	89%
Special Needs Status of Children			
None	77%	97%	99%
Multiple special needs	68%	89%	96%
Intellectual, developmental, behavioral health	66%	93%	95%
Physical	66%	95%	97%

Source: Butler Institute for Families Family Survey, 2022



Scott Dressel-Martin

► Early Intervention Colorado

Early Intervention has a broad reach across the state. It draws on 1,500 providers and service coordinators. The service is available in every county.

About 15,000 children across the state got Early Intervention Colorado services in 2019.⁵² That includes 8% of the state's infants and toddlers. However, according to a survey of families, those who speak Spanish or who are Black received Early Intervention Colorado services less frequently (see Table 10).⁷ More investigation is needed to understand the reasons behind this.

Table 10. Use of Early Intervention Colorado Services Varies by Language and Race/Ethnicity

Use of Early Intervention Colorado Services by Demographic

Language	Percentage Receiving Early Intervention Services
English	21%
Spanish	14%
Other	18%

Race/Ethnicity	Percentage Receiving Early Intervention Services
Hispanic, Latino(a), or of Latin American origin	18%
White or European American	20%
Asian	30%
African, African American, or Black	14%
American Indian, Indigenous, or Alaska Native	25%

Source: Butler Institute for Families Family Survey, 2022

Workforce shortages among early childhood therapists can create long wait times for families seeking early intervention services. Even when screenings and referrals are done promptly, accessing services can be an additional barrier.

“We were referred to Early Intervention Colorado when our baby was three months old. When we finally had our first physical therapy appointment six months later, it didn’t feel ‘early’ anymore. It felt very late.”

Parent of a 10-month-old

Planning for Improvement

According to survey data, children from families earning low incomes, children of color, children whose families do not speak English or Spanish, children from rural areas, children with disabilities, and children who have experienced trauma often face barriers in accessing the quality early childhood care and education they need.⁷

The early childhood system does not meet the needs of families who mostly speak a language other than English or Spanish.



Language is a barrier to all types of early childhood services. Spanish-speaking parents have noticed some progress in getting services in their language. But dozens of languages are spoken in Colorado besides English and Spanish. Many families want to have their children learn English and also get to speak their first language. Only two-thirds (65%) of parents who speak other languages are happy with their care arrangements, compared with 75% of parents overall (see Table 9).⁷

“Early childhood services are in Spanish and English only. Everything is only in these two languages. These don’t represent all other cultures. This leads to isolating already isolated communities. They cannot share their voices without language access.”

Community-based organization leader



Children whose first language is not English sometimes get inaccurate results on screenings for learning delays. Screening results can misidentify language difficulties as a developmental delay. Even when the screenings are accurate, parents have a hard time finding early intervention services in their family's language.

Children with special health conditions or disabilities need more from Colorado's early childhood care and education programs. However, the state needs more data to understand the scope of the issue and how best to offer support.



Child care providers have to be ready to manage common childhood needs such as asthma, diabetes, epilepsy, or other chronic diseases. They also must work with children with feeding tubes or mobility issues.

About one in five children in Colorado has such special health conditions.⁶⁰ The state lacks more detailed data on all specific health needs of young children. There are also no detailed data on the demand for services among parents whose children have special health conditions, and we don't know how common it is for a child care and education program to be serving a child with a special health condition. If the state collected this information, it could plan better to support families, providers, and children.

Child care health consultants are experts who help child care providers take care of these children's needs. They give advice, offer training, and even help with giving medicines when needed.⁶¹ Child care health consultants can help providers care for these children safely. But some communities have hardly any child care health consultants.



I definitely see [a lack of access for] children with special health care needs. Parents of children with special health care needs are six times more likely to have to quit their job or reduce their hours at work to care for their child."

Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment program director

What's more, there isn't a rule that says every early childhood care and education program must have them available.⁶³ Licensed family child care homes, for example, are exempt from this requirement.

Families of children with disabilities can have a much harder time finding the care their children need. Parents also say Colorado does not have enough deaf-friendly preschools, occupational therapists, or pediatric specialists. They can sometimes feel unwelcome or unsupported by their child care options, and they say it's hard to find a provider they trust.

Families need child care at all hours.



Parents say they need care outside the regular 9-to-5 workday. Having care earlier, later, and on weekends is especially important to service workers and agricultural laborers. Solid data may not be available on how often licensed and unlicensed care is provided outside regular working hours. Collecting this information would help state leaders understand families' needs and gaps in the system.



When we finally got a daycare, the timing just didn't work with my job schedule. They wouldn't take late nights."

Parent of a 3-year-old

Many of the largest preschool providers are participating in Universal Preschool Colorado, but many others have yet to commit.

Beginning in 2023, Universal Preschool Colorado pays for 15 hours per week of preschool services for all children in the year before they enter kindergarten. Some 3-year-olds also qualify.

Nearly 1,911 providers have signed up to be a Universal Preschool Colorado provider - most of those that care for preschool-age children. However, of the 3,521 licensed child care providers with home, preschool, or preschool and school-age capacity, 1,610 (46%) were not participating in the Universal Preschool Colorado as of January 2024. The ones that choose not to participate tend to be smaller providers. Only 22% of people who provide care in their homes have enrolled.

But three-quarters (76%) of center-based child care providers have signed up. The providers that have joined Universal Preschool Colorado make up 72% of Colorado's home, preschool, and preschool or school age licensed care capacity.⁶²

In 2022, providers who were not planning to participate in Universal Preschool Colorado said they were worried the program would have too many rules, too much paperwork, and would not pay enough.⁶³



Different needs and preferences for preschool programming among Colorado families present challenges to crafting a statewide system. One third of families cited the need for full-day care as one of the most prevalent issues that keeps them from enrolling in Universal Preschool Colorado. Cost is also a factor, though Indigenous, Black, and Hispanic/Latino families were the most unsure among all racial and ethnic groups about whether they would send their children to preschool, regardless of cost.⁶⁶

Families with infants and toddlers have the greatest needs for child care.



