



Ideal Learning

IN COLORADO

Challenges and opportunities
to advance Ideal Learning in
pre-kindergarten through third grade



EARLY MILESTONES
COLORADO

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION	1
APPROACH	2
DEFINITION OF IDEAL LEARNING	3
KEY FINDINGS	5
Policy Context	5
Environmental Barriers	6
Internal Debate	7
General Education System	8
Perception/Awareness	10
Accountability Systems	11
Opportunities	13
RECOMMENDATIONS	17
Internal Review	17
Perception/Awareness	18
Accountability Systems	19
General Education System	19
CONCLUSION	21

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This initiative was guided by a steering committee comprised of state and local education leaders, experts from higher education, and Ideal Learning practitioners:

Elena Bodrova, Ph.D., *co-founder and director of research, Tools of the Mind*

Anji Gallanos, *director, P-3 Office, Colorado Department of Education*

Priscilla Hopkins, *executive director, Early Education Department (former instructional superintendent for early childhood), Denver Public Schools*

Rebecca Kantor, Ed.D., *dean of the School of Education and Human Development, University of Colorado Denver*

Kristie Kauerz, Ed.D., *director, National P-3 Center, University of Colorado Denver*

Deborah Leong, Ph.D., *co-founder and executive director, Tools of the Mind*

Heidi McCaslin, *preschool director, P-3 Office, Colorado Department of Education*

Lisa Roy, Ed.D., *director of program development, Buffett Early Childhood Institute (former executive director, Early Education Department, Denver Public Schools)*

Seth D. Webb, *Rocky Mountain regional coordinator, National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector*

The contributions of many thoughtful groups and individuals over the course of this project — particularly the key informants who participated in comprehensive interviews — are greatly appreciated.

A special thank you to our project partners in the Early Education Department of Denver Public Schools and the Preschool Through 3rd Grade Office (P-3 Office) of the Colorado Department of Education. They served in an advisory role, guiding the project's development and execution. CDE supports whole child education generally; however, due to its role does not specifically endorse any particular Ideal Learning program.

Finally, this work was made possible by a grant from the Trust for Learning.



Introduction

Ideal Learning, or whole child education, is an approach to instruction that emphasizes personalized learning, supports multiple facets of development, and places children at the center of their education.¹

Children learn best when their interests and full abilities are honored. Ideal Learning programs cultivate academic, social, and emotional growth for children from pre-kindergarten (pre-K) through third grade and promote the internal drive to learn. Many programs, such as Montessori and Tools of the Mind (Tools), reflect this philosophy, though instructional methods and curriculum may differ.

The science of child development supports learning environments and teachers that encourage student-initiated exploration, individual and group inquiry, and differentiation. Within quality pre-K settings, this approach is widely considered the gold standard because it upholds the inherent way that young children learn. Yet there is a significant divide between pre-K and early elementary education practices, and most children are placed in traditional school environments when they enter kindergarten.

Ideal Learning programs have experienced success outside of the traditional public school system, either as private or charter schools, however, scaling these programs in public schools has been challenging. Many local school districts, including Denver Public Schools (DPS), value the developmentally appropriate approach to whole child support. DPS operates several Ideal Learning programs and has a goal to expand their availability. This report explores the real and perceived barriers to a broader adoption of Ideal Learning models in Colorado, as well as opportunities that can be leveraged to expand Ideal Learning statewide.

¹ Many terms are used to describe this approach to early education. For simplicity, we use *Ideal Learning*, a term promoted by the Trust for Learning.

Approach

This project, led by Early Milestones Colorado (Milestones), was conducted in partnership with the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) and Denver Public Schools (DPS). A steering committee met regularly to share expertise, provide access to additional relevant resources, and ensure that the project approach would successfully address three key questions:

1

What are the barriers to the growth of Ideal Learning models in Colorado, particularly for kindergarten through third grade (K-3), but also broadly across early education?

2

What strengths and opportunities might be leveraged to increase the number of schools implementing these models throughout the state?

3

What specific steps can be taken to reduce barriers and leverage opportunities for growth?

Eighteen experts in education, state and local policy, and higher education were selected as key informants. Each participated in a 45- to 60-minute interview designed to identify real and perceived barriers to broader adoption of Ideal Learning models in Colorado. A list of key informants is provided in Appendix A, and the interview guide is provided in Appendix B.

