



Boots on the Ground:

Advancing the Shared Vision for Colorado's Children

*The History and Impact of Colorado's
Early Childhood Councils*

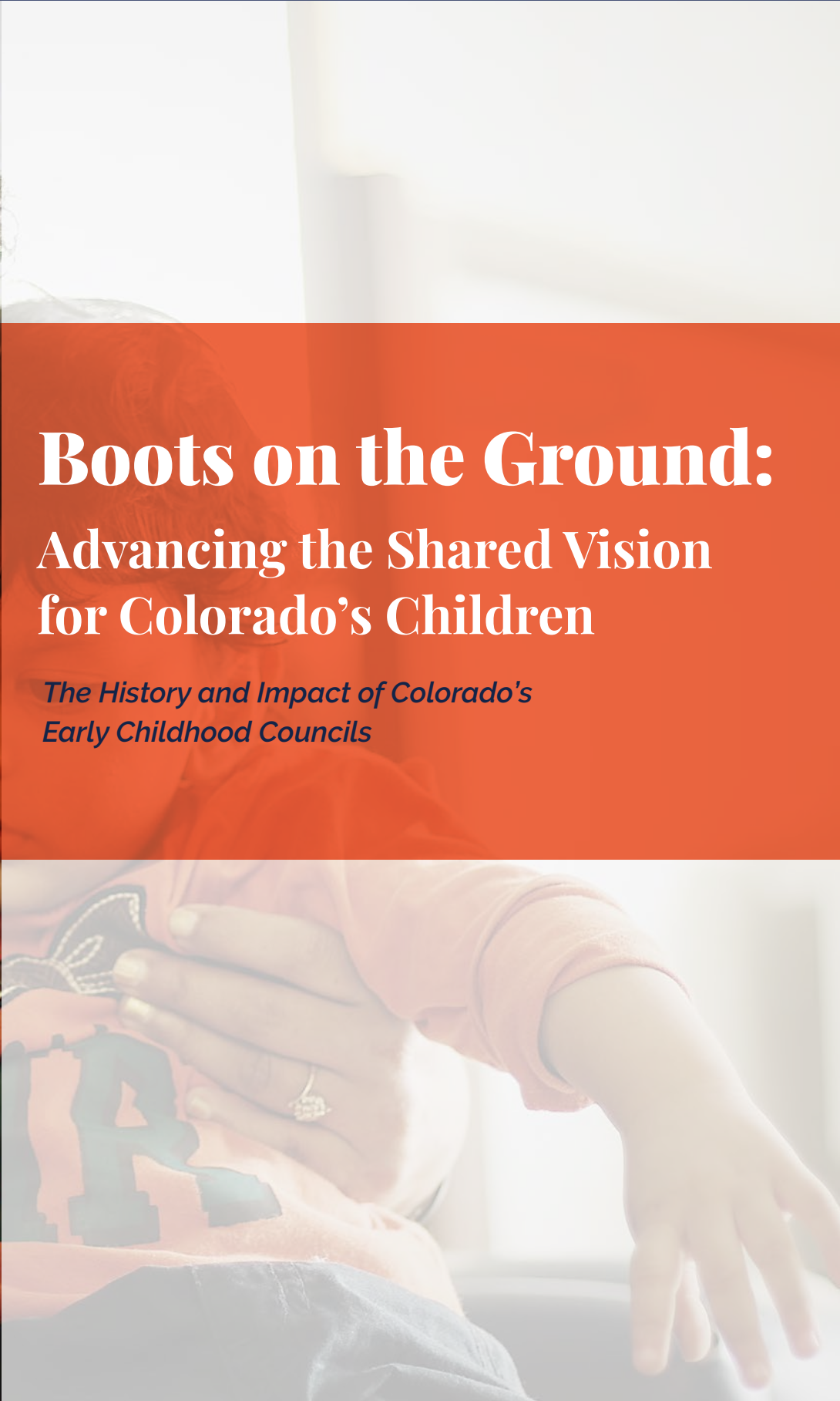
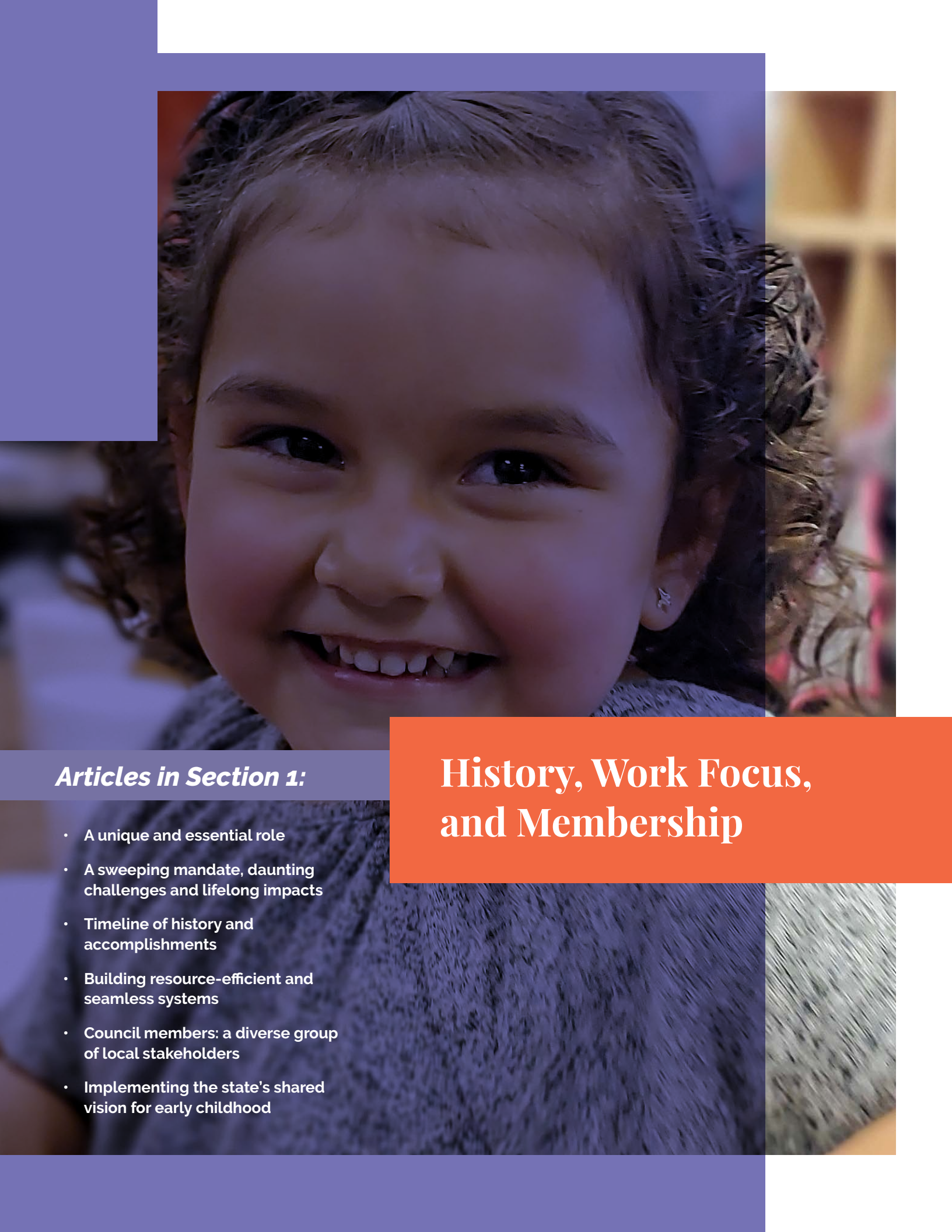


Table of Contents

Section 1: History, Work Focus, and Membership	3
• A unique and essential role	4
• A sweeping mandate, daunting challenges and lifelong impacts	5
• Timeline of history and accomplishments	6
• Building resource-efficient and seamless systems	8
• Council members: a diverse group of local stakeholders	10
• Implementing the state's shared vision for early childhood	12
Section 2: Local Leadership Drives Efficiency, Accountability and Impact	13
• Levers for local control allow local solutions to shared challenges	14
• Piloting innovative approaches and sharing best practices	16
• Accountable, effective stewards of public funds	18
• Small teams maximize impact through partnerships	19
Section 3: Ensuring Children Enter Kindergarten Ready to Learn	24
• Leveraging time-limited funds to permanently address child care shortage	25
• Driving sweeping quality improvement in early care and learning	26
• Ensuring equal access to school readiness support for rural families	28
Section 4: Bridging Disjointed Services for Better Child Outcomes	30
• Integrating health and health care into early childhood systems	32
• Leveraging technology for universal developmental screening	33
• Improving outcomes for children at highest risk	34
• Meeting families' mental health needs in rural areas	36
• Single process of entry eliminates duplication, improves access	38
Section 5: Elevating the Needs of Local Children and Families	39
• Innovative approaches to address the workforce crisis	40
• Creating technology solutions for efficiency and accountability	42
• Early childhood: From a private matter to an issue of economic importance	43
• Data-driven efforts catalyze initiative to address "failed market" for child care	44
• Aligning a community-wide response to combat child abuse and neglect	45
Section 6: Advancing Progress Toward Colorado's Vision for Early Childhood	47
• Amplifying diverse Council voices for statewide reach	48
• Continuous progress despite tumultuous fiscal environment	49
• Driving taxpayer approval of local dedicated children's funds	50
• Supporting child care sector to reassess and reopen post COVID-19	52



Articles in Section 1:

- A unique and essential role
- A sweeping mandate, daunting challenges and lifelong impacts
- Timeline of history and accomplishments
- Building resource-efficient and seamless systems
- Council members: a diverse group of local stakeholders
- Implementing the state's shared vision for early childhood

History, Work Focus, and Membership

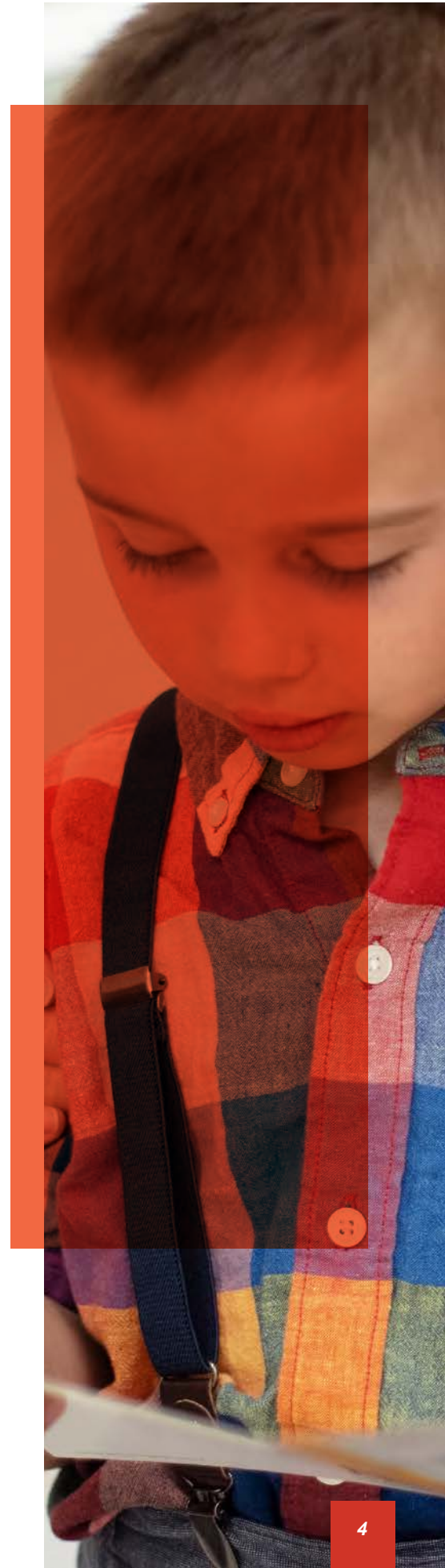
The Unique and Essential Role of Early Childhood Councils

Early Childhood Councils, established by legislation, are local collaboratives of public and private stakeholders in the community that work in close partnership to ensure that the youngest children are ready for school and families have the support they need to thrive.

Families with young children often need support from an array of distinct systems in order to thrive. These include physical health, mental health, child care and nutrition support, among others. By connecting family support and education; health and well-being; and learning and development, Councils serve as the backbone of early childhood services in local communities. Their unique role is to be the interconnected “hub” for all early childhood-related systems and efforts in their service area. To accomplish this, Councils bring together providers, caregivers, local governments, businesses and many other stakeholders to align and coordinate efforts and resources to build a seamless system of service delivery around the needs of local families.

The goal of Councils' work is to create a resource-efficient continuum of local services that is easy for families to navigate and supports children's school readiness and families' economic success. Early Childhood Councils facilitate the sharing of services, resources, knowledge and coordination. Their work “connects the dots” between various agencies and implementers, creating efficiencies that ensure taxpayer dollars are maximized and local services and programs are aligned to local families' needs.