Families with children under 3 have the hardest time finding care. Waitlists are long, and costs are high. Providers must follow health and safety rules that limit the number of babies and toddlers a single care professional can be responsible for. Colorado only has enough licensed care spots for 9% of its infants and 23% of its toddlers. Some families manage by taking parental leave, but not everyone can do that. More than half of parents who stay home with their children full time would like a different option.⁶⁰



5. Quality

The big picture: Parents care about quality, but their main concern is finding early childhood care and education that they can afford.

What needs work: Slightly more than half of early care and education providers have moved beyond the first step in Colorado's quality ratings.

What's working: A third of care providers have moved into the top rating levels, which signals that many Colorado providers are offering high-quality care.

What We Learned

Colorado uses the Colorado Shines rating system to measure quality in early care and education. The state intentionally invests in evidence-based programs for early childhood mental health, family strengthening efforts, and early intervention, but does not use quality standards for these parts of the system. However, all programs do include a quality improvement component.

► Early Care and Education

The Colorado Shines rating system gives families information on all licensed early childhood care and education providers. The scale goes from 1 to 5. Any program that completes the state's licensing requirements begins at a Level 1. In summer 2023, almost a third (31%) of providers had advanced to Levels 3, 4, or 5. These scores show they offer quality care in multiple program areas.⁶⁴ The state does not currently collect demographic data on the families that attend programs with a rating of 3, 4, or 5.

Nearly half of child care and education providers have a Colorado Shines quality rating at Level 1 (see Table 11). These programs still meet the basic health and safety requirements for child care providers to operate in the state, and they might offer high-quality care. However, the state does not have the data to make this determination as they have not yet engaged in the Colorado Shines process to demonstrate their quality.



Table 11. Nearly Half of Eligible Providers Have Not Advanced Colorado Shines Rating Beyond 1

Colorado Shines Participation by Rating Level

Colorado Shines Rating	Percentage of All Eligible Child Care Facilities
Level 1	45%
Level 2	24%
Level 3	6%
Level 4	21%
Level 5	3%

Source: Colorado Licensed Child Care Facility Report, August 2023

Regardless of quality ratings, parents say their first priority is finding any services at all. Quality ratings are important, but they are a secondary consideration to identifying available and affordable early childhood care and education services.

Planning for Improvement

In addition to school readiness, early childhood services should emphasize a whole-child approach.

Early childhood professionals know that a big part of their job is to get children ready for kindergarten. But they get frustrated when school becomes the main focus. Young children are much more than just future students. They have needs for social-emotional learning, mental health, and strong families. They also have basic needs such as safe housing and healthy food. The COVID-19 pandemic spotlighted those needs for many families.

Colorado needs to take a whole-child approach, according to the early childhood professionals who shared their thoughts for this report. State programs must address these broader needs while still making sure children are set up for a successful start to kindergarten — a major goal of the Preschool Development Grant.

Early childhood programs have an opportunity to think broadly about what they mean by quality improvement.

Colorado Shines was designed to be a standard way to assess quality in early childhood care and

education. But most programs in the early childhood system don't have an agreed-upon method for assessing quality.

Quality can mean different things to different people, and it is hard to know which the state should prioritize. Should the main goal be family satisfaction? Should it be having more children who are reading by third grade? Or something else entirely? Each program within the early childhood system should work with partners and families to define what quality services means in their context. They can then work to ensure there is accountability and opportunities to review that those standards are being met.

About half of early child care and education providers have not advanced their Colorado Shines rating beyond a Level 1.

Most service providers (70%) and early childhood care and education providers (85%) have some knowledge of Colorado Shines. But about 45% of providers are at a Level 1 (see Table 11).⁷⁰ In surveys, providers revealed their top reasons for not advancing. They said:

- They do not need a Colorado Shines rating to attract families.
- The Colorado Shines requirements put too much stress on their staff.
- The renewal process is hard and takes too much time.³⁴

Families say quality is important, but they do not use quality ratings to make decisions about child care.

Almost all families (88%) say quality ratings such as Colorado Shines are important. But most families do not use the system to make decisions about child care. Only about one in three parents (32%) use Colorado Shines to judge the quality of their child care provider.⁷ Two-thirds of that group (63%) did not know the current rating of their child care provider.^{7,60} Families say they make their decisions based on where they can find a spot that is within their budget. Families appreciate quality, but they feel they can't be picky because affordable child care is so hard to find.

“You don’t get exactly what you want. You have to take whatever is available. For us, that means a private daycare that doesn’t share our values ... and that’s kind of unfortunate.”

Parent of an 8-month-old

Next Steps

This report has taken a detailed look at Colorado’s system for supporting our youngest children. State agencies, state and local organizations that offer early childhood programs, and advocates can use it to plan for a system that’s always improving. People who work in early childhood can use it to understand the broad scope of services in the state’s system. With a big-picture understanding, providers can help families find more of the services they need. And families can use this report to understand how the system works, find its strengths and weaknesses, and advocate for themselves and their fellow Coloradans.

The job of children is to grow their bodies, hearts, and minds. That’s a hard job. It’s up to adults to give them what they need to do it. We hope this report has pointed out some ways to help.



Program Profiles

Early Childhood Mental Health

► Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation and Support Line

Babies and young children are working hard to develop social-emotional skills such as making friends, managing emotions, and resolving conflicts. Parents, teachers, and other caregivers play an important role in this process. Helping children to develop these skills promotes their growth, reduces behaviors that adults can find challenging, and reduces instances of suspension and expulsion.⁶⁵

Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation helps families support their children's well-being. Early childhood mental health consultants are experts in child development and mental health. They work with a child's parents and teachers, either at home or on location with a child care provider. They aim to build up relationships and environments that help children cope with everyday worries.

