



UNIVERSAL PRESCHOOL RECOMMENDATIONS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Colorado has a decades-long commitment to the early care and development of its youngest children. This dedication was recently underscored by the enormous will for early childhood investment and reform when a bipartisan majority of voters supported funding for high-quality, 4 year old universal preschool in a mixed delivery system with the passage of Proposition EE in 2020. This new voluntary preschool program will build upon the successes of Colorado's existing early childhood programs, including the Colorado Preschool Program (CPP), to offer every child in Colorado access to funded early care and education services the year before they enter kindergarten.



This exciting development will have a long lasting impact in Colorado. The research is clear: children who attend a high-quality preschool in the first few years of life are more likely to experience higher educational attainment and less likely to experience poverty or enter the criminal justice system.^{1 2 3} By investing in early childhood and universal preschool, Colorado aims to break the cycle of poverty in the long term, while also immediately creating an accessible and streamlined system that alleviates the burdens of families and children.

The magnitude of this vision, and the importance of ensuring, not just access, but quality of care provided, requires the state work urgently toward achieving this goal of building a birth to 5+ system that is accessible, affordable, and valuable for children and families over the next several years. Through the creation of universal preschool, Colorado also has an unprecedented opportunity to leverage the newly created Department of Early Childhood (DEC) to improve the quality and availability of early childhood programs and services for all young children, including infants and toddlers.

While the universal, voluntary preschool program will launch in July 2023, fully implementing these recommendations and addressing challenges in the entire early care and education system must be a process of continual and urgent innovation, engagement, and adaptation.

This report sets a bold vision, and the implementation and details will evolve over time as DEC is established and more engagement occurs. The infrastructure investment this report suggests will create a system to support Colorado's families for generations to come. This report is a first step in making this innovative and ambitious universal preschool program a reality and provides Colorado with guidance on the infrastructure needed to implement a comprehensive, family-focused, universal preschool program model at this pivotal moment.

Building and Strengthening an Early Childhood Infrastructure

To achieve Colorado's goal of a universally available preschool program that helps to prepare all children for school and beyond, the state must think about its infrastructure needs, including leadership, capacity, workforce, resources, and more. In the many conversations across stakeholder groups, there was clear consensus that to realize this goal, the state would need to develop a clear vision for the experiences every child should have at each age before entering kindergarten, and then invest in and partner with local leadership to ensure every child can access universal preschool and additional birth to 5+ slots and services.

Colorado should invest in an infrastructure with:

1. Local leads empowered and charged to solve local challenges, foster partnerships, create alignment across all local entities, and plan for the allocation of funding equitably across providers in their communities.
2. A demonstrated commitment from DEC to provide resources to local leads and communities, to help build their capacity to execute their charge including fiscal capacity, and to ensure Colorado's aligned early childhood vision is executed successfully across the state.

1. https://heckmanequation.org/www/assets/2019/05/F_Heckman_PerryMidlife_OnePager_050819.pdf

2. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6344026/>

3. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6426150/>

Local Lead's Role

To ensure every child is offered a universal preschool slot, every family can easily navigate enrollment, and all funding is maximized, including local investments, universal preschool implementation should be facilitated through newly-designated "local leads." Local leads, which could be any public agency (e.g., a county), nonprofit organization (e.g., an Early Childhood Council), or newly created organization, should serve as the coordinator of birth to 5+ early childhood services in regions across Colorado, beginning with universal preschool. They should bring together partners to build a local plan that accounts for how all available resources will be used to support access to quality, affordable early care and education in a mixed delivery system that supports children's healthy growth and development.

Department of Early Childhood's Role

DEC should select local leads through a transparent, rigorous application process that demonstrates buy-in from a community's regional partners. DEC should clearly define the scope of authority and expectations for local leads, collaborate with them as implementation partners, fully support them to build collaboration and coordination with their local partners, and create incentives and an accountability mechanism with clearly delineated responsibilities. If a community is unable to identify an appropriate local lead, DEC should fulfill these responsibilities itself or through another partner until the local lead can assume full responsibility. DEC should then work to recruit and build the capacity of a local lead within the first three years of universal preschool implementation. As part of overseeing local leads, DEC should provide contracts, partnerships, training, technical assistance, and resources to local leads, promote collaboration and collective learning, and elevate examples of success from Colorado and nationally.

Additionally, to ensure the success of universal preschool, the recommendations of this report advise DEC take on the following responsibilities in the course of the launch of the program:

Application: DEC should work to develop a single, unified application for families to access all publicly-funded early childhood services and slots from birth to 5+ that is equitable and streamlines the enrollment and eligibility process for both families and providers. This application should be designed with the user experience in mind and offer families a simple and engaging interface. This application should ensure families are able to go to one place to apply for all early childhood services for their children, and at a minimum, this application should be functional for universal preschool by 2023.

Eligibility and Prioritization: DEC should work with stakeholders and experts to create a base rate for universal preschool and additional adjustments or incentives that can build upon the base rate to ensure access for all children. This rate must balance the tensions between universally funding quality preschool for 10 hours a week and providing additional hours for Colorado's children with greatest needs.

Quality and Evaluation: DEC should work with a representative group of stakeholders and experts to review existing Colorado Preschool Program (CPP) and other local and national standards to create a unified set of program standards for universal preschool that layer on top of minimum licensing standards and remove barriers for providers that hinder progress toward universal quality preschool. As part of this analysis, DEC should review Colorado's existing birth to 5+ quality regulations and standards to align funding sources and develop a unified definition of quality experiences for the early care and education of all children, including in the universal preschool program. As charged by the legislation, DEC should contract with an external evaluator to measure the quality of universal preschool and child outcomes to enhance children's positive outcomes for future years.

Workforce: To address the current early childhood workforce shortage and successfully launch a mixed delivery model for universal preschool, Colorado will need more educators, mental health specialists, home visitors, special education practitioners, and related service providers. DEC should support the workforce with increased compensation, including a liveable wage and benefits, aligned professional development supports, and other innovative strategies to ensure they are valued, healthy, and thriving. DEC should simplify the process to enter the early childhood field and clearly define the expected competencies the workforce should be achieving over time. As DEC works to implement these recommendations, they should consider ways they can strengthen the workforce as a whole, ensure the diversity of the workforce – racially, linguistically, and culturally – and avoid any unintended consequences on the rest of the birth to 5+ early childhood landscape.

Special Education: The recommendations related to special education as detailed in the DEC Transition Plan,⁴ including that the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) should continue to administer and be the identified state education agency responsible for compliance with IDEA Part B, are also relevant for the implementation of universal preschool. DEC should also partner with CDE to ensure all children with disabilities are served equitably in the universal preschool program, ensure access to inclusive classrooms, and operate in accordance with all federal and state regulations.

The establishment of universal preschool is an incredible opportunity for children, families, and providers that must be capitalized upon. This program will not only expand access for 4 year olds but can serve as a catalyst to transform Colorado's entire early childhood system.

4. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1haHVk8WvAYOzAQ9Qe-QWgWxoUdYXIR92/view>