The efforts of Early Childhood Councils focus on aligning and coordinating efforts to increase the quality of local early care and learning programs for children under age 5; ensure access to social-emotional, mental health, and health care services for young children and families; and increase the knowledge and capacity of early childhood professionals. In general, Councils are not the entity providing services directly to families but facilitating collaboration between service providers to improve how families are able to find and navigate between programs and services. Councils work to ensure that services are available to meet the needs in their community, and while this often occurs through coordination, collaboration and partnership, sometimes Councils have to step in and do the work themselves.



A Sweeping Mandate with Daunting Challenges and Lifelong Impacts

The Mandate

Colorado's 34 Early Childhood Councils are charged with positively impacting services for the youngest children, ages 0 to 5, and their families by building an effective local early childhood system through coordination across many diverse stakeholders and entities.

The Challenge

In the K-12 system, school districts act as coordinating entities to ensure families have access to an array of educational, social-emotional and family support services. But in the five years before children enter Colorado's K-12 system, there is no single system of support. Instead there is a complex web of overlapping agencies and organizations and funding streams that each address different and discrete needs of young children and families (e.g., child care, health, mental health, etc.).

In Colorado, early childhood programs cross five state agencies, and services are delivered through hundreds of local entities across the state's 64 counties. This has historically created a disjointed, fragmented experience for families, sowing confusion, delays and barriers to access for families seeking child care, support for developmental concerns, medical or mental health care, and other support.

The Importance

Decades of research demonstrate that a child's readiness for kindergarten is a reliable predictor of that child's future academic and economic success. Indeed, the experiences and relationships that a child has in the first five years of life — the period of the most rapid and sensitive brain development — can have lifelong impacts on health and well-being.

Access to quality child care, physical health and mental health care, and other supports in the early years is essential to help all children reach their potential. Supporting healthy development in the early years pays dividends across a lifetime — for families and entire communities. Colorado prospers when our kids thrive because they are our future workforce, leaders and community members.

Early Childhood Councils facilitate strong partnerships between many local initiatives, programs, services and policies in order to create a coordinated, efficient and high-quality system with young children and their families at the center. The result is that Colorado families, no matter where they live in the state, have access to an array of resources that foster healthy development for children in the critical early childhood period.

“

In a local-control state, where so much problem-solving happens at the community level, you need entities that can look across systems locally to make the connections, facilitate the local conversation, and serve as the intermediary between children, families, providers and public systems. Colorado's Early Childhood Councils have been that connective tissue at the local level to advance the needs of young children and their families.

Bill Jaeger, Colorado Children's Campaign

Timeline & History

of Early Childhood Councils

1997

The Consolidated Child Care Pilot Program is established by the Colorado General Assembly in 12 pilot communities across the state. Its mandate is to align funding sources, eliminate barriers for families, and bring together local partners to create a cohesive system to access child care. The emphasis is on helping parents transition from welfare to the workforce.

2006

Arapahoe County Early Childhood Council begins a six-year pilot of Colorado's Assuring Better Child Development (ABCD) initiative, which results in a 400% increase in referrals to Early Intervention from primary care providers. The ABCD initiative is later replicated across Colorado. (pg. 16)

2008

The Early Childhood Colorado Framework is developed with extensive participation by Councils to gain input from communities across Colorado. The Framework codifies Colorado's shared vision that all children are healthy, valued and thriving and serves as an enduring North Star that guides all practice, policy and investment. (pg. 12)

2009

La Plata Board of County Commissioners adopts the Children, Youth and Families Master Plan, informed and guided by the local Early Childhood Council's work to strengthen the local early childhood system over the previous decade. (pg. 45)

2012-2013

Colorado receives \$45 million in Early Learning Challenge funds from the federal government to improve the quality of child care programs and provider training. Early Childhood Councils are instrumental in statewide local implementation of Colorado Shines, a system to assess, improve and communicate the quality of early care and learning programs. (pg. 26)

1999

The Consolidated Child Care Pilot Program expands through Senate Bill 226 to include six additional communities. The mandate for pilot communities expands to include identifying best practices to increase quality, meeting the varied needs of families seeking child care, and increasing training and professional development for providers.

2007

The Colorado General Assembly replaces the Consolidated Child Care Pilots with Early Childhood Councils (House Bill 1062) and allows for an application-and-funding process to expand coverage to all 64 Colorado counties. A common purpose for Councils is defined: to build and implement a comprehensive system of early childhood services at the community level to ensure children's school readiness.

2008-2013

Early Childhood Councils receive five years of dedicated funding to tackle the integration of health and health care into the local early childhood system. The result in many Colorado communities, including Mesa County, is improved health outcomes for children and eliminating costly duplication of services. (pg. 32) The Meeting Milestones initiative, a technology-driven solution to screening and referrals in Grand and Jackson counties, is also developed during this time. (pg. 33)

2011

Following the passage of House Bill 1062, more Colorado communities create Early Childhood Councils to build more effective local service-delivery systems. By year's end, 30 Councils are operating, serving 55 Colorado counties.

2013

Denver Early Childhood Council develops the proprietary data information system ecConnect and expands the system to statewide use by all Early Childhood Councils a year later. (pg. 42)

2014

House Bill 1317 overhauls the Colorado Child Care Assistance Program (CCCAP) to expand access, promote quality and lower barriers for low-income families in need of child care. The legislation is informed significantly by the Early Childhood Council of Larimer County, whose recommendations are adopted into the final legislation. (pg. 15)

2015

The Early Childhood Leadership Commission updates the Early Childhood Colorado Framework, with significant local input provided by the Councils. There is added focus on infants and toddlers, prenatal care and integrated health, mental health and well-being.

2017

Data-gathering efforts of the Early Childhood Council of Larimer County expose a "failed market" for child care and results in the formation of a task force, housed under the Fort Collins Chamber of Commerce, to study the issue and propose solutions. (pg. 44)

2020

The COVID-19 crisis begins and Early Childhood Councils mobilize to support Colorado's child care industry. (pg. 52)

2013-2014

The Early Childhood Council Leadership Alliance incorporates as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit membership association with the mission of supporting a strong statewide network of Early Childhood Councils to improve access to quality services and outcomes for young children. (pg. 48) By 2014, 31 Councils are serving 58 Colorado counties.

2014-2019

Early Childhood Partnership of Adams County is the local implementation community for Colorado Project LAUNCH, a five-year federal project to strengthen a sustainable system of early childhood mental health services. The project informs replication of successful practices across the state. (pg. 34)

2016-2020

Eight Colorado-based funders come together to create the LAUNCH Together initiative to expand and replicate the successful strategies from Adams and Weld counties. Two Councils — Chaffee County Early Childhood Council and ECHO and Family Center — receive a joint award to lead the LAUNCH work in Chaffee and Fremont counties. Denver's Early Childhood Council also receives funding. (pg. 36)

2019

There are 34 Early Childhood Councils representing 63 of 64 Colorado counties.

Building Resource-Efficient and Seamless Systems

In order for children to be healthy and ready for school, and for parents to have the support they need to work, families need support from a variety of programs and organizations. Child care, health care, oral health and mental health care services, as well as nutrition programs and other supports, ensure that children and families have a strong foundation.

Yet even when there are available programs in the community, families often have difficulty connecting to the services they need. That's because early childhood is a confusing array of distinct systems and programs with different funding sources, housed within different agencies, and all with unique program standards, eligibility, evaluation and reporting requirements. This creates a confusing maze for families who are seeking to apply for and participate in services that young children need to thrive.

“

When kids get to be school age, the school systems are clear. But early childhood is incredibly fragmented; there is no one point of entry for families to get services. You are at home with your baby and it's up to you to figure it out.

Bev Thurber, Early Childhood Council of Larimer County (ret.)

The role of Colorado's Early Childhood Councils is to address this problem by developing and maintaining coordinated, aligned early childhood service delivery systems in local communities. By coordinating strategies, outcomes and efforts across a diverse array of stakeholders, Early Childhood Councils make it possible to serve more families with better services for the same amount of funding.

Early Childhood Councils work at the intersection of distinct and interconnected early childhood systems that are each essential to support the health and well-being of children and families. Beyond the obvious benefit to families, a strong early childhood system is

a source of economic strength. When children and families have the support they need, children will enter school ready to learn, and parents will be able to work and provide for their families.

“

Work at the individual agency level can impact a few, whereas a system-building work can impact an entire community for years to come.

Christina Taylor, Early Childhood Council of Larimer County

“

A system does not mean that things are more complicated; it means that they work better together and are less wasteful.

Gerrit Westervelt, WestEd

Family Support & Parent Education

The Unique Role of Councils

Working at the intersection of distinct but interconnected systems

Healthy, supported families and children

Early Learning

Health & Mental Health

Early Learning

- Support existing child care programs to improve equity, access and quality
- Encourage creation of new programs to meet demand
- Train and build capacity of early childhood professionals to create high-quality learning environments
- Build pipeline of early childhood professionals to address shortages
- Facilitate universal screening and early identification
- Create strong referral networks to connect children to developmental support
- Secure funding to meet local needs

Family Support & Parent Education

- Connect families to local support and parent education programs
- Bring evidence-based initiatives to local communities, including programs designed to increase equity and eliminate bias
- Increase coordination of services for families of children with special needs
- Promote parent engagement and leadership
- Provide evidence-based information about early childhood and guidance on supporting healthy development

Health & Mental Health

- Increase equitable access to medical and oral health care, including during prenatal and postpartum periods
- Build coordinated local systems for universal developmental screening
- Strengthen local networks to ensure high follow-through rates on referrals
- Facilitate mental health consultation in a variety of settings and align community mental health services for children and families



Child care providers

Early
Childhood
Council

Mental health
centers &
providers

Council Members: A Diverse Group of Local Public and Private Stakeholders

Colorado's 34 Early Childhood Councils are as different as the communities they serve. They vary greatly in size and staff capacity, and each Council pursues different but aligned efforts depending on the specific needs and conditions in the communities they serve.

Sixty-three of Colorado's 64 counties have Councils, with 20 Councils each representing a single county and the others representing from two to six counties. Early Childhood Councils operate in accordance with the rules and requirements detailed in Colorado statute. Half of the Early Childhood Councils are independent 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations while the other half operate under a fiscal agent, such as a local school district or community college.

Each Council is governed by a diverse group of members — public and private stakeholders who meet regularly to align efforts and resources, collaborate and share knowledge with the goal of improving outcomes for local children and families. Members of Councils, as illustrated in the diagram and outlined in statute, serve in their roles as volunteers. Councils coordinate strategies and action across this diverse array of member partners to make efficient use of resources and deliver more comprehensive, quality services to the youngest Coloradans and their families.



When you talk to someone at an Early Childhood Council, it's like talking to 100 local early childhood professionals.

Jennifer O'Brien, Colorado Department of Education

We work together because child development is a multi-domain and multi-dimensional endeavor and because, to really address individual child and family needs and conditions, all perspectives are critical.

Jennifer Stedron and Ginger Maloney, Looking to the Past to Shape Colorado's Future: 30 Years of Progress for Young Children and Families, Report by Early Milestones Colorado

Implementing the State's Shared Vision for Early Childhood in Local Communities

Over decades — and across administration changes and varying economic conditions — Colorado has maintained a commitment to advancing a shared vision for the health and well-being of the youngest Coloradans. This vision, that all Colorado children are healthy, valued and thriving, is captured in the Early Childhood Colorado Framework.

The Framework establishes a unified approach for all work related to early childhood in the state. Early Childhood Councils are responsible for building the partnerships and cohesive systems to allow for effective implementation of the Framework strategies at the local level.

Councils not only are responsible for facilitating the strategies in the Framework but were instrumental in enabling the creation of the shared vision for Colorado.

Originally drafted in 2008, codifying a unified vision across an ideologically and geographically diverse state was no small feat. Early Childhood Councils made it possible by facilitating extensive information gathering in their local communities and enabling an inclusive process that ensured the Framework reflected the interests of all Coloradans. During the Framework's development, Councils convened countless meetings of local stakeholders and filtered the input up to local, regional and state partners.

The Framework was updated in 2015, and once again the Councils engaged to provide extensive local input into the process. As a result, the Early Childhood Colorado Framework has been embraced by the entire early childhood community in Colorado, serving as the North Star and a tool to align outcomes and strategies for action across every aspect of early childhood.

Having an early childhood Framework that reflects the interests of the entire state and all stakeholders has made Colorado a model for other states looking to align and unify early childhood efforts across multiple systems and partners.



“

The Early Childhood

Colorado Framework is truly a reflection of the interests of all Coloradans who care about and work with young children. We would not have that nor would Colorado have come this far in advancing the strategies in the Framework without the work of the Councils.

**Elsa Holguin, Denver
Preschool Program**



Local Leadership Drives Efficiency, Accountability and Impact

Articles in Section 2:

- Levers for local control allow local solutions to shared challenges
- Piloting innovative approaches and sharing best practices
- Accountable, effective stewards of public funds
- Small teams maximize impact through partnerships

Levers for Local Control Allow for Local Solutions to Shared Challenges

Colorado's Early Childhood Councils are tackling common problems — lack of quality affordable child care and fragmented services for young children and families — across vastly different communities. Each county in Colorado is proudly independent, with the political, economic and social conditions as different from county to county as the landscape.