The program is free. The Early Childhood Mental Health Support Line, which launched in 2022, helps connect the parents and caregivers of young children with the services they need.

- **Who runs it.** The Colorado Department of Early Childhood runs the program statewide. Locally, community mental health agencies and Early Childhood Councils do the work in communities. Healthy Child Care Colorado acts as a network hub to support ongoing education for the early childhood mental health consultants.
- **How it's paid for.** The program gets about \$3 million from state and federal funds. Private foundations pay for an extra 20 to 30 consultants, bringing the total number of consultants statewide to 90.
- **Who it's for.** Children birth through age 6, their families, and their early care and education providers.



► The Incredible Years

The Incredible Years aims to improve children's social and emotional skills like naming their feelings and sharing with other children. It is for children ages 3 to 8. If children this age can have good social and emotional skills, they will be set up for success through the rest of their lives.

Colorado offers three Incredible Years programs for parents and teachers. They are Teacher Classroom Management, Dinosaur School, and the Preschool BASIC Parent Program. All three promote positive relationships between parents and children and teachers and children.

Teacher Classroom Management helps educators learn positive ways to handle challenges with children. They find ways to create positive relationships with children displaying challenging behaviors and learn how to help those children control their behaviors.

Dinosaur School teaches social and emotional skills to children from preschool through first grade. The course has 60 lessons. Children take two or three lessons a week. Trained teachers co-lead the lessons, which use activities, role-playing, and videos. The lessons focus on how to solve problems, control anger and emotions, succeed in school, and make friends.

The Preschool BASIC Parenting Program offers two-hour classes once a week for 14 weeks. Parents learn to help their children grow socially and reduce behavior problems. They practice skills such as effective praise and use of incentives, routines, setting limits, ways to manage misbehavior, and teaching children to solve problems.

- **Who runs it.** The Department of Early Childhood partners with Invest in Kids, the certified Colorado Incredible Years program model intermediary, to implement the program. Local nonprofits offer The Incredible Years program to child care centers and preschools and offer parenting classes.
- **How it's paid for.** Money comes from state marijuana tax dollars, local sources, and charities.
- **Who it's for.** Parents, early childhood educators, and children ages 3 to 8.

► Child First

Child First is a home-based mental health service for young children and their families. It helps parents and children heal from stress and trauma. The program helps parents build strong, nurturing relationships with their children. It helps families find the services they need and helps adults cope with everyday life. The aim is to prevent child abuse and neglect.

Families work with a two-person team that visits their home. Each team includes a mental health provider who knows about early childhood development. Teams also include a family support partner. The partner helps families identify their sources of stress and solutions in the community.

- **Who runs it.** The Department of Early Childhood partners with Invest in Kids, the certified Colorado Child First program model intermediary, to offer the program. Invest in Kids works with six local behavioral health agencies across the state to offer Child First services.
- **How it's paid for.** The legislature dedicated \$2 million in federal pandemic aid for Child First. Additional funding comes from multiple state agencies and foundations.
- **Who it's for.** Families must be referred to the program through an online portal. Families can refer themselves.

Family Strengthening

► Family Resource Centers

Family Resource Centers give families a single place to find most of the support they need. Families can go to a Family Resource Center and find all sorts of programs. Examples include:

- Early childhood education and preschool
- Adult education services including GED support, English as a Second Language, and workforce development
- Access to health care and nutrition
- Emergency assistance, including energy or rental assistance
- Connections to local food banks or thrift stores
- Parenting programs such as the Colorado Fatherhood Program or Parents As Teachers
- Parent leadership such as Parent Advisory Committees or the Family Leadership Training Institute of Colorado

Family Resource Centers have served Coloradans since 1993. They are one of the state's longest-standing programs for families.

For many people, Family Resource Centers are the front door of the early childhood system, providing referrals to home visitation, early intervention, or child care. Thirty-two Family Resource Centers serve families across the state.

- **Who runs it.** The Department of Early Childhood and the Family Resource Center Association — the Colorado Family Resource Center program model intermediary — partner to support local nonprofits or school districts running Family Resource Centers. The Family Resource Center Association provides backbone support through training, technical assistance, data tools, and evaluation expertise.
- **How it's paid for.** The state provides \$1.75 million per year. Funding varies from location to location. Family Resource Centers get a mix of local, state, and federal funding. Some also get money from foundations, faith-based organizations, individual donations, special events, and program fees.
- **Who it's for.** Family Resource Centers serve vulnerable families, including parents and caregivers, children, and youth.



► HealthySteps for Young Children

The doctor's office can be a great place to reach families. HealthySteps for Young Children works at pediatricians' offices to give parents personalized support, with the goal of helping them raise healthy families.

Specialists screen families during a child's doctor appointment to see what type of support they might need. HealthySteps can provide anything from a brief chat to ongoing visits by a team.

- **Who runs it.** The Department of Early Childhood partners with Assuring Better Child Health and Development (ABCD) — the certified Colorado HealthySteps program model intermediary — to implement HealthySteps at the state level. ABCD helps doctors' offices set up and run the program.
- **How it's paid for.** The state legislature provides around \$600,000 and some federal Community Based Child Abuse Prevention grant funding. ABCD also gets public funding and private donations.
- **Who it's for.** Children from birth to age 3 and their families.

► Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters

Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters, or HIPPY, helps parents get their children ready for school and life. Instructors visit families at their homes to share storybooks and other resources to help parents help their children grow mentally, emotionally, and physically. The HIPPY program's home visitors live in the same community as the parents, and they have taken the program themselves. They bring new HIPPY materials weekly, starting when the child turns 3. Instruction continues through kindergarten, so children can practice at home what they learn at school. HIPPY also provides monthly group meetings.