A focus group, comprised of twelve early childhood education partners and instructional coaches working in DPS elementary schools, was conducted to identify building-level challenges for implementing Ideal Learning. The focus group protocol is provided in Appendix C.

An analysis of thirteen education laws adopted between 2008 and 2019 was completed to identify relevant trends and specific language that could impact the growth of Ideal Learning. This policy analysis was organized into three categories:

- › academic expectations;
- › accountability structures and systems; and
- › educator preparation and evaluation.

A summary of the policy analysis is available in a separate document (the full analysis is available upon request).

Information gathered from the interviews, focus group, and the policy analysis — as well as resulting recommendations for next steps — are summarized in this report.





DEFINITION

Ideal Learning

The following definition of *Ideal Learning* was used to inform interviews and the focus group:

- › learning is individualized and teaching is differentiated;
- › teaching and learning are developmentally informed and culturally responsive;
- › all facets of a child's development — academic, social, and emotional — are given attention and priority;
- › teachers guide children to carry out their own learning; and
- › the programs are an integral part of the community.²

The terms *whole child learning* and *student-centered learning* were used interchangeably with *Ideal Learning* throughout the project. Recognizing that the word *ideal* implies value, the steering committee was comfortable with the assertion that this approach to learning is best for children from pre-K through third grade.

Montessori and Tools of the Mind were cited as examples of *Ideal Learning* methods. Participants were encouraged to reference other instructional approaches that meet this definition.

² This working definition is based on resources from the Trust for Learning (trustforlearning.org).



Key Findings

POLICY CONTEXT

No substantial barriers were identified in the thirteen pieces of Colorado legislation enacted between 2008 and 2019 relevant to education content standards, accountability systems for students and educators, and educator preparation programs. Colorado state law does not explicitly prevent nor promote the use of Ideal Learning models. However, the interpretation and application of policy may create implementation challenges. For example, approved instructional materials, assessment instruments, and professional development support for teachers may not align properly for Ideal Learning settings.

The state appears committed to the basic frameworks it has established within these areas. However, policymakers have begun to make revisions to specific approaches that may signal growing flexibility with these frameworks. During the 2019 legislative session, the state passed changes to the READ Act, authorized the creation of a pilot program testing new accountability school measures, and actively debated requirements for educator preparation. These actions suggest opportunity for further evaluation and revision of state policies to improve access to and implementation of Ideal Learning models.

THE COLORADO CONTEXT

KEY POLICYMAKERS & LOCAL CONTROL

Governor Jared Polis, the state legislature — particularly the members of the House and Senate Education Committees and the Joint Budget Committee — and the State Board of Education (CSBE) play important roles in setting state education policy in Colorado. Colorado is one of ten states whose board of education is at least partially elected by the public.³ The seven members of the CSBE, representing congressional districts, are elected to serve in six-year terms. Among other responsibilities, CSBE appoints the commissioner of education, meaning the Colorado Department of Education is the only state agency whose head does not report to the governor.

There are 178 local school districts in Colorado, each with an elected board of education and staff administrators, most typically led by a district superintendent. The size and composition of each local school board varies. In total, there are more than 1,000 school board members and superintendents across the state. **While the governor may set an education agenda and the legislature may enact laws, local district leadership often makes decisions concerning implementation.**

³ National Association of State Boards of Education. (2018). *State education governance matrix* [Data file]. Retrieved from <http://www.nasbe.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Governance-matrix-October-2018b.pdf>.