Colorado's system of local control requires local representation of the early childhood system, which is the role of Early Childhood Councils. Made up of members who live and work in the communities they serve, Councils embody Colorado's independence and commitment to collaborative problem solving. This is reflected in Councils' accomplishments in local communities to build the implementation capacity of many partners, align efforts, resources and outcomes, and establish shared accountability.

The legislation that created Early Childhood Councils sought to ensure that the Councils would have the flexibility to adapt policies, rules and regulations at the local level. The local community's authority over how best to use resources is evident in the rule waiver process — and was essential in the early evolution of the Councils.

Rule waivers were an important lever of local control that helped bring more partners to the table in the early days of the Councils. Having a process by which to request a waiver for any law or regulation was a strong motivation for formerly disparate agencies and organizations to come together. The rule waiver process offered an early glimpse of how much local partners could gain by working together and has been used by Councils ever since to address local community needs.

Through rule waivers, which are evaluated by the Early Childhood Leadership Commission to ensure the health and safety of children, Councils have a channel to request changes to rules, policies or regulations that impede the Council from pursuing its strategies or that create barriers for local families and children.

Some of the earliest rule waivers requested by Councils focused on the Colorado Preschool Program (CPP): requests to use CPP slots to serve younger children or changes to how kids were counted and when. Other early waivers sought to impact child care reimbursement rates and to raise the family income eligibility for child care assistance in expensive resort communities. Today, many Councils continue to request rule waivers as a way to impact policy that addresses workforce challenges and build a pipeline of early childhood professionals (see pg. 40).

Rule waivers have been one mechanism for impacting state policy. Many Councils also have analyzed and impacted local and state policies in other ways, targeting their efforts toward policies that support or create barriers for children and families. One such policy was the modernization and overhaul of the Colorado Child Care Assistance Program (CCCAP) in 2014, a notable example of Council-informed policy change. The legislation that overhauled CCCAP drew in part on the findings and recommendations made by the Early Childhood Council of Larimer County, which had been working to address issues with CCCAP and local providers.

“

We in Colorado see ourselves as very independent; we don't all think alike, and we are proud of that. Early Childhood Councils reflect the individuality of Colorado counties and are uniquely capable of responding to local community needs. At the Buell Foundation we work with other leaderspartners across the state to develop strategies that reflects the collection of all of these perspectives. Closer to where the services are needed is the best place to make decisions.

Susan Steele, Buell Foundation



*Early Childhood Council
of Larimer County*

Council Tackles Challenges with Colorado Child Care Assistance Program, Informs Statewide Overhaul

Early Childhood Council of Larimer County

The Colorado Child Care Assistance Program, or CCCAP, provides financial assistance to support child care expenses for low-income families who receive welfare benefits through Colorado Works (the state's Temporary Assistance to Needy Families or TANF program).

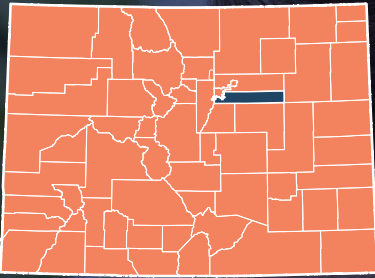
CCCAP has a rocky history with child care providers in Colorado and has always struggled to find the right balance between a fair reimbursement rate paid to providers and shortening the long waiting lists of children seeking a CCCAP spot. In the early 2010s, child care providers in Larimer County and across the state began refusing to accept CCCAP, claiming it was a money-losing proposition, impossible to continue for small, independent child care businesses already functioning on razor-thin margins.

Recognizing that an agreement between providers and CCCAP was the only way to ensure many vulnerable children's access to quality affordable child care, the Early Childhood Council of Larimer County (ECCLC) convened

a task force of local CCCAP administrators and providers to examine what could be changed to better support providers and eligible families. Local CCCAP staff worked with the task force to break down the federal and state regulations and identify areas for potential local decision-making. Under ECCLC's leadership, the task force analyzed what could and could not be changed about Colorado's implementation, conducted surveys of parents and providers, and produced a detailed series of recommendations for both local and state-level changes.

In 2014, House Bill 1317 overhauled CCCAP to expand access, promote quality and lower barriers for working parents trying to find child care so they can work and advance toward self-sufficiency. The legislation was informed significantly by ECCLC, and many of the Council's recommendations were adopted into the final legislation. At the time it passed, HB 1317 was considered one of the most significant two-generation approaches to child care and early learning in the country.

Arapahoe County Early Childhood Council



Local Laboratories Pilot Innovative Approaches and Scaling Best Practices

Early Childhood Councils have been called “petri dishes” and “laboratories” because they test and refine strategies in order to accomplish the Early Childhood Framework goals. The Councils’ approach — to study, plan, test and refine — results in best practices that have been shared and scaled across the state.

Challenge

One in eight children in Colorado is impacted by social, emotional or behavioral challenges or developmental delays. Without identification of the problem and access to intervention services as early as possible in a child’s life, these developmental delays can negatively impact children for a lifetime. Ample evidence demonstrates that children with untreated developmental delays have poorer outcomes over their lifetimes related to academic achievement, health and economic well-being. Despite the potentially dire consequences, less than 20% of children under age 3 with at least one developmental delay receive early intervention services, according to the American Association of Family Physicians.

Opportunity

The rapid pace of brain development in the first three years of life makes early childhood a critical window of time to intervene and provide developmental support. When developmental delays or challenges are identified early on, families can be referred to intervention that can get children back on track for success in school and in life. For every dollar invested in early identification and intervention, long-term costs related to criminal justice, health care and social services are reduced by \$4 to \$9, according to the National Forum on Early Childhood Policy and Programs.

Regular developmental screenings for babies and toddlers, performed at the pediatrician’s office, along with a strong and coordinated referral network, ensure that young children who need intervention are identified early and receive appropriate support. Children in Colorado who have developmental delays and are identified early may receive services from Early Intervention.



“We incubate innovative approaches. We look at what needs to happen. If someone is already doing it, we find out how we can support them to do more of it. That’s why piloting works; it’s reflective, it’s respectful of the partners, and it places the child at the center.”

Gretchen Davidson, Arapahoe County Early Childhood Council

Council as Catalyst

In 2006, the American Academy of Pediatrics released a policy statement that developmental screenings should be given at the 9- and 18-month visits, as well as at the 24- or 30-month visit. The next year, the Arapahoe County Early Childhood Council was selected as the Colorado pilot site to test implementation of a new national initiative to strengthen screening-and-referral systems within primary health care settings. It was called Assuring Better Child Health and Development, or ABCD.

The results were dramatic. In the six years that the Arapahoe County Early Childhood Council incubated Colorado's ABCD initiative, referrals to Early Intervention from primary care providers grew by 400%. The lessons learned in Arapahoe County were used to replicate the ABCD initiative across Colorado. Today, ABCD is a statewide leader in removing barriers for children who need developmental services.

Change Created for Children

Colorado children and families, no matter where they live in the state, now have access to regular developmental screenings, early identification and stronger local referral networks for developmental support. The number of primary care practices performing regular screenings in Colorado increased from 5% in 2006 to 95% in 2016, according to ABCD. This means more Colorado children with developmental delays are identified early and referred to needed support so they can get back on track for success in school and beyond.

Accountable, Effective Stewards of Public Funds

By statute, each Early Childhood Council is required to conduct a regular community needs assessment to ensure that resources and efforts are always aligned with the needs of local families. The challenges Councils uncover in their community needs assessments are too large and complex for any one agency or area of expertise to tackle alone. The role of the Council is to bring together all of the stakeholders in a local community to align efforts toward solutions and ensure the most efficient use of resources.

By braiding together many varied sources of funding, aligning partner efforts and operating extremely efficiently, Early Childhood Councils significantly reduce waste and duplication in the system.

The findings of each Council's community assessment serve as the basis for its strategic plan, which sets measurable goals related to increasing the quality, accessibility, capacity and affordability of local early childhood services. Councils also create strategies and goals around locally determined needs that align with the Early Childhood Colorado Framework outcomes of access, quality and equity. Councils are accountable for the goals and metrics included in their strategic plans, and their progress toward stated goals is evaluated annually.

Triad Early Childhood Council

One way that Early Childhood Councils leverage all available resources to operate efficiently, reduce waste and better meet the needs of children and families is by using fiscal sponsors and sharing resources.

The Triad Early Childhood Council, which serves Jefferson, Gilpin and Clear Creek counties, uses Red Rocks Community College as its fiscal sponsor. This enables efficient shared use of services including space, accounting and human resources. The close connection to Red Rocks Community College also allows Triad Early Childhood Council direct access and connections to the college's Early Childhood Professions programming, which enables the Council to better support a pipeline of qualified early childhood professionals.

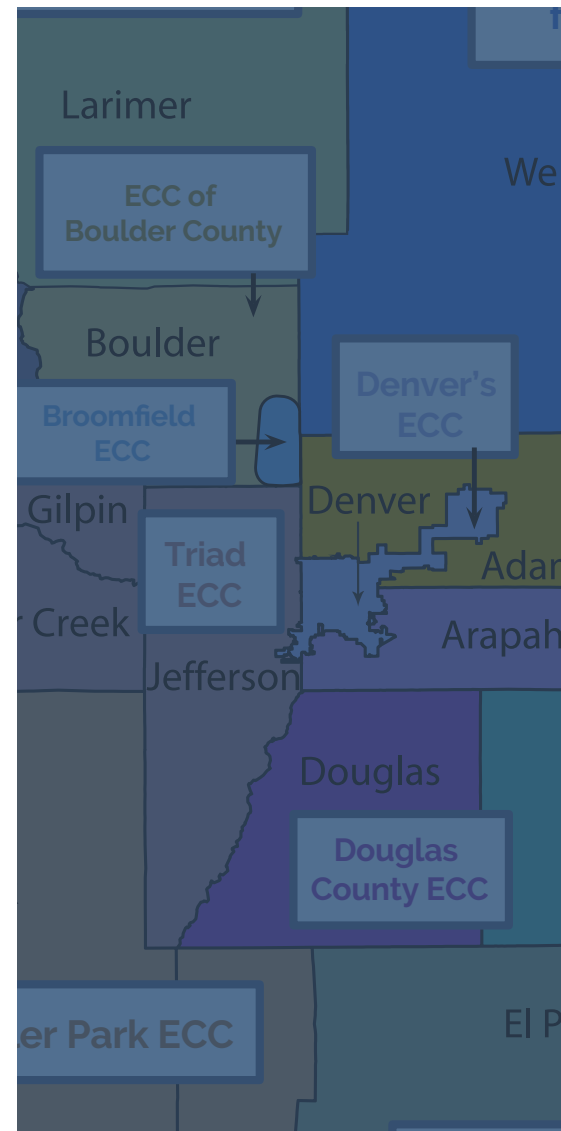


*Triad Early
Childhood Council*

Small, Efficient Council Teams Maximize Impact through Partnerships

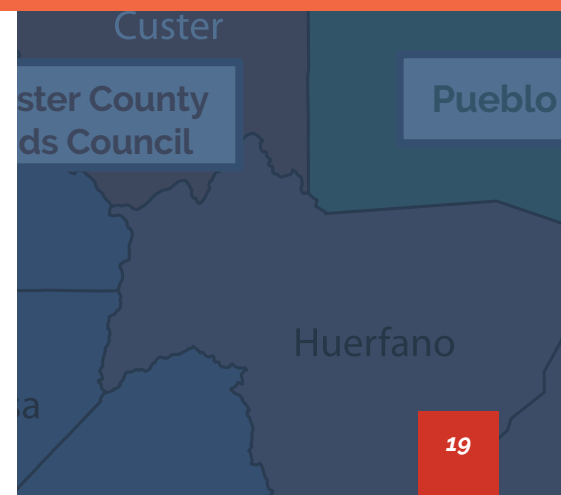
The number of paid staff varies by Council, from just one part-time employee to teams of nearly 30 people. But what makes Early Childhood Councils so unique and effective is the vast network of local partnerships that each Council has built and maintained.

Each Early Childhood Council in Colorado maintains a vast portfolio of cross-sector community partnerships that are key to building and sustaining a cohesive, seamless early childhood system. Council partnerships cross every domain and include representatives of local government, child care providers, local public health and human services, health care and mental health care providers, and family support and education organizations, among many others (pg. 10).



“We have small communities that want to collaborate instead of duplicating or competing.”