- **Who runs it.** The Department of Early Childhood works with a nonprofit called Parent Possible, the certified Colorado Parents as Teachers program model intermediary, to implement HIPPY. Parent Possible offers programs for parents of young children. Different types of sites offer HIPPY programs. They include school districts, child care providers, Family Resource Centers, and other groups.

- **How it's paid for.** The legislature dedicated \$1 million in federal pandemic aid for HIPPPY and the state provides funding from the federal government's Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting program. Money could also come from the state's Tony Grampsas Youth Services program, AmeriCorps, local, or private sources.
- **Who it's for.** Families earning low incomes and children ages 3, 4, and 5.

► Nurse-Family Partnership

The Nurse-Family Partnership brings nurses into the homes of first-time mothers. The nurses make sure moms and babies are healthy for the first two years of the child's life. The program is voluntary — nurses visit only if moms want them to.

Colorado has a long tradition with the Nurse-Family Partnership. The University of Colorado created it, and the state was one of the first to offer the program in 2000. The national program is still headquartered in Denver.

The Nurse-Family Partnership is a time-tested success. It's one of the few programs in the country with more than 40 years of clinical trials that show long-term benefits, such as fewer childhood injuries. Trained, registered nurses mentor new moms by building a relationship with them. The Nurse-Family Partnership draws on mothers' strengths to help them think positively about their lives. Mothers learn to plan for their lives and the lives of their children.

- **Who runs it.** A four-organization team runs the Nurse-Family Partnership in Colorado. The team includes the Department of Early Childhood, the University of Colorado Denver, the Nurse Family Partnership National Service Office, and Invest in Kids, the certified Colorado Nurse-Family Partnership program model intermediary. Local program sites are located in public health departments, community health centers, Federally Qualified Health Centers, community nursing agencies, a school of nursing, and hospitals.
- **How it's paid for.** Funding comes from money the state gets from the national tobacco lawsuits. Other funds come from Medicaid and the federal government's Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting program.
- **Who it's for.** Low wage-earning, first-time mothers and their babies from pregnancy until age 2.



► Parents as Teachers

A child's first teacher is her parents. Parents as Teachers is a program that helps parents be good teachers. Educators from Parents as Teachers visit families at home from pregnancy through the start of kindergarten to build parents' knowledge of early childhood development. Parents as Teachers visitors can help spot health issues and developmental delays. They help prevent child abuse and neglect, and they get children ready for kindergarten. Parents as Teachers educators also hold group meetings, help set goals for children, and tell families about other community resources.

- **Who runs it.** The Department of Early Childhood works with a nonprofit called Parent Possible, the certified Colorado Parents as Teachers program model intermediary, to implement Parents as Teachers. Parent Possible offers programs for parents of young children. Different types of organizations implement the program locally, including nonprofits, family resource centers, child care centers, and Early Childhood Councils.
- **How it's paid for.** It depends on the group that's offering the program. Money may come from the federal government's Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting program. Or it can come from state, local, and private sources.
- **Who it's for.** Families from pregnancy until the child enters kindergarten.

► SafeCare Colorado

SafeCare Colorado is a free program for parents and caregivers with children ages 5 and under. SafeCare provides extra support to keep families safe and healthy. Home visitors work with parents once a week in 50- to 90-minute visits. Visitors help parents build their skills in parent-child interactions, home safety, and child health. Their primary goals include:

- Reducing future mistreatment of children
- Increasing positive parent-child interactions
- Decreasing safety hazards in the home
- Enhancing home safety and parent supervision
- Improving how parents care for their children's health

SafeCare has a strong track record within Colorado. Unlike most other states, Colorado's SafeCare program focuses on prevention, and it is voluntary. Referrals come from many sources, including families themselves. Child welfare agencies can also refer families to the program, but courts do not order families to join.

The program delivers services over 18 to 20 weeks — one of the shortest home visitation programs available.

- **Who runs it.** The Department of Early Childhood administers the program through contracts with local providers and the certified Colorado SafeCare program intermediary (the Kempe Center for the Prevention and Treatment of Child Abuse and Neglect). Fourteen county public health agencies, Family Resource Centers, and community groups offer the program locally.
- **How it's paid for.** The state provides \$5.4 million a year.
- **Who it's for.** Parents and caregivers of children birth through age 5. Families can be eligible for a number of reasons:
 - A history of child abuse or neglect
 - Low incomes
 - Having multiple children under age 5
 - Unstable housing
 - A history of substance use disorder
 - A history of domestic violence



► Colorado Fatherhood Program

The Colorado Fatherhood Program helps dads create healthy relationships with their children. This program offers fatherhood workshops in nine counties. It also helps fathers with finances and social connections. Fathers in the program get help with finding housing and jobs and meeting basic needs.

Seven organizations in nine counties offer the program:

- La Plata Family Centers Coalition in La Plata County
- The Piñon Project in Montezuma County
- Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Pueblo
- Denver Human Services
- Hilltop in Delta, Mesa, and Montrose counties
- Empowering Communities Globally in Boulder County
- Prowers County Department of Human Services

The Colorado Fatherhood Program is a five-year project.

- **Who runs it.** The Department of Early Childhood works through local organizations to offer the program.
- **How it's paid for.** The federal Administration on Children, Youth and Families has made a \$7.5 million grant.
- **Who it's for.** Adult fathers and father figures whose children are age 24 or younger.

Early Care and Education

► Licensed Child Care

Colorado's licensed child care providers play a key role in the early childhood system. They are often a family's main point of contact with early childhood services. And they help families find other services in the system.