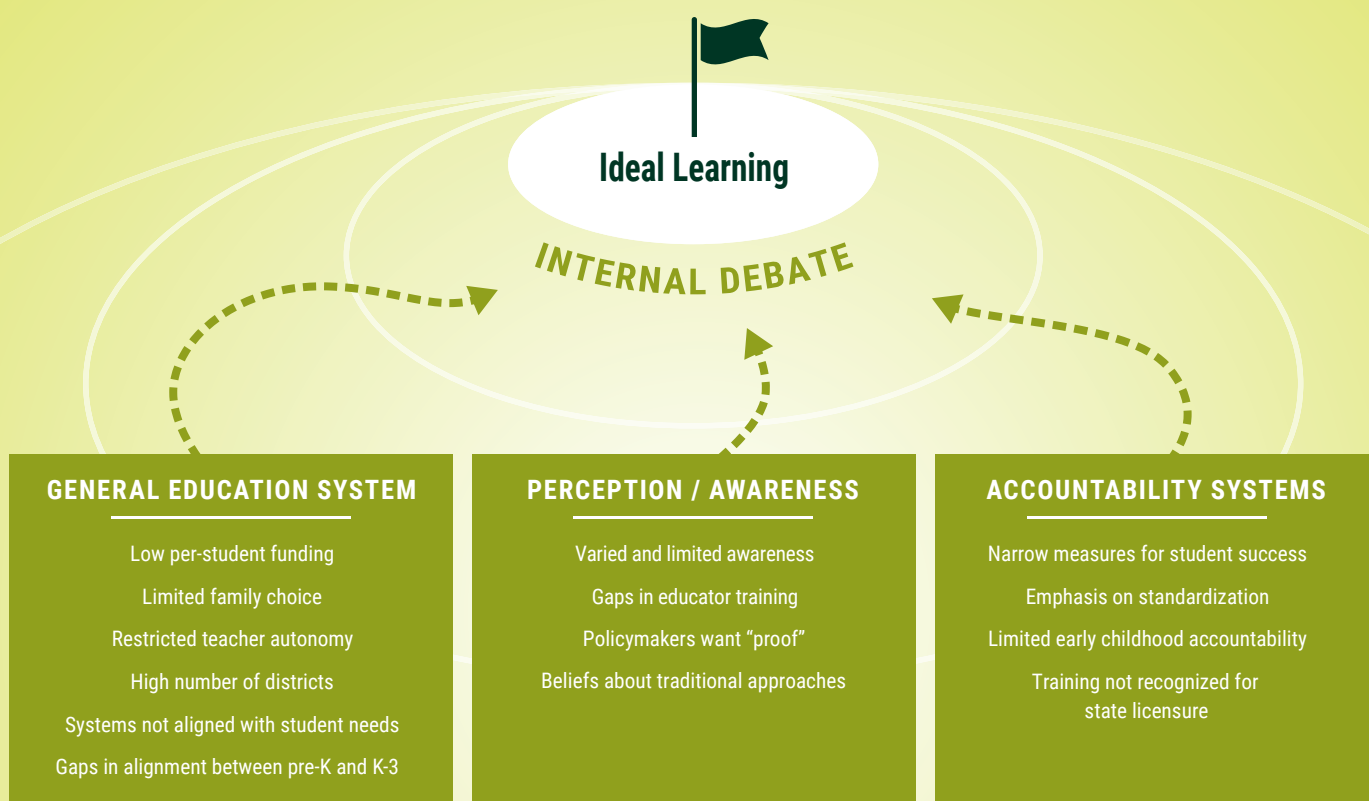
ENVIRONMENTAL BARRIERS

Leaders in Colorado’s early childhood education community agree that Ideal Learning approaches benefit young children greatly, but acknowledge that these methods are not implemented consistently and with fidelity in kindergarten through third grade (K-3). Few policy barriers impede the growth of Ideal Learning in Colorado. The more significant challenges derive from a lack of common understanding about Ideal Learning approaches, the pressure on schools to meet narrow accountability standards, insufficient data to support the efficacy of Ideal Learning, and a limited supply of the resources needed for successful implementation.

Environmental barriers impacting the spread of Ideal Learning in Colorado can be grouped into four major categories.

- › **Internal debate:** Proponents agree on the definition and philosophy of Ideal Learning. However, how to operationalize and implement these principles has not been resolved.
- › **General education system:** Challenges impeding school improvement – for example: low per-pupil funding, limited teacher autonomy, limited school choice, and misalignment between pre-K and early elementary education – also hinder the adoption of Ideal Learning models.
- › **Perception/Awareness:** Awareness of Ideal Learning and its benefits is generally low among parents, educators, and policymakers. Some families may have even less exposure to these programs.
- › **Accountability systems:** Current systems rely on narrow, standardized measures of success. Adoption may be discouraged by the lack of alignment between these systems and Ideal Learning core principles.

BARRIERS TO GROWTH



INTERNAL DEBATE

Proponents have a shared understanding of the core principles of Ideal Learning. However, there is still debate for how to operationalize the approach, as well as the degree of implementation required to provide effective instruction in a proper learning environment.