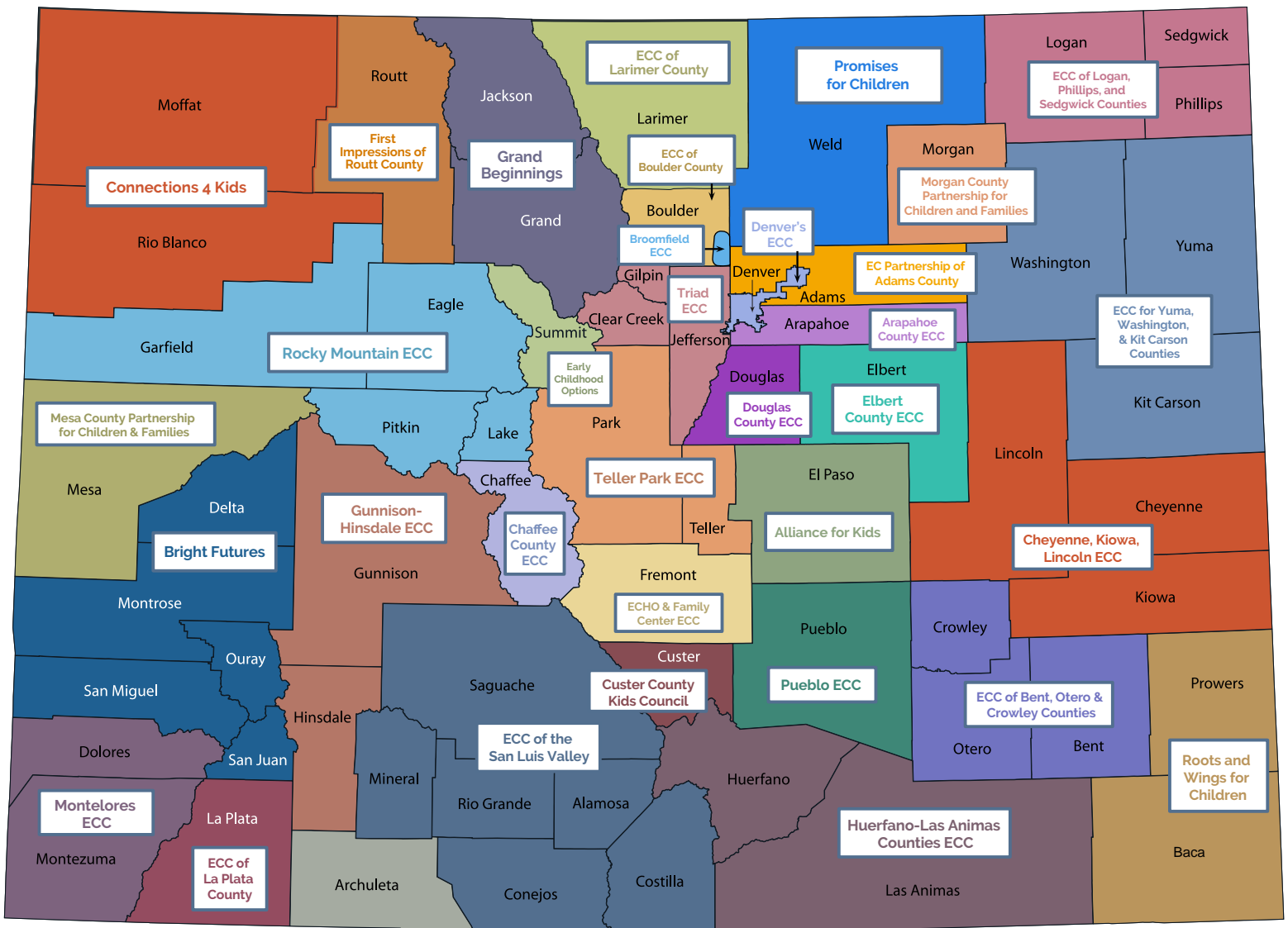
Stacy Petty, Rocky Mountain Early Childhood Council



Colorado's Early Childhood Councils

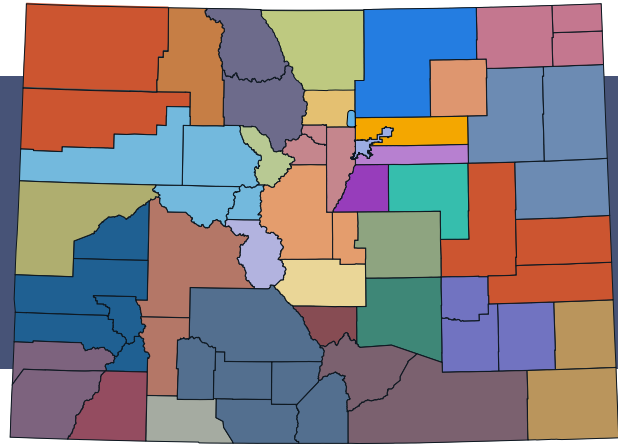
This map identifies each of Colorado's 34 Early Childhood Councils by name and by the county or counties they serve. It also indicates the number of full-time equivalents (FTEs) on staff at each Council, as well as the number of formalized partnerships maintained by each Council.

The remarkable number of partnerships that Councils maintain, and the community-wide alignment that they facilitate, results in a cohesive and sustainable system that delivers needed services and feels seamless to families.


















The map and data are courtesy of the Early Childhood Council Leadership Alliance (ECCLA).

Colorado's Early Childhood Councils



Council Name	Number of FTEs	Number of Local Partners	Licensed Child Care Programs Supported by Council
Grand Beginnings	4	80	12
Arapahoe County Early Childhood Council	25	195	420
Douglas County Early Childhood Council	1	70+	228+
Rocky Mountain Early Childhood Council	2	72+	120
Early Childhood Council of La Plata County	2.8	68	58
ECHO and Family Center Early Childhood Council	1	39	18
Teller Park Early Childhood Council	3	27	15
Promises for Children	11	46+	273
Early Childhood Partnership of Adams County	9	71	92
Cheyenne, Kiowa, Lincoln Early Childhood Council	4 PT	20	12

Council Name	Number of FTEs	Number of Local Partners	Licensed Child Care Programs Supported by Council
 Elbert County Early Childhood Council	1	14	7
 Early Childhood Council for Yuma, Washington and Kit Carson Counties	1.5	23	38
 Chaffee County Early Childhood Council	2.5	85	12
 Connections 4 Kids	1.5	30	13
 Early Childhood Options	5	16	26
 Montelores Early Childhood Council	4	41	17
 Roots and Wings for Children	0.25	25	16
 Custer County Kids Council	0.5	30	2
 Early Childhood Council of Bent, Otero and Crowley Counties	2.5	20	21
 Early Childhood Council of Larimer County	10.5	115+	357
 The Early Childhood Council of Boulder County	8.15	80+	324
 Triad Early Childhood Council	8.25	36+	391

Council Name	Number of FTEs	Number of Local Partners	Licensed Child Care Programs Supported by Council
 Mesa County Partnership for Children and Families	3	15	136
 Huerfano-Las Animas Counties Early Childhood Council	1 FTE, 1 PT	42+	12
 Broomfield Early Childhood Council	1.3	49	30
 Pueblo Early Childhood Council	5	80+	134
 Gunnison Hinsdale Early Childhood Council	1	23	13
 Early Childhood Council of Logan, Phillips, Sedwick Counties	2.6	55	35
 Bright Futures	7	51	80
 Alliance for Kids	12 FTE, 4PT	75	450
 Early Childhood Council of the San Luis Valley	24	73	41
 Morgan County Partnership for Children and Families	1	18	29
 Denver's Early Childhood Council	26	77	518
 First Impressions of Routt County	0	26	40



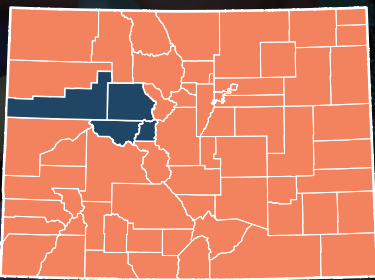
Ensuring Children Enter Kindergarten Ready to Learn

Articles in Section 3:

- Leveraging time-limited funds to permanently address child care shortage
- Driving sweeping quality improvement in early care and learning
- Ensuring equal access to school readiness support for rural families

Leveraging Time-Limited Funding to Permanently Address the Shortage of Infant and Toddler Care

Rocky Mountain Early Childhood Council



Challenge

Infant and toddler care requires a lot more overhead for providers. Lower adult-child ratios are required, more coursework is required for providers to meet the state minimum standards, and other special licensing requirements apply to programs that care for the youngest children. As a result, taking care of babies and toddlers can be a money-losing proposition, and there are shortages of infant and toddler child care spots in almost every community across Colorado.

Opportunity

Legislation enacted in 2013 allocated funds to help address the shortage of child care slots for infants and toddlers. Rocky Mountain Early Childhood Council (RMECC), which serves Eagle, Lake, Garfield and Pitkin counties, leveraged this funding to accelerate efforts to expand support for existing licensed child care programs in an effort to better match the supply of infant and toddler care with the demand. House Bill 1291 expanded access to infant and toddler care by supporting counties and Early Childhood Councils to invest in supporting more families while also raising the quality of infant and toddler care.

Council as Catalyst

During the four years that RMECC had funding from House Bill 1291, the Council strengthened a sustainable increase in infant and toddler child care spots, including helping existing child care centers open 14 new infant and toddler rooms with a capacity of 10 children each, for 140 total slots.

Change Created for Children

RMECC negotiated 36 new Colorado Child Care Assistance Program (CCCAP) agreements with local child care centers to serve low-income children, which wiped out CCCAP waiting lists at the time. Although the dedicated funding has changed and decreased since House Bill 1291, RMECC has not only sustained but increased the number of infant and toddler slots, while also increasing the number of CCCAP agreements.

Challenge

Before Colorado had a statewide system, there were no universal standards to rate the quality of early care and learning programs, and there was no aligned set of standards to ensure the professional qualifications of the providers working in those programs. Improving the quality of early care and learning programs and providers had long been a priority in Colorado because quality early learning experiences are shown to pay dividends over a child's lifetime, leading to better outcomes in school and life. But the state lacked the resources to create a statewide system for uniform quality rating and improvement.

Opportunity

In 2012 and 2013, Colorado was awarded nearly \$45 million in Early Learning Challenge funds in the largest and most significant federal grant focused on early childhood ever awarded to the state. The funds supercharged Colorado's efforts to implement statewide quality standards for early care and learning programs and providers in a sweeping four-year implementation effort. The funds built upon a history of measuring quality of care in Colorado through the Qualistar Rating, which was a national model and one of the first Quality Rating and Improvement Systems in the country.

Councils as Catalyst

Winning the funding and satisfying the proposal requirements required Colorado to undertake a statewide engagement process — on an extremely tight timeline. The process, powered by Early Childhood Councils, gave state officials the local access they needed to inform the proposal, build collective support and obtain buy-in for the strategies that were needed to win the funding.

Once the state secured the funding, Early Childhood Councils were the critical on-the-ground implementers in local communities. Rolling out Colorado's new Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) for early care and learning programs, as well as the new Professional Development Information System (PDIS) for early learning providers across every community in the state, required a massive statewide mobilization of local teams. Councils drove implementation by scaling up to offer personalized support to local programs and providers, helping them understand and adopt the new quality and professional standards. Efforts by Councils to guide local programs through the process and filter input back to state partners helped the state achieve the broad participation that has resulted in sweeping improvements to the quality of early care and learning programs across Colorado.