The Department of Early Childhood licenses home care providers who take care of five or more children who are not related to the provider. The department also licenses child care centers, family child care homes, preschools, children's camps, and neighborhood youth organizations.

Parents can feel confident when sending their children to a licensed child care provider. A license shows the facility:

- Has standards for health and safety
- Has policies supporting positive child behavior
- Employs qualified professionals who have passed background checks for criminal history and child abuse and neglect
- Is inspected by external agencies

Licensing is set in state law through the Child Care Licensing Act. The Department of Early Childhood keeps detailed sets of rules.

- **Who runs it.** The Department Early Childhood licenses and regulates child care providers.
- **How it's paid for.** The department is funded through the state budget. Licensed child care providers do not receive funding based on their license status.
- **Who it's for.** Licensed providers serve children as young as six weeks old. Different programs serve children in different age ranges. Infant programs take babies from 6 weeks to 18 months old. Toddler programs go from 12 months to 36 months. Preschools take children from 30 months to 7 years.

► Informal Early Care and Education

Some of the state's most important child care providers are not formally part of the child care system. People such as grandparents, aunts and uncles, or a neighbor down the block are essential to the child care plans of more than half of Colorado's families.

Certain child care providers may not need a license under state law. Family homes don't need a license if they care for four or fewer children ages 0 to 18. No more than two children can be under age 2, and the person cannot provide round-the-clock care.

These types of license-exempt child care providers, as well as babysitters and nannies, are called informal care providers.

- **Who runs it.** Informal care providers are not licensed, and they do not have special regulations.
- **How it's paid for.** Informal care providers get little or no help from government. They make private agreements with families for payment. Often, they provide child care for free.
- **Who it's for.** Any family can use informal care providers. Families often turn to informal care providers when they can't find licensed child care or can't afford it.



► Colorado Shines

Colorado Shines is the state's system for rating the quality of child care and preschools. Every licensed child care provider and preschool gets a Colorado Shines rating of 1 to 5. Level 5 is for the highest-quality programs. Only 3% of Colorado providers have reached Level 5. About half of the state's providers have not advanced their rating beyond Level 1.

Programs can move up levels by showing high quality in five categories:

- Workforce and professional development
- Family partnerships
- Leadership, management, and administration
- Learning environment
- Child health

The goals of Colorado Shines are to support programs to improve or maintain their high quality and to help parents find high-quality care and education. The program also includes the Colorado Shines Professional Development Information System. This is a free online resource for trainings related to early care and learning that offers self-paced online courses, opportunities to earn professional credentials, and more.

- **Who runs it.** The Department of Early Childhood.
- **How it's paid for.** Colorado Shines is funded through the federal Child Care and Development Fund. It launched in 2015 using money from the Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge grant.
- **Who it's for.** The program is for any Colorado family searching for quality child care and preschool programs. It also serves the programs and their staffs by pointing out ways to improve.

► Head Start

Head Start is a federal-to-local funded model that supports children's growth from prenatal to age 5 through services that support early learning and development, health, and family well-being. Head Start services are available at no cost to children in eligible families with children ages 3 to 5, while Early Head Start services work with eligible families with children ages birth to 3. Many programs also serve expectant families. Programs deliver child development services in center-based, home-based, or family child care settings.

Head Start services are for children from birth to kindergarten entry, as well as pregnant people and expectant families. Eligible participants include children whose families have incomes at or below the federal poverty level or who use Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, Supplemental Security Income, or Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program public assistance services. Other eligible participants include children who are in the foster care system or experiencing homelessness. Programs may also accept a limited number of children who do not meet any of those eligibility criteria.

Migrant and Seasonal Head Start programs have specific eligibility requirements for the children of farmworkers. American Indian and Alaskan Native Head Start programs enroll tribal children from reservations or nearby areas. All programs enroll children with disabilities and welcome children who speak a language other than English at home.

As there are generally more eligible children than are supported by program funding, each program maintains a waiting list and partners with local funding sources to support families, such as Colorado Child Care Assistance Program. Head Start is currently funded to provide services for 11,861 children in Colorado.

Head Start offers many services, including:

- Education and academic help
- Oral, mental, and physical health services
- Social supports and services
- Home visiting for some families

As of the 2022 program year, Colorado has 74 grant recipients covering 34 counties.

- **Who runs it.** Nationally, Head Start is run by the Administration for Children and Families division of the Department of Health and Human Services. In Colorado, the program is operated by government agencies, nonprofits, school districts, and tribal governments.
- **How it's paid for.** The federal Office of Head Start makes grants to 74 local Head Start grantee recipients in Colorado. Federal funding goes straight to local Head Start programs. As of August 2022, Colorado Head Start programs employed 4,142 professionals and had a combined annual budget of \$125 million.⁶⁶
- **Who it's for.** Head Start serves pregnant people and children under 5 from families with incomes below the federal poverty level. That is \$30,000 for a family of four. Some children are eligible no matter their family income. They include children without homes, those in foster care, and children from families who receive public assistance such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, Supplemental Security Income, or Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program services. Each Head Start program has to save 10% of its spots for children with special needs. Head Start also offers programs for migrant families and American Indian and Alaska Native families.

► **Colorado Child Care Assistance Program**

The high price of child care is one of the biggest problems for Colorado families. The Colorado Child Care Assistance Program helps families afford child care. Families still must pay part of the cost through a co-payment or parent fee.

The Colorado Child Care Assistance Program helps a diverse group. Hispanic children make up about half of Colorado Child Care Assistance Program participants.

The Department of Early Childhood would like all providers to accept Colorado Child Care Assistance Program payments, and about half of providers in the state do so.⁶⁷

- **Who runs it.** The Department of Early Childhood supervises the program statewide. County human services departments administer it at the local level.