Rising to the Early Learning Challenge: Councils Drive Sweeping Quality Improvement Efforts

Change Created for Children

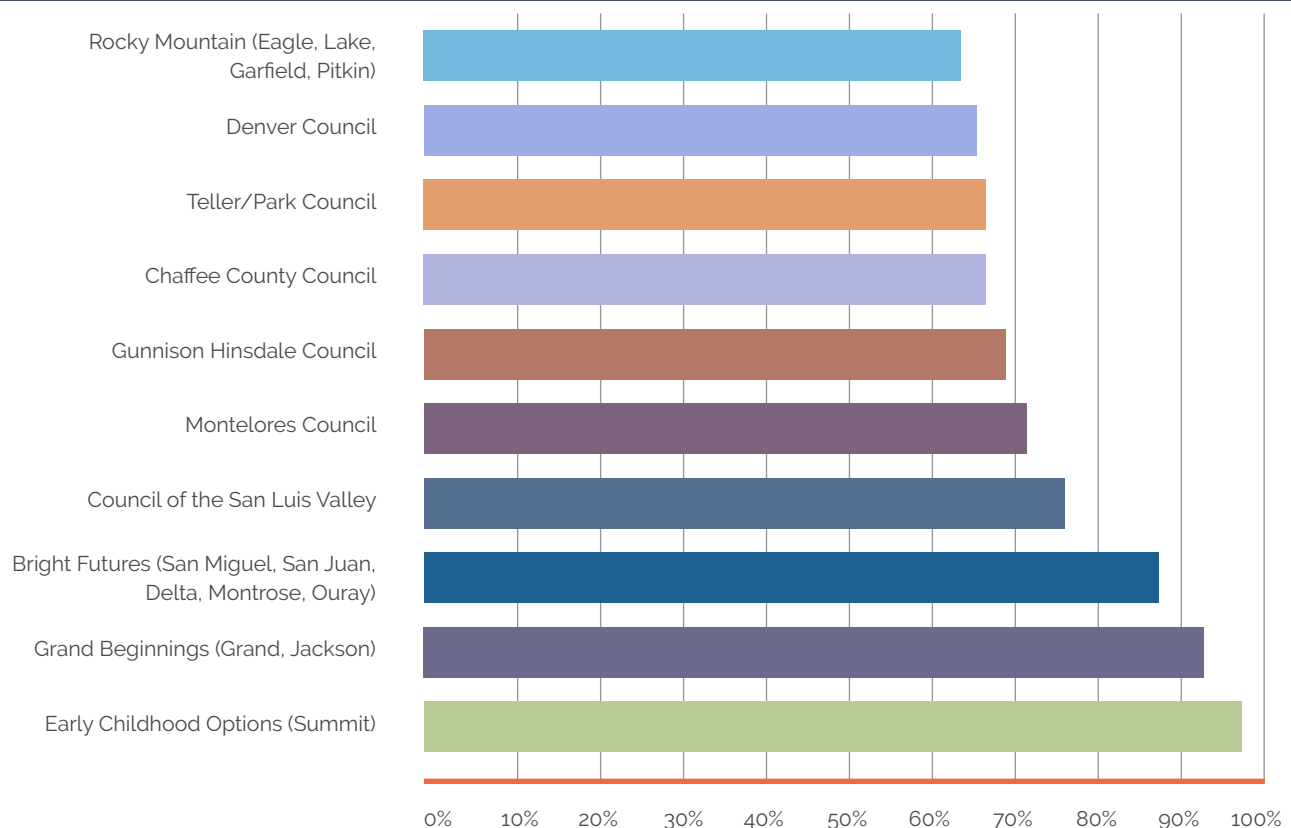
The remarkable progress Colorado has made in improving the quality of child care in the state is evidence of the collective impact of Early Childhood Councils, which have been essential drivers of progress in local communities. In 2014, when the state set out to align quality standards for every child care and preschool program in Colorado, very few programs in the state had a quality rating, and providers didn't always have guidance and resources to improve the quality of care they provided. As a result, only 10% of programs in Colorado had a quality rating from Qualistar, the organization that laid the groundwork for the statewide rating system.

Today, 100% of licensed child care and preschool programs in the state have a quality rating of at least Level 1 in Colorado Shines, which certifies the program as meeting basic health and safety standards. Among licensed and quality-rated programs, 49% have taken the next step to obtain an objective, on-site rating to advance to a higher level of quality within Colorado Shines (Levels 2-5). The Colorado Shines rating assesses quality based on a variety of factors that ensure children's health and safety and support positive early learning and development. In some communities, nearly every program is of extremely high quality. In Grand and Jackson counties, for example, every program rated for quality is either a level 4 or 5, with 5 being the highest possible rating on the scale.

The work of Councils has also significantly increased the credential level of early childhood professionals in the state since 2015. Research clearly shows that the quality of the early learning environment is directly tied to the level of training, knowledge and capacity of the adult caregivers. Having an aligned set of standards for early learning professionals ensures the same early childhood core knowledge, regardless of setting, and ensures quality care for children everywhere in Colorado.

The Early Childhood Councils with the highest percentages of quality-rated child care and preschool programs (out of the total number of programs in the community) are highlighted in the chart below.

Percentage of Licensed Programs Rated for Quality



Ensuring Equal Access to School Readiness Support for Rural Families

Because of local decision-making and access to resources in Colorado, there is uneven access for families to publicly funded programs. In Denver, Boulder and other communities where taxpayers have approved tax increases to fund early childhood programs, families have access to many more services than in communities where funding is much tighter.

Early Childhood Councils promote equitable access for all Colorado families by advocating at the local level, across public and private stakeholders, to meet families' needs and build the capacity of the local early childhood service-delivery system. Councils that serve rural areas of the state are particularly adept at bridging varying perspectives — and vast geographies — to ensure equitable access to high-quality services and support for children and families in their communities.

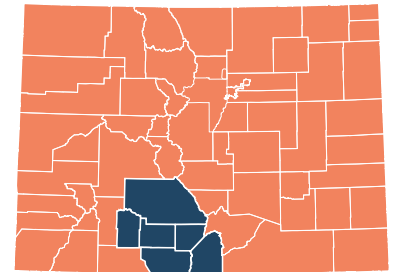
Ensuring Access and Equity for Families across 8,200 Square Miles

The Early Childhood Council of the San Luis Valley (ECCSLV) covers Alamosa, Conejos, Costilla, Mineral, Rio Grande and Saguache counties. Each of these six counties are represented by three county commissioners. The ECCSLV has strong relationships with all 18 county commissioners in these communities, which has enabled the Council broad reach and impact throughout its vast region.

ECCSLV coordinates across more than 70 partners in all six counties to ensure that the needs of local families are met. Like in other Colorado communities, the shortage of infant and toddler care is an issue in the San Luis Valley. When Early Head Start opened an application process for communities to apply for funding, the only entity in the region with the capacity to write the proposal and manage the grant was the local Early Childhood Council. ECCSLV won the funding on behalf of its communities and now contracts with existing child care programs across the six counties to provide infant and toddler care, significantly increasing access for local families.



Early Childhood Council of the San Luis Valley



“

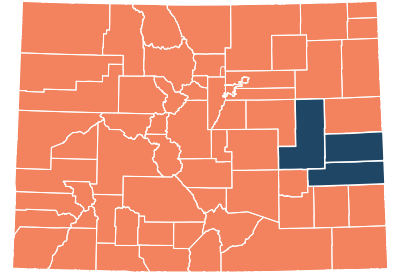
When you cover six counties and 14 school districts, relationships are key. Even across the distance and different perspectives, through our partnerships we are able to impact families with young children directly, reach every licensed provider and bring new resources into our communities.

Sheri Valdez, Early Childhood Council of the San Luis Valley

Promoting School Readiness for Children on the Eastern Plains

Cheyenne, Kiowa, Lincoln Early Childhood Council

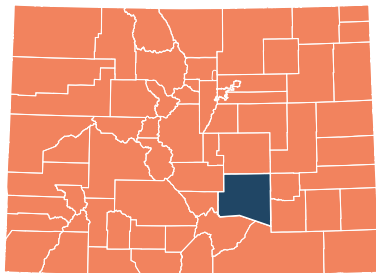
Families living in rural, remote communities may have very limited access to school readiness supports such as high-quality child care or preschool programs. The Cheyenne, Kiowa, Lincoln Early Childhood Council, together with its partners, launched the Fun Tote program to ensure that families in these communities have access to evidence-based materials to support school readiness. The Fun Tote program connects families to local support, including child care, library literacy programs and in-home and virtual parenting support. Parents and caregivers report that the Fun Tote program has helped children in these counties improve or master specific developmental skills and expanded their family's access to quality early learning experiences.



Ensuring Smaller Communities Have Access to Early Childhood Training and Resources

Pueblo Early Childhood Council

Over the years, Colorado has established and invested in the Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) network to ensure that families across the state can find the early childhood care and services they need. Early Childhood



Councils play an important role in facilitating the statewide network of CCR&Rs, which provide families with information about quality child care, availability of child care in their community, financial assistance, and referrals to local programs, including parenting classes, early childhood developmental screening and assessments, health care, and basic needs support.

In broad regional collaborations, Councils coordinate across service areas and work in partnership to provide resources to help families make informed child care decisions. The Pueblo Early Childhood Council operates the Children First CCR&R, which spans 11 counties and seven Early Childhood Councils in southeastern Colorado. Through collaboration, Children First CCR&R and its partners can connect more families across a vast area with high-quality child care in their community, while maximizing limited resources, aligning efforts and increasing efficiency.



Bridging Disjointed Services for Better Child Outcomes

Articles in Section 4:

- Integrating health and health care into early childhood systems
- Leveraging technology for universal developmental screening
- Improving outcomes for children at highest risk
- Meeting families' mental health needs in rural areas
- Single process of entry eliminates duplication, improves access

Aligning Goals, Resources and Efforts Across Stakeholders for Greater Impact, Efficiency

Early Childhood Councils coordinate among a diverse array of partners to create an effective local early childhood system that bridges previously disconnected, disjointed services into a seamless and resource-efficient system.

The Early Childhood System Before Councils

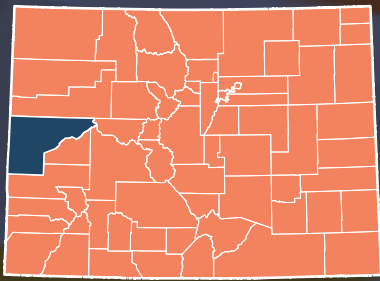
- Served just part of a county or region
- Goals and priorities defined by the missions and visions of independent agencies
- Funding ups and downs drove efforts
- Focus on a single domain
- Focus on a single population
- Single agency focus on meeting needs, filling gaps and addressing concerns
- Independent decision-making based on individual agency interests
- Outcomes measured varied from program to program

The Early Childhood System Today

- Serves the entire county or region
- Clear vision for local children and families that is shared among partners
- Shared vision drives resource development efforts
- Focus on all three domains
- Comprehensive approach that serves all families
- Cross-agency and cross-sector collaboration to identify and address needs and gaps
- Collective decision-making based on data and what is best for the community
- Increasingly aligned evaluation practices that enable data-driven decision-making

Integrating Health and Health Care into Local Early Childhood Systems

Mesa County Partnership for Children and Families



“Getting everyone to the table, facilitating collaboration and building partnerships — that’s the leadership of the Council. It’s many years of work, but once those partnership relationships are cemented, they live on beyond the individuals to bind together entities and agencies. That’s how the needle is moved.

Holly Jacobson, Mesa County Partnership for Children and Families

Challenge

For young children to be healthy and enter kindergarten ready to learn, they need support from a variety of providers, including child care, medical care and mental health care. Even when these programs exist in communities, families often struggle to find out about, apply for and enroll in services that could benefit them and their children.

The rules and funding are usually designed and designated at the national and state levels, while most services are delivered locally at the community level, where families interact with the system. Without substantial efforts aimed at integration, this reality can lead to a network of disconnected services at the local level that leave families confused and unable to access the services they need.

Opportunity

A funding commitment over five years from The Colorado Trust enabled 20 of Colorado’s Early Childhood Councils, beginning in 2008, to integrate health and health care into local early childhood systems in ways that would be sustainable after the funding ended. To both improve health outcomes for children and minimize costly duplication of services, Councils tackled various aspects of health integration, including:

- Increasing the number of convenient sites where families can enroll in public health insurance
- Linking publicly insured families with local health care providers that accept Medicaid
- Improving access for children to mental health support

Council as Catalyst

The health integration systems-building work was led by 20 of Colorado’s Early Childhood Councils, including the Mesa County Partnership for Children and Families (PCF), based in Grand Junction. PCF convened a broad coalition of stakeholders including physicians and medical practices, child care providers, local public health and human services agencies, and many others to coordinate the health integration work. The committee no longer meets, but it doesn’t have to as the systems it worked to create are now ingrained in how providers across Mesa County conduct their operations.

Change Created for Children

By linking the places where families can enroll in public health insurance to the providers where they can receive care, all children in Mesa County have access to the health care and developmental monitoring and support that they need to enter school ready to learn and thrive. Nearly one in five children in Mesa County lacked health insurance when the health integration initiative was beginning a decade ago. Today, less than 5% of Mesa County children lack health insurance.

Challenge

Every child learns and develops at their own pace. For parents and caregivers, it can be difficult to know if their child's development is on track. Developmental screenings, which identify strengths and delays in a child's development and help families get support to address them early, are critically important to the health and learning of young children. Sometimes children need a boost to maximize their potential – and there are effective programs that can provide this boost if screening is performed. In Grand County, early childhood and health leaders noticed that developmental screening and referral rates for young children did not meet national standards. Grand Beginnings and community health leaders convened partners from across the community to find a solution.

Opportunity

Grand Beginnings launched the Meeting Milestones initiative with the goal of increasing use of the Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ-3) screening instrument. Supported by an investment from The Colorado Trust, Meeting Milestones relied on technology and close collaboration with multiple community partners.

Councils as Catalyst

Research shows that the earlier a developmental delay is identified, the better the outcome for the child, and many of Colorado's Early Childhood Councils have focused on strengthening screening and referral systems at the local level. Huge gains have been made across the state, but Grand Beginnings stands apart for its innovative response.

Grand Beginnings and other community stakeholders formed a collaborative effort and worked with Patient Tools, a company based in Littleton, to create an app based on the ASQ-3 that alerts parents to any missed developmental milestones and improves the traditional process by referring families to local providers in their area if follow-up is recommended. Today, Meeting Milestones has grown to include developmental, oral health, hearing and vision screenings and facilitating referral and follow-up pathways for Grand and Jackson counties.

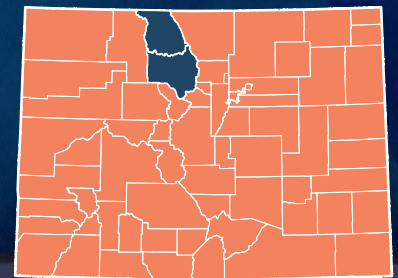
Change Created for Children

The result has been a sharp increase in the percentage of children screened using the ASQ-3. In 2016 the overall screening rate in Colorado was 50%, significantly higher than the national average of 30%. But with fewer opportunities to be screened, children in rural areas can slip through the cracks when it comes to developmental screening. Grand Beginnings determined that only 34% of young children in its area were being screened when it began the Meeting Milestones initiative.

Today, 98% of young children in Grand and Jackson counties receive an appropriate developmental screening. Children with a developmental concern receive timely and appropriate referrals and follow-up to intervention services. Less tangible but still important, Grand Beginnings has spurred a significant shift in the culture and common language surrounding the importance of developmental screening and child development. This is transformative not only for communities but also for the many individual children whose life trajectories will be positively impacted by early screening and identification.

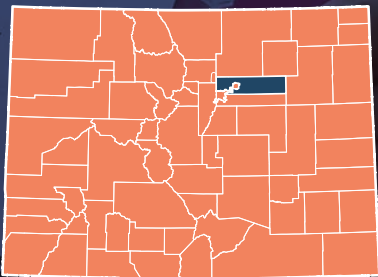
Usings Partnerships and Technology to Implement Universal Developmental Screening

*Grand Beginnings, the
Early Childhood County
of Grand and Jackson
Counties*



Improving Outcomes for Children and Families at Highest Risk

Early Childhood Partnership of Adams County



Challenge

Risk factors including poverty and exposure to traumatic experiences place young children at higher risk for developing social-emotional issues, which if left untreated can negatively impact children for a lifetime. In Colorado, Adams County is among the communities with the highest need for early childhood mental health services, based on an analysis of nine risk factors completed by the Colorado Health Institute.

Opportunity

Research has confirmed the harmful effects of toxic stress on early brain development and the lifelong consequences of exposure to early adversity. But the good news is that prevention programs designed to support healthy social-emotional development in the early years are highly effective at preventing more serious emotional and behavioral disorders. The LAUNCH approach — Linking Actions for Unmet Needs in Children's Health — was created based on these research findings as a sustainable, systems-level solution to promoting the overall health and well-being of children, particularly those facing risk factors. The LAUNCH model has been replicated in communities across the country and in Colorado, including a Council-led initiative in Adams County.

Council as Catalyst

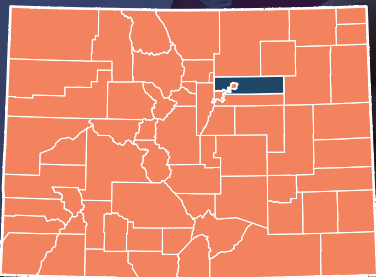
The Early Childhood Partnership of Adams County (ECPAC) worked with the Colorado Department of Human Services Office of Early Childhood, the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment, and JFK Partners at the University of Colorado to win a substantial investment from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration to strengthen a sustainable prevention and mental health promotion system in Adams County following the LAUNCH model. With a strong network of formal partnerships and relationships across the community, ECPAC was able to solidify a strong system for screening, assessment and referrals in a range of child-serving settings, including primary care and child care. The work included:

- Integrating behavioral health into primary care clinics
- Supporting early care and learning centers to incorporate mental health consultation
- Enhancing home visitation and in-home parenting support programs with a focus on social-emotional well-being
- Strengthening families through parent skills training

Informed by an earlier LAUNCH project in Weld County, the lessons learned in Adams County have been instrumental in informing the expansion and replication of effective LAUNCH strategies across the state.

Improving Outcomes for Children and Families at Highest Risk

Early Childhood Partnership of Adams County



“

LAUNCH is about upstream prevention and healthy social-emotional development so that down the road children don't need costlier services related to juvenile justice, child and family services, special education or health care. The sooner a child with social-emotional concerns is identified and receives services, the greater the return on investment for that family and the whole community.

Lisa Jansen Thompson, Early Childhood Partnership of Adams County

Change Created for Children

In Adams County, primary care providers, child care professionals, home visitors, mental health consultants and others collaborate to create a strong support system for families so that early screening and identification of mental health issues occurs and vulnerable children thrive. ECPAC has cemented a sustainable community-wide system of screenings and referrals, which has resulted in many more children and families receiving the support they need. ECPAC provided technical assistance to three large health clinics — Clinica Family Health Services, Every Child Pediatrics and Mountainland Pediatrics — to incorporate screening-and-referral best practices for young children and pregnant and postpartum mothers.

When ECPAC started the LAUNCH work in 2015, the follow-through percentage for referrals in Adams County was just 39%, meaning most children who needed extra support weren't getting it. Today, over 80% of children and families who are referred for services follow through and seek the needed support, thanks to the coordination of care led by “care navigators” who work to stay connected with families. ECPAC no longer receives LAUNCH funding, but the referral follow-through rate remains steady in Adams County. These positive, sustained outcomes are thanks to ECPAC's work to help partners improve their own workflow and processes while incorporating best practices for screening and referrals and care navigation.



Building Durable Systems to Meet Families' Mental Health Needs in Rural Areas

Chaffee County Early Childhood Council

Since its inception in 2007, the Chaffee County Early Childhood Council (CCECC) has facilitated collaboration across dozens of agencies and with many community leaders to identify, prioritize and address local early childhood needs. The Council's efforts have resulted in the implementation of a number of sustainable, cost-effective solutions that ensure local families have sustained access to evidence-based services.

“

Before the Council was established, valuable needed programs came and went in our rural county depending on funding accessed and lost by individual agencies often serving one end of the county or the other. Since the Council started, we have facilitated everyone working together to identify and prioritize local early childhood needs and implement sustainable and cost-effective best practice solutions.

Janine Pryor, Chaffee County Early Childhood Council

Since 2012, CCECC had been working to build the community's capacity to support early childhood mental health, with an investment from the El Pomar Foundation. Efforts in Chaffee County to expand child and family access to mental health support took another big step forward in 2015,

when the Council, in collaboration with ECHO & Family Center Early Childhood Council in Fremont County, won four years of private funding to further build out the local system to support social-emotional development and early childhood mental health in the region. The LAUNCH Together initiative helped to further strengthen Chaffee County's system-level collaboration, focused on improving local infrastructure, streamlining services and infusing greater local knowledge about early childhood mental health. Informed by and building on earlier work in Weld and Adams counties under the Project LAUNCH initiative (see pg. 34), Chaffee and Fremont counties were selected in 2015 as LAUNCH Together implementation communities.



Chaffee County Early Childhood Council (cont.)

In Chaffee County, the Council had already worked to establish and solidify a community-wide screening-and-referral system that coordinates across 14 local agencies, including all medical practices. This strong foundation enabled CCECC to leverage the LAUNCH Together investment to solidify new collaborations, resulting in these accomplishments:

- Integration of an early childhood mental health clinician into local medical practices
- Expanding the screening-and-referral system created by CCECC for parents and children prenatal to age 5 to include pregnancy-related mental health and autism screening, in addition to developmental and social-emotional screening
- Embedding comprehensive screening and referral in well-child and prenatal visits across all medical practices
- Adaptation of best-practice, evidence-based programs to strengthen families and improve the capacity of caregivers to respond to the social-emotional needs of children
- Addressing school readiness gaps upstream through use of the Devereux Early Childhood Assessment, which measures and supports resiliency in infants, toddlers and preschoolers

“

When the Council started, there was no system for screening and referral, no child care home had ever been rated for quality, and there were no early childhood mental health specialists in the entire county. The Council has addressed all of these things.

Lyndsay Pulsipher, Buena Vista School District (ret.), Chaffee County Early Childhood Council

Building Systems to Support Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health

LAUNCH Together is an initiative designed to improve social-emotional and developmental outcomes for Colorado's youngest children and their families.

Inspired and informed by Project LAUNCH, a nationwide project funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA),

LAUNCH Together is a unique, first in the nation public-private partnership between eight Colorado foundations and four communities, including Chaffee and Fremont counties, Jefferson County, Southwest Denver, and Pueblo.

LAUNCH Together focuses on building coordinated systems around five community prevention and health promotion practices:

1. Integrating behavioral health into primary care
2. Mental health consultation in early care and education settings
3. Enhanced home visiting services
4. Family strengthening and parent education
5. Screening and assessment



*ECHO & Family Center
Early Childhood Council*

Single Process of Entry Eliminates Duplication, Improves Experience for Families

The ECHO and Family Center Early Childhood Council (ECHO Council) has been working for over 40 years across a broad network of partners in Fremont County to improve outcomes for young children and families. With a history that begins long before Early Childhood Councils were legislated into existence, ECHO Council has built a seamless, comprehensive and highly collaborative early childhood system centered on the needs of young children.

In Fremont County, ECHO Council has developed a robust, community wide screening and assessment strategy that is a primary example of successful cross-agency systems building. Through the ECHO Council system, families have access to a coordinated and efficient single process of entry into all publicly funded programs and services supported by the many member agencies of ECHO Council. The system includes screening applicants for public programs as well as all children from birth to age 5 involved in the Fremont County Child Welfare system. The easy access for families that ECHO Council has facilitated reduces duplication and ensures that public funds are spent efficiently.

Recognizing that a strong network of community referrals is vital to ensure families access the services their children need, ECHO Council has also innovated a local approach that maximizes resources, eliminates waste in the system and provides the best service to children and families. The Referral Hub is a group of mental health providers and early childhood professionals, convened by the ECHO Council, who meet regularly to review referrals and coordinate services for individual families. Once a family receives a referral for an evaluation or for developmental support services, Referral Hub members track each family and each referral, following up to ensure children connect with the services they need.

“

In Fremont County, families don't have to go from agency to agency, telling their story again and again until they find the right provider of services. Instead, every door is the right door, and no matter if families ask a question of their child care provider, doctor, parent group leader, or someone else, they will be directed to the support they need.

Pamela Walker, ECHO & Family Center Early Childhood Council



Elevating the Needs of Local Children and Families

Articles in Section 5:

- Innovative approaches to address the workforce crisis
- Creating technology solutions for efficiency and accountability
- Early childhood: From a private matter to an issue of economic importance
- Data-driven efforts catalyze initiative to address “failed market” for child care
- Aligning a community-wide response to combat child abuse and neglect

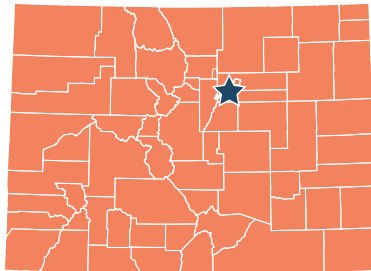
Innovative Approaches to Address the Workforce Crisis in Early Childhood

Caring for young children is a physically demanding job. Not only this, but early childhood educators receive very low wages and often no benefits, which makes it difficult to hire and keep staff. A shortage of providers results in limited access for families with young children — a situation that can be especially pronounced in rural areas.

Colorado's Early Childhood Councils are leaders in innovating solutions by creating tailored workforce initiatives that bridge the needs of local programs, state requirements and aspiring early childhood professionals. Examples of local workforce solutions tested by Councils include:

- Establishing accelerated pathways to earn the required credentials
- Promoting public funding options (e.g. a mill levy) to fund salary supplements
- Raising funds for scholarships and coordinating access to higher education
- Providing mentoring and coaching for aspiring early childhood educators
- Supplying equipment required for licensing

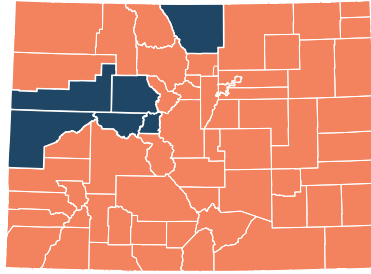
Rule waivers (see pg. 14) are one tool used by Councils to address workforce shortages while ensuring the health and safety of children. Here are examples of how Councils have used rule waivers to positively impact communities in Colorado.



Denver's Early Childhood Council

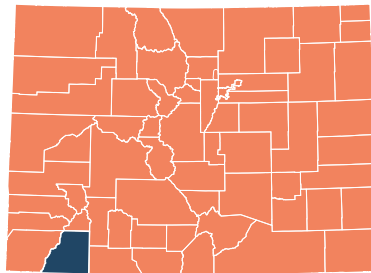
created an accelerated pathway for individuals to earn their Early Childhood Teacher professional credential. Denver's Council is seeking to build a pipeline of qualified Early Childhood Teachers through finely targeted recruitment strategies, just six months of course work, and mentorship and supervised experience in high-quality programs.