- **How it's paid for.** In 2023, the Colorado Child Care Assistance Program had a \$188 million budget. More than three quarters came from the federal Child Care Development Block Grant. The state general fund provides another 16%. Counties provide the rest.⁹ Parents make co-payments directly to the providers.
- **Who it's for.** Families who earn low incomes and are employed, searching for employment, or are in post-secondary education or training programs, or who receive Temporary Assistance for Needy Families basic cash assistance or state diversion and need child care services to support their efforts toward self-sufficiency. Some counties also have an option for families that have an open protective services child welfare case to qualify.

► **Targeted Preschool for 3-Year-Olds**

Many families need affordable early childhood care and education for their 3-year-olds. Some of these younger children can still qualify for support under the Universal Preschool Colorado's Targeted Preschool for 3-Year-Olds effort.

Three-year-old children whose families earn low incomes or have other qualifying factors can get support for 10 hours of preschool programming per week. These children must turn 3 before October 1 to qualify.

- **Who runs it.** The Department of Early Childhood directs the program.
- **How it's paid for.** In 2022, the state legislature passed a bill to fund Universal Preschool Colorado, which includes this support for 3-year-olds. The money comes from a nicotine tax that was passed by voters in 2020.
- **Who it's for.** Families who earn low incomes or who are engaged in foster or kinship care, are experiencing homelessness, are dual language learners, or are enrolled in an Individualized Education Program.

► Individuals with Disabilities Act Part B Preschool Special Education

Part B, Section 619 of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act is a federal program that helps states offer free special education and related services to children ages 3 to 5 who have disabilities. The main goal is to make sure that all children in this age group with disabilities receive these services in an environment that is best suited for their needs.

- **Who runs it.** The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act is a federal program that is administered by the Colorado Department of Education.
- **How it's paid for.** Both the federal and state governments pay for this program.
- **Who it's for.** Families with children ages 3, 4, and 5 who have disabilities.

► Universal Preschool Colorado

Colorado wants to help children access preschool before they are eligible for kindergarten. The Universal Preschool Colorado program pays for up to 15 hours of preschool for every child in the state. Some families can get more support.

Right now, about half of the preschool providers in the state provide care that can be paid for using this program. The Department of Early Childhood is working to get more preschool providers enrolled.

- **Who runs it.** The Department of Early Childhood directs the program.
- **How it's paid for.** In 2022, the state legislature passed a bill to fund Universal Preschool Colorado. The money comes from a nicotine tax that was passed by voters in 2020.
- **Who it's for.** Every 4-year-old in Colorado qualifies for 15 hours of free care. Families who earn low incomes or who are engaged in foster or kinship care, are experiencing homelessness, are dual language learners, or are enrolled in the Individualized Education Program can get more hours per week covered.



Early Intervention

► Early Intervention Colorado

Research shows the first three years of a child's life are the most important time for developing and learning. Young children are less likely to fall behind later in life if they get the help they need in their first three years.

Early Intervention Colorado is a program for infants and toddlers with developmental delays or disabilities. It is also known as Part C of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The program identifies infants and toddlers who meet eligibility criteria for Part C. It gives families support and resources to help them boost their child's learning through everyday activities. Services are voluntary and free to the family. Early intervention services happen at home, in school, or other places where children spend their day.

- **Who runs it.** The Individuals with Disabilities Act Part C is a federal program, and the Department of Early Childhood oversees it statewide. Local Early Intervention programs provide services in their areas.
- **How it's paid for.** In 2023-24, the state budgeted \$91 million for Early Intervention Colorado. \$58 million came from the general fund, \$18 million came from Medicaid, \$10 million came from the federal government, and the rest through the Early Intervention Services Trust Fund.
- **Who it's for.** Children birth up to the age of 3 suspected of having a developmental delay and their families. They may be referred by parents, physicians, child care providers, or others.

Appendix A: Methods

Background

This needs assessment defines the early childhood system as the comprehensive, coordinated program, service, and infrastructure elements that affect child and family outcomes across domains. This includes:



Early childhood mental health programs such as Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation and Support Line, The Incredible Years, and Child First



Family strengthening efforts such as Family Resource Centers, HealthySteps for Young Children, Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters, Nurse-Family Partnership, Parents as Teachers, SafeCare Colorado, and the Colorado Fatherhood Program



Early care and education programs such as licensed child care, informal early care and education, Colorado Shines, Head Start, Colorado Child Care Assistance Program, targeted preschool for 3-year-olds, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Part B preschool special education, and Universal Preschool Colorado



Early Intervention Colorado through the Individuals with Disabilities Act Part C

CHI includes findings specific to each domain where applicable throughout this report.

The report makes special note of “select family contexts,” which are groups identified in the Colorado Department of Early Childhood’s initial Birth Through Five Preschool Development Grant application. These select contexts are:



Cultural and linguistic considerations

Families of different cultural backgrounds, families and children whose primary language is not English, immigrant families



Behavioral and physical health considerations

Children who have or are at increased risk for chronic physical, developmental, behavioral, or emotional conditions. These children require health and related services beyond those required by children generally



Resource considerations

Families in rural areas, families in high poverty areas or other underserved family and child populations, families experiencing homelessness



Infants and toddlers

Age categories for licensure purposes vary and often overlap. CHI uses the following age groups for children unless otherwise specified:

- Infant: under 1 year old
- Toddler: 1 and 2 years old
- Preschool: 3 and 4 years old
- School: 5 and older

Research Questions

CHI organized this report into five categories that cover seven research questions addressing outcomes outlined in the Preschool Development Grant Birth Through Five Planning Grant. These research questions were developed in partnership with CDEC and the Family Voice Council.

Family Engagement

Research question 1. What are the best ways to get families involved in the early childhood system? How are these ways different for different types of families?