Innovative Approaches to Address the Workforce Crisis in Early Childhood



Early Childhood Council of Larimer County, Rocky Mountain Early Childhood Council and the Mesa County Partnership for Children and Families

all received rule waivers to create a pilot program that allows qualified child care centers and preschools to hire Provisional Early Childhood Teacher candidates with a grace period of 12 months to complete their coursework and qualifications. All participating programs across the three Council regions report positive gains in overcoming workforce challenges. For example, eight Provisional Early Childhood Teachers in Eagle, Lake, Garfield and Pitkin counties have resulted in an increased capacity of 120 high-quality early care and learning slots in those communities just since 2019.



Early Childhood Council of La Plata County

has solidified a partnership with Fort Lewis College, Durango Adult Education Center and Durango High School to increase the early childhood education coursework available in the community. The Council has entered into formal agreements to offer these courses to students at a negotiated tuition rate. Council efforts have resulted in the creation of a community-wide action plan that blends partial scholarship funds, matching funds from child care centers and student contributions to increase the number of early childhood professionals and high school students who can afford to participate in college coursework leading to teacher and director qualification.

Challenge

With multiple funding sources and unique program standards, eligibility and reporting requirements, Colorado's early childhood system is a complex labyrinth for providers to navigate. As a result, child care providers and other early childhood entities in Colorado spend considerable resources performing key functions necessary for compliance and accountability. As data-driven and publicly accountable entities backed by legislation, Early Childhood Councils needed a way to simplify and braid together standards, requirements and reporting across multiple funding entities.

Opportunity

Denver's Early Childhood Council created a proprietary data information system to address the challenge and allow for comprehensive tracking of activities, expenses and reporting across multiple funding streams. Known as ecConnect, the data information system serves as a "one-stop online marketplace for early childhood education programs and professionals." ecConnect is also a source of valuable data for early childhood funders and service delivery organizations, facilitated by ecConnect's back-end integration with statewide data-tracking systems.

Councils as Catalyst

Denver's Council serves the largest number of children, families and early childhood providers and entities of the state's 34 Early Childhood Councils. This puts the Denver Council in a unique position to conceptualize, pilot, refine and share solutions that support the work of all Early Childhood Councils across the state.

The ecConnect system is owned and administered by Denver's Early Childhood Council and licensed to the other 33 Early Childhood Councils for use to more effectively operationalize quality-improvement investments. The ecConnect system includes 2,000 individual users (representing about 900 unique licensed programs) on the front-end of the database platform, and over 80 users of the data-rich back-end functionality.

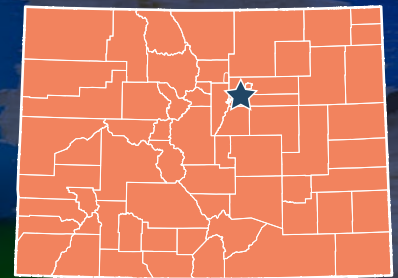
Change Created for Children

ecConnect has grown into a comprehensive system with the power of relating data on investments made in early childhood to quality outcomes for children, families and caregivers. It has also strengthened the ability of Early Childhood Councils statewide to advocate for and empower early childhood professionals to address key workforce compensation, recruitment and retention issues within the field.

Focused on ensuring that programs have the qualified workforce they need, Denver's Early Childhood Council is in the process of expanding ecConnect to include a "workforce marketplace" to connect early childhood professionals with programs seeking staff. As a replacement to the current inefficient workforce search-and-placement activities, ecConnect is an example of how Councils have innovated effective solutions and then scaled them to address shared challenges.

Creating Technology Solutions to Increase Efficiency and Accountability

*Denver's Early
Childhood Council*



Elevating Early Childhood from a Private Matter to an Issue of Economic Importance

For most of the 20th century, the notion that children's early years and child care were private family matters created headwinds for building strong early childhood systems. The evolution of Colorado's Early Childhood Councils coincided with the emergence of research showing the vital importance of the early years to a child's development. At the local level, Councils packaged and repackaged the emerging science to make it accessible for parents and families, as well as for leaders and policymakers.

All the while, Councils have been dogged in their efforts to collect local data related to early childhood issues and have succeeded in attracting many diverse partners to the table. The result has been a gradual increase of momentum in communities across Colorado supporting the notion that child care is an issue of primary economic importance.

“Local policymakers listen to the local community. Early Childhood Councils have been working for two decades to advance the message of early childhood and ensure that the value and resources are there. They have been incredibly successful at this and they don't get nearly enough credit. They are the boots on the ground, doing the day-to-day work, and we could not do the work of early childhood in Colorado without the Councils.”

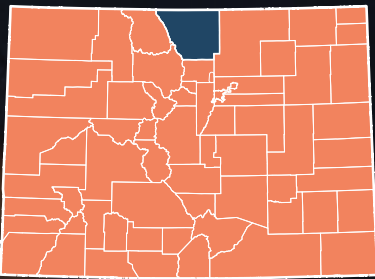
***Elsa Holguin,
Denver Preschool Program***

“Councils and Council leaders have been part of the community that has elevated a whole host of early childhood issues at both the local and state levels, and they have been able to do that because they are trusted. Councils are trusted by the provider community, trusted by state leaders, trusted by philanthropy, and they are trusted by their local elected officials to connect the dots in support of children and families.”

Bill Jaeger, Colorado Children's Campaign

Data-driven Council Efforts Catalyze Broad Initiative to Address “Failed Market” for Child Care

Early Childhood Council of Larimer County



“Our Council has done an enormous amount of education and advocacy work that has resulted in a rush of community momentum related to child care access issues because of a deeper understanding of the impact it has on a range of issues.”

Christina Taylor, Early Childhood Council of Larimer County

Challenge

Data from the Early Childhood Council of Larimer County (ECCLC) proved that local child care providers, both for-profit and nonprofit, could not afford to pay wages high enough to attract and retain a qualified workforce, which prevented them from operating at full capacity. The high cost of providing quality child care in Larimer County — and across Colorado — threatens the financial viability and sustainability of providers. ECCLC argued that the child care industry is a “failed market” because those who want the service (families) cannot afford to pay enough for child care providers to provide the desired service. What’s more, ECCLC identified a gap of more than 3,000 children, the difference between licensed child care capacity in Larimer County and the families with children needing care.

Opportunity

Early Childhood Councils are data-driven, which allows them to effectively coordinate services, understand where the gaps are, and mobilize the community to respond. Through regular community needs assessments, Councils identify the needs of local families in real time, align local efforts and resources toward shared goals, and filter local information up to local, county and state partners.

In Larimer County, sustained Council efforts over many years and consistent collection and presentation of local data resulted in broad community recognition that quality, availability and affordability of child care are key economic indicators.

Council as Catalyst

ECCLC has been gathering data on the shortage of licensed, affordable child care in the county for nearly two decades. Over this time, ECCLC has completed biannual studies on workforce challenges in child care, as well as commissioning sophisticated supply-and-demand studies of the availability and affordability of child care in Larimer County. Driven by the data, ECCLC brought stakeholders together to shine a light on the problem.

Change Created for Children

In 2018, ECCLC’s efforts resulted in the formation of a task force, housed under the Fort Collins Chamber of Commerce, to study the issue of child care. Findings revealed common concerns for employers that child care had become a significant barrier to the recruitment and retention of talent in Larimer County. As a result, child care has become a strategic county-wide initiative, a priority for the Larimer County government and for the local United Way.

Challenge

In the early 2000s, state-level data showed alarming rates of child abuse and neglect in communities across Colorado, including in La Plata County, home to the towns of Bayfield, Durango and Ignacio as well as the Southern Ute Reservation. According to the Kids Count in Colorado! report from 2004, the rate of child abuse and neglect per 1,000 residents in La Plata County was 8.6 — higher than for the state overall.

Opportunity

The Early Childhood Council of La Plata County (ECCLPC) was serving as the Child Care Resource and Referral agency for five counties in southwest Colorado, which offered a unique view into the challenges that families and providers were facing. They heard from providers that families were struggling with mental health concerns and challenging behavior and that many were unable to afford their basic needs. ECCLPC knew that vulnerable families often relied heavily on their child care programs and providers for support. For this reason, ECCLPC had focused since its inception — as one of the original pilot Councils — on engaging child care providers to provide a quality early learning environment and to help families learn parenting skills and connect to other resources in the community. In response to the troubling data trends, in 2004 ECCLPC led a community-wide strategic planning process to better coordinate comprehensive services for young children and families to ensure they were able to access the support they needed.

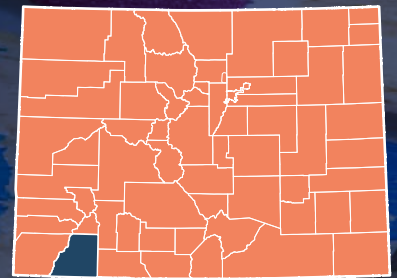
Councils as Catalyst

In 2007 the La Plata County Board of County Commissioners adopted ECCLPC's initial community planning work to initiate its own process of creating the La Plata County Children, Youth & Family Master Plan, with the goal of ensuring a comprehensive and seamless system of services from birth to graduation across all of La Plata County.

The adoption of the Children, Youth & Family Master Plan by county and municipal governments in 2009 marked the culmination of a process initiated by ECCLPC that aligned systems and approaches across each municipality and the Southern Ute Reservation to the needs of children and families. The Master Plan continues to guide the work of local government and health and human services agencies, as well as over 150 local nonprofit organizations in La Plata County that serve children and families.

Aligning Responses Across Communities to Combat Child Abuse and Neglect

Early Childhood Council of La Plata County



Change Created for Children

The prevalence of child abuse and neglect in La Plata County has dropped significantly since ECCPLC initiated community-wide efforts in 2004. According to the 2020 Kids Count in Colorado! report, the incidence of child abuse and neglect in La Plata County is 4.5 per 1,000, considerably lower than the overall state number, which has gone up to 9.5 per 1,000.

The adoption of the La Plata County Children, Youth & Family Master Plan has also served to elevate and earn respect for the essential work performed by child care providers to nurture children during the most critical period of development. ECCLPC's work helped to establish the issue of quality child care as a community-wide priority. With this increased respect and value, child care providers in La Plata County have gained greater access to local resources and business support.

“The Master Plan establishes our collective responsibilities and accountability and ensures that everyone in our community will step up and work together.”

Heather Hawk, Early Childhood Council of La Plata County

Aligning Responses across Communities to Combat Child Abuse and Neglect

Early Childhood Council of La Plata County



Advancing Progress Toward Colorado's Vision for Early Childhood

Articles in Section 6:

- Amplifying diverse Council voices for statewide reach
- Continuous progress despite tumultuous fiscal environment
- Driving taxpayer approval of local dedicated children's funds
- Supporting child care sector to reassess and reopen post COVID-19





Amplifying Diverse Council Voices to Have Coordinated, Statewide Reach

Early Childhood Council Leadership Alliance

Early Childhood Council Leadership Alliance (ECCLA) was initially formed in 1998 as an informal collaborative among Early Childhood Council leaders to support each other, align efforts, communicate grant management information, share best practices, and provide local input to state policy decisions. Over the years ECCLA evolved and in 2013 became an independent 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. In 2014, it launched formally as a membership association.

Today, ECCLA's mission is to improve the quality, capacity, and equity of services and supports for Colorado's young children and their families through a statewide network of Early Childhood Councils and key stakeholders. ECCLA meets this mission by:

- Representing the Councils as a collective
- Providing technical assistance and capacity building
- Engaging in policy and advocacy
- Scaling innovations and best practices
- Improving and expanding workforce supports
- Facilitating state-level partnerships

In collaboration with Councils, ECCLA's efforts help to effectively align, scale, and advance solutions that contribute to building and supporting a robust early childhood system in every Colorado community. Colorado's long-established system of local Early Childhood Councils are trusted for their expertise, coordination, and support of early childhood programs and services in their communities. ECCLA's role is to elevate Councils' work at a statewide level and represent and advocate for increased support and sustainability for Council efforts.

Together, Councils and ECCLA are driven by the belief that supporting healthy children, families, and communities requires all stakeholders to have a voice in the process. A robust statewide early childhood system that effectively improves the quality, accessibility, and equity of services for young children and their families requires the local implementation and leadership that Councils provide, as well as the statewide reach, coordination and influence that ECCLA enables.

Continuous Progress Despite Tumultuous Fiscal Environment

Despite the challenges of year-to-year funding fluctuations and the pressure those changes bring to scale up and scale down operations, Councils have been remarkably steadfast in their ability to sustain the systems-level changes they make.

Funding for Councils comes from a variety of sources. Councils receive funding from the Colorado Department of Human Services, Office of Early Childhood based on a formula that considers the number of children under age 5 in the community, the number of providers, and takes into account a variety of risk factors to direct funding to the communities with greatest need. Most of this funding filters through Councils to support training and materials for local early childhood providers. Some Councils also may receive county or city funds and/or private funding. Other Councils administer tax dollars that are designated for local early childhood programs (see pg. 50).

When funding for Councils' work has increased — either through local support, philanthropic investment or significant infusions of state and federal dollars — Councils have leveraged the financial opportunity for sustainable change in their communities. Councils have achieved this by successfully increasing the quality of child care for children, building new workforce pipelines and acting as the driving agents for systems-level change, even long after time-limited grant and contract funding ends.

The funding challenges faced by Colorado's Councils are shared by early childhood systems across the country. As a nation, the United States significantly underinvests in early childhood. Instead, policies, programs and funding reinforce the ingrained notion that the burden of raising children and paying for child care is a private matter handled by families with the larger public support systems entering the equation at kindergarten.

The system-wide underinvestment in early childhood and the continuously changing funding landscape create challenges for Councils seeking to fulfil the vision for their work, which is laid out in state statute, and drives Colorado's shared vision for young children and families. Nevertheless, Councils have managed to make continuous, progress in advancing the interests of local families thanks to long-standing and mutually beneficial partnerships.

“

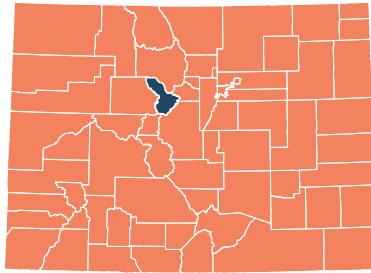
It's one thing to manage funds and coordinate funds in a community in an effort to meet as many needs as you can. It's another thing altogether to build a local system that is strong enough to survive the ebb and flow of funds, administrations, and state and local priorities while always keeping forward momentum to build a better system for our kids. That's what the Councils have achieved.

Sharon Triolo Moloney, Colorado Department of Education (ret.)

Councils Drive Taxpayer Approval of Local Dedicated Children's Funds

A local dedicated children's fund is public revenue that has been allocated to services for children and families — beyond the school day — and approved by local voters in an election. In the U.S. there are approximately 40 local dedicated children's funds, including at least five in Colorado.

The successful passage of dedicated children's funds in Colorado has been supported in no small part by the efforts of Early Childhood Councils. Counties including San Miguel, Summit, Denver, Boulder and Larimer, as well as the cities of Aspen and Breckenridge, have successfully appealed to taxpayers to approve strategic, comprehensive community financing solutions to ensure that children in these communities are ready to learn by the time they reach kindergarten. A few of these successful initiatives are described below.

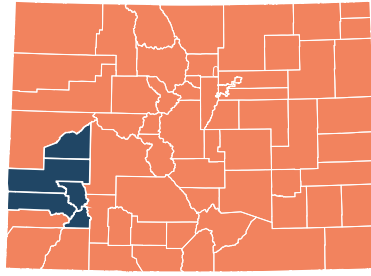


Sustained Summit County Voter Support for Investing in Early Childhood

Since 2005, Summit County voters have supported a local property tax to help support early care and learning. The Right Start Project, as the tax-funded initiative is known, is aimed to ensure local working families have safe, quality care for their children; to attract and retain quality early childhood teachers; and to provide parents with tools to help them build strong relationships and nurturing environments that prepare their children for success.

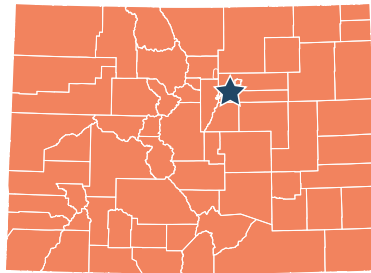
Initially approved by voters in 2005 and reauthorized in 2013, the Right Start Project generates about \$1 million annually for early childhood. Early Childhood Options, the Council in Summit County, has been a constant driver for improving conditions for children and families, and the Council's efforts have led taxpayers to approve multiple ballot measures aimed at supporting young children. An initiative under Right Start provides health coverage for 140 of Summit County's child care providers as a means of increasing teacher retention. Turnover in an early care and learning setting can impact how children are able to bond with their caregivers, and supporting teacher tenure increases the quality of care provided. Most recently Summit County voters passed a measure to support universal preschool with a sliding scale. The ballot measure provides \$2.5 million annually to ensure the affordability of early childhood care and learning for all Summit County 4-year-olds.

Councils Drive Taxpayer Approval of Local Dedicated Children's Funds



Child Care Crisis and Council-Led Coalition Spur San Miguel Voters to Action

Bright Futures, the Early Childhood Council for San Miguel, Delta, Montrose and Ouray counties, identified a local child care crisis. San Miguel County is among the fastest growing counties in Colorado in terms of child population. But data projected that the county would fall short by nearly half in meeting the demand for child care. In Telluride, the county's most populous town, prior to 2017 there were no licensed infant and toddler child care options. Many local child care providers cited extreme turnover and burnout due to low pay and long shifts. Bright Futures sought to address this challenge by building a coalition of partners to advocate for a ballot initiative to raise funds for the local early childhood system. The ballot measure passed by a 63% margin in 2017, and the resulting property tax has raised \$600,000 each year since. An early childhood advisory panel ensures that the funds build and sustain a strong early childhood workforce and increase the availability of quality child care in San Miguel County.



Denver Voters Affirm Importance of Preschool in Concept that Became National Model

Denver Preschool Program (DPP) makes quality preschool possible for all 4-year-old Denver children through a dedicated sales tax first approved by voters in 2006 and renewed and extended in 2014. By the end of May 2020, DPP estimates it has provided more than \$136 million in tuition support to help more than 59,000 Denver children attend the preschool of their family's choice. Prior to the passage of DPP by Denver voters in 2006, two previous attempts to pass a sales tax increase to fund early childhood failed. A commitment from then Mayor John Hickenlooper and a broad commission of early childhood leaders helped to make a successful third appeal to Denver voters. Today in the city and county of Denver, any family with a 4-year-old child in preschool is eligible to apply and receive tuition assistance. About 60% of Denver families take advantage of the program. Other cities across the county have modeled their own campaigns for dedicated early childhood public funding after the success of DPP.

Supporting the State's Child Care Sector to Reopen and Reassess Families' Needs amid COVID-19

Early Childhood Councils were an important part of the COVID-19 emergency response in Colorado communities. During overwhelming circumstances in the midst of the pandemic, Councils offered personalized, high-touch support for early care and learning providers in their communities to navigate the uncertain situation. Councils connected local providers with supplies, helped them navigate licensing, and provided counsel on how to reopen and how to access available funding streams, both public and private.

Once the cautious process of gradual reopening was underway, Councils worked to help child care providers safely operate and consider their future in a sector deeply impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. At the state level, Colorado has traditionally lacked a clear picture of the supply of child care slots compared to the demand from families, which has compounded the challenges of access and affordability of child care common in many Colorado communities. In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, the supply and demand of child care slots in Colorado is shifting in challenging and unpredictable ways.

“

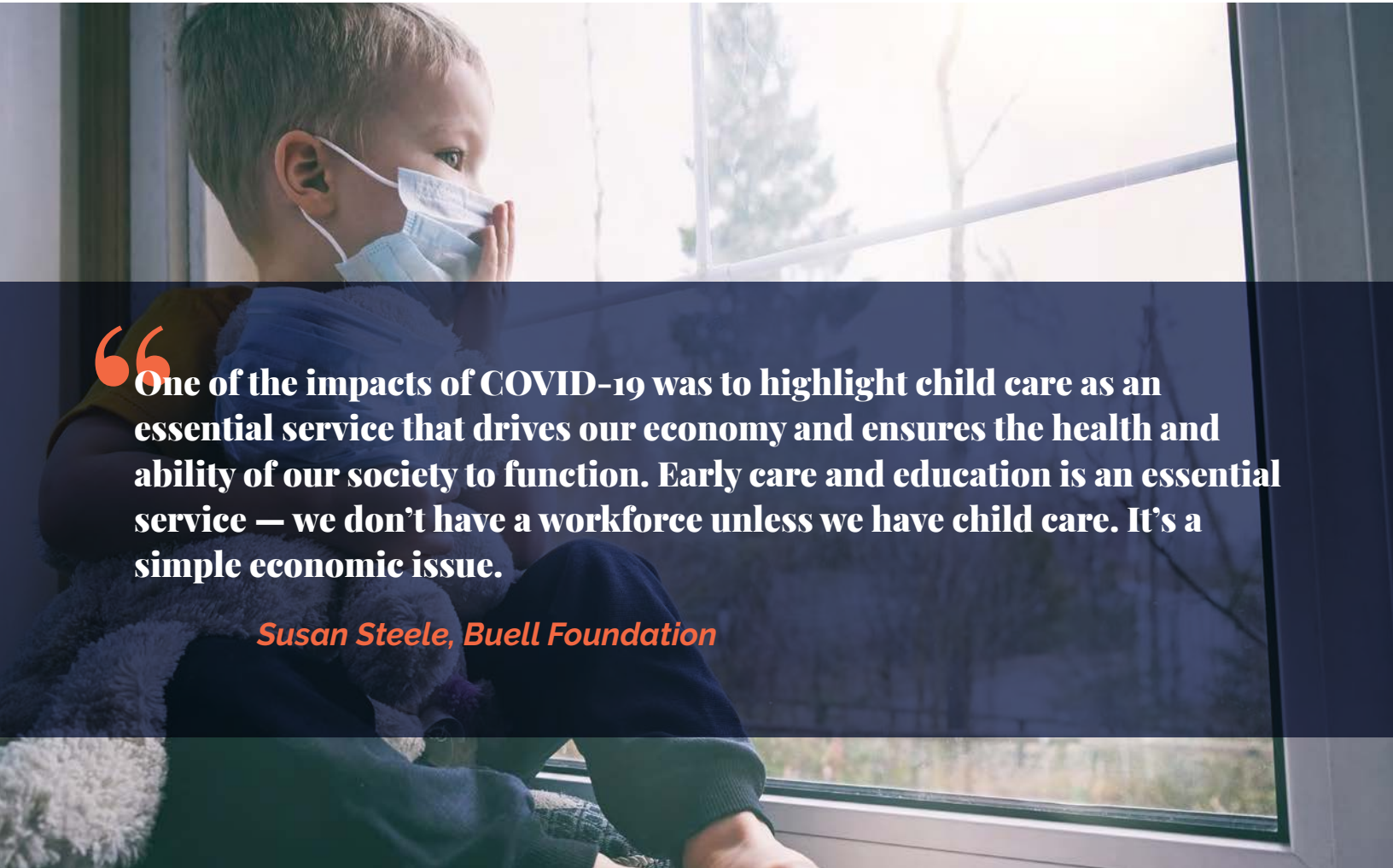
The COVID-19 crisis has elevated in the public's mind the importance of child care services. A silver lining may be a sustained, higher value that our society places on early childhood and child care.

*Jared Polis,
Governor of Colorado*

“

One of the impacts of COVID-19 was to highlight child care as an essential service that drives our economy and ensures the health and ability of our society to function. Early care and education is an essential service — we don't have a workforce unless we have child care. It's a simple economic issue.

Susan Steele, Buell Foundation





Some of the shifts in the sector are temporary, and others may be permanent as families re-evaluate what they are comfortable with and what kind of care they need. Early Childhood Councils are integral in assessing the evolving demand for early care and learning programs among families in their communities and filtering that information up to local and state partners. They are also the key to helping local providers navigate a dramatically changed regulatory and health landscape. Early care and learning is a sector that operates on thin margins in the best of times. Amid the COVID-19 crisis, the industry faces even tighter financial circumstances. Councils played a vital role as providers began the process of evolving to meet the shifting needs of families.

As schools reimagine instruction in the era post-COVID-19, many Councils are helping school districts and leaders understand the needs of local families, their economic and physical health, the resources available, and how the community can work together to support them. With their long history in local communities, Councils can serve as a quick and accessible source of support and information — including getting the word out to local families.

“

Collaborative groups like the Councils disseminate information and offer advice and support about the protective measures providers need to take. That way we don't have to invent the wheel multiple times or make each business figure it out for themselves.

George Welsh, Cañon City Schools (Fremont RE-1)

Through the struggles related to the pandemic, it has become clear how vitally important a strong early childhood system is to the functioning of our economy. As Colorado has moved beyond the immediate impacts of the crisis, local communities benefit from the strong foundation of partner-based systems that have been built by Councils. As the on-the-ground experts in their local communities with a finger on the pulse of what families need, Early Childhood Councils have been and continue to be well-positioned to inform any type of policy decision related to families with young children.

“

Children are our future. That's why the Buell Foundation invests in organizations that support Colorado's youngest children and their families. We invest millions every year in Early Childhood Councils. Councils' local knowledge makes our job easier and our impact greater. Children are better off because of Councils' leadership and advocacy.

Dan Ritchie, Board Chairman, Buell Foundation

Early Childhood Councils' work at a glance:

- Increase quality, affordability and accessibility of child care, health, mental health and other services for children and families
- Support child care providers to create quality environments that ensure children enter kindergarten ready to learn
- Build the pipeline of early childhood educators
- Expand access to evidence-based parent support and education
- Build community capacity to open new child care centers and sustain existing programs
- Assess local needs, support strong partnerships, and align local resources and funding streams
- Test and evaluate new approaches
- Unify the efforts of many partners toward shared outcomes



This report was produced with support from the Buell Foundation.