Sustainability

Research question 2. How can early childhood programs keep paying the bills? How did the pandemic change things?

Workforce

Research question 3. How can we do better at recruiting early childhood professionals and hanging on to the ones we have?

Availability

Research question 4. How easy is it to find early childhood programs in Colorado? How is it different for families with special needs?

Research question 5. What gets in the way of finding early childhood services?

Quality

Research question 6. How good are Colorado's early childhood programs? Do different types of families have the same access to high-quality programs?

Research question 7. What gets in the way of providing top-quality programs? What are some ideas for solving these problems?

CHI analyzed quantitative and qualitative data and drew on existing research to inform the findings and gaps and opportunities in this report.

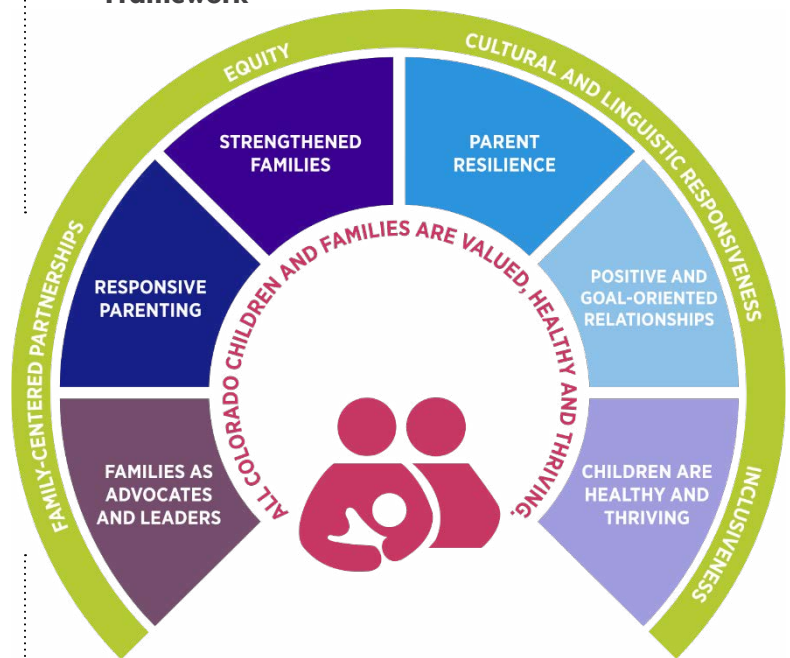
Quantitative Data

Between April and June 2023, CHI created a database of early childhood system data sources such as the Colorado licensed child care facilities report, the Butler Institute for Families family and workforce surveys, and the Community Engagement Alliance and American Rescue Plan Act stabilization reports. Appendix B contains a full list of data sources.

Qualitative Data

CHI's approach to qualitative data collection was guided by the Colorado Early Childhood Family Engagement Framework. This framework, developed in 2022, is the result of a collaborative effort led by the Colorado Department of Early Childhood and supported by the Early Childhood Leadership Commission.

Colorado Early Childhood Family Engagement Framework



Source: Colorado Department of Early Childhood

Between April and June 2023, CHI conducted six focus groups, facilitated six discussions at existing community forums, and interviewed 30 key informants to hear the perspectives of parents, families, and Colorado's early childhood system workforce. Appendix B contains a full list of people and groups who participated in this research through interviews and facilitated group discussion.

Existing Research

Between April and September 2023, CHI conducted a scan of existing reports and publications related to the early childhood system, including those from Early Milestones Colorado, the Butler Institute for Families, the National Institute for Early Education Research, and the Home Visiting Task Force's Home Visiting Investment Plan. Appendix C lists the reports that informed CHI's assessment.

Data Sources

- American Community Survey
- Butler Institute for Families Family Survey Data
- Butler Institute for Families Workforce Survey Data
- Colorado Department of Education Pupil Counts
- Colorado Department of Education Special Education Data
- Colorado Fatherhood Program Data
- Colorado Licensed Child Care Facilities Data
- Colorado State Long Appropriation Bills
- Community Engagement Alliance and American Rescue Plan Stabilization Report Data
- Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation Data
- Early Intervention Colorado Data
- Family Strengthening Data
- Head Start Program Data
- Health eMoms COVID-19 Survey
- Health Resources and Services Administration Funding Awards
- Home Visiting Investment Task Force Data
- National Survey of Children's Health
- Professional Development Information System Data
- Quality Rating and Improvement System ERS Data
- Quality Rating and Improvement System Score and Rating Data
- Rapid Survey Project
- Universal Preschool Program Provider Data
- U.S. Department of Education Funding Awards
- U.S. Department of Labor National Database of Childcare Prices
- Other custom data pulls from the Colorado Department of Early Childhood

Appendix B: Partners

Key Informants

Organization / Organization Type	Area of Focus	Interviewees
Behavioral Health Administration	Early childhood behavioral health programs	Chris Meyer
Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies	Red Rocks Community College, Mesa County Partnership for Children and Families	Pat Bolton, Stephanie Bivins
Colorado Association of Family Child Care	Licensed family child care homes	Amber Bilby
Colorado Department of Education	Early Childhood Career Navigation, Migrant Education, Preschool Special Education	Jennifer O'Brien, Jenny Lerner, Heidi White
Colorado Department of Health Care Policy and Financing	Home Visiting, Early Intervention Colorado, Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation	Susanna Snyder, Gina Robinson, Robert Werthwein
Colorado Department of Higher Education/Institute of Higher Education	Workforce	Sondra Ranum
Colorado Department of Human Services	Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, Department of Local Affairs	Mina Castillo, Ian McMahon, Karla Maraccini, Dionne Williams
Colorado Department of Labor and Employment	Apprenticeship	Denise Miller
Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment	Children and Youth With Special Health Care Needs; Maternal and Child Health; Women, Infants, and Children; Division of Disease Control and Public Health Response; Child and Adult Care Food Program	Jennie Munthali, Mandy Bakulski, Naomi Steenson, Erin Kendrick, Therese Pilonetti
Denver Preschool Program	Public preschool tuition program	Elsa Holguin
Early Childhood Council	Pueblo County	Angie Shehorn
Early Childhood Councils Leadership Association	Early Childhood Councils	Maegan Lokteff
Early Childhood Education Association of Colorado	Licensed child care providers	Dawn Alexander
Family Resource Center Association	Family Resource Centers	Teri Haymond, Mandy Watrous-Gale
Family Resource Centers	Catholic Charities Colorado Springs, La Puente	Kathy Dobyns, Tara Bay
Head Start State Collaboration Office	Head Start suite of programs	Heather Craiglow
Healthy Child Care Colorado	Early Childhood Mental Health, Child Care Health Consultants	Taran Schneider
Local Public Health Agency	Gunnison County Health and Human Services	Joni Reynolds
Organizations or Health Care Providers Supporting Black, Hispanic, and American Indian Families	Denver Indian Family Resource Center, La Familia, The Hope Center	Lucille Echohawk, Joesph Ziegler, Cassandra Johnson
Organization Supporting Families Experiencing Homelessness	The Matthews House	Nicole Armstrong
Organizations Supporting Families, Friends, and Neighbors	Colorado Statewide Parent Association, Cultivando, Valley Settlement	Lorena Garcia, Xiomara Sanchez, Guadalupe Solís, Kenia Pinela
Organizations Supporting Immigrants and Refugees	Pamoja, Spring Institute	Deborah Young, Khatira Amn
San Juan Board of Cooperative Educational Services	Individuals with Disabilities Act Part B, Preschool Special Education	Jessica Corley



Scott Dressel-Martin

Groups and Coalitions

- Early Childhood Leadership Commission. Data Subcommittee, Early Childhood Workforce Development Subcommittee, Home Visiting Investment Task Force, Program Quality and Alignment Subcommittee
- Families. Colorado parents or guardians of children ages 5 and younger
- Family Voice Council.
- Workforce. Child care providers (including family, friends, and neighbors), Early Intervention Consultants, Child Care Health Consultants, early childhood coaches, Family Resource Center staff, and Program Directors

Appendix C: Reports

- **Annual Report 2019-2020.** *Invest in Kids.* (2021).
- **Annual Report 2021-2022.** *Invest in Kids.* (2022).
- **Annual Report 2021-2022.** *Parent Possible.* (2022).
- **Building a Strong System for Child Care Health Consultation: Opportunities and Gaps.** *Healthy Child Care Colorado.* (2023).
- **Child Care Stabilization and Sustainability Grants: Preliminary Evaluation Results.** *Butler Institute for Families.* (2023).
- **Colorado Early Childhood Compensation and Benefits Task Force.** *Colorado Department of Early Childhood.* (2023).
- **Colorado Early Childhood Councils: Triennial Evaluation.** *Butler Institute for Families.* (2022).
- **Colorado Families' Experiences of Financial Instability.** *Early Milestones Colorado.* (2022).
- **Colorado Home Visiting Financing Options.** *Start Early Consulting.* (2022).
- **Colorado Is Facing a Child Care Crisis.** *Colorado Health Institute.* (2022).
- **Colorado Shines Brighter Preschool Development Grant Evaluation.** *Butler Institute for Families.* (2022).
- **Colorado Shines Brighter: The Colorado Birth Through Five Needs Assessment.** *Colorado Office of Early Childhood.* (2019).
- **Colorado's Early Care and Education Professionals: 2019 Snapshot Report.** *Butler Institute for Families.* (2020).
- **Coordinating Funds to Support the Sustainability of Comprehensive Early Childhood Systems.** *SRI Education.* (2022).
- **Early Childhood Educator Workforce Update to the ECSRLC.** *Colorado Department of Early Childhood.* (2022).
- **Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation: At-a-Glance Workforce Competency Alignment.** *Colorado Office of Early Childhood.* (2022).
- **Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation: COVID-19 Responsiveness.** *Colorado Office of Early Childhood.* (2022).
- **Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation: ECMH Workforce, Recipients, and Reach.** *Colorado Office of Early Childhood.* (2022).
- **Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation: Voices from the Field.** *Colorado Office of Early Childhood.* (2022).
- **Early Childhood Workforce Survey Results.** *Butler Institute for Families.* (2022).
- **Engaging Colorado's FFN Child Care Providers in Early Childhood Systems.** *Early Milestones Colorado.* (2021).
- **Family and Provider Sentiments About Colorado's Proposed Universal Pre-K Program.** *Early Milestones Colorado.* (2022).
- **Home Visiting Investment Plan.** *Colorado Department of Human Services.* (2021).
- **Home Visiting Investment Task Force Annual Progress Update.** *Colorado Department of Early Childhood.* (2023).
- **Home Visiting Workforce Survey: Recruitment and Retention.** *Colorado Department of Early Childhood.* (2023).
- **How a Two-Generation Approach Can Build Success for Students and Families.** *Waterford.* (2021).
- **Partners in Health and Safety in Child Care: The Role of Child Care Health Consultants (CCHCs).** *Healthy Child Care Colorado.* (2023).
- **Paying for Preschool: Who Blends Funding in Early Childhood Education?** *Educational Policy.* (2022).
- **Report of The Incredible Years in Colorado.** *Invest in Kids.* (2022).
- **Still Struggling: Colorado Families' Views on Child Care and Hopes for Universal Preschool.** *Early Milestones Colorado.* (2022).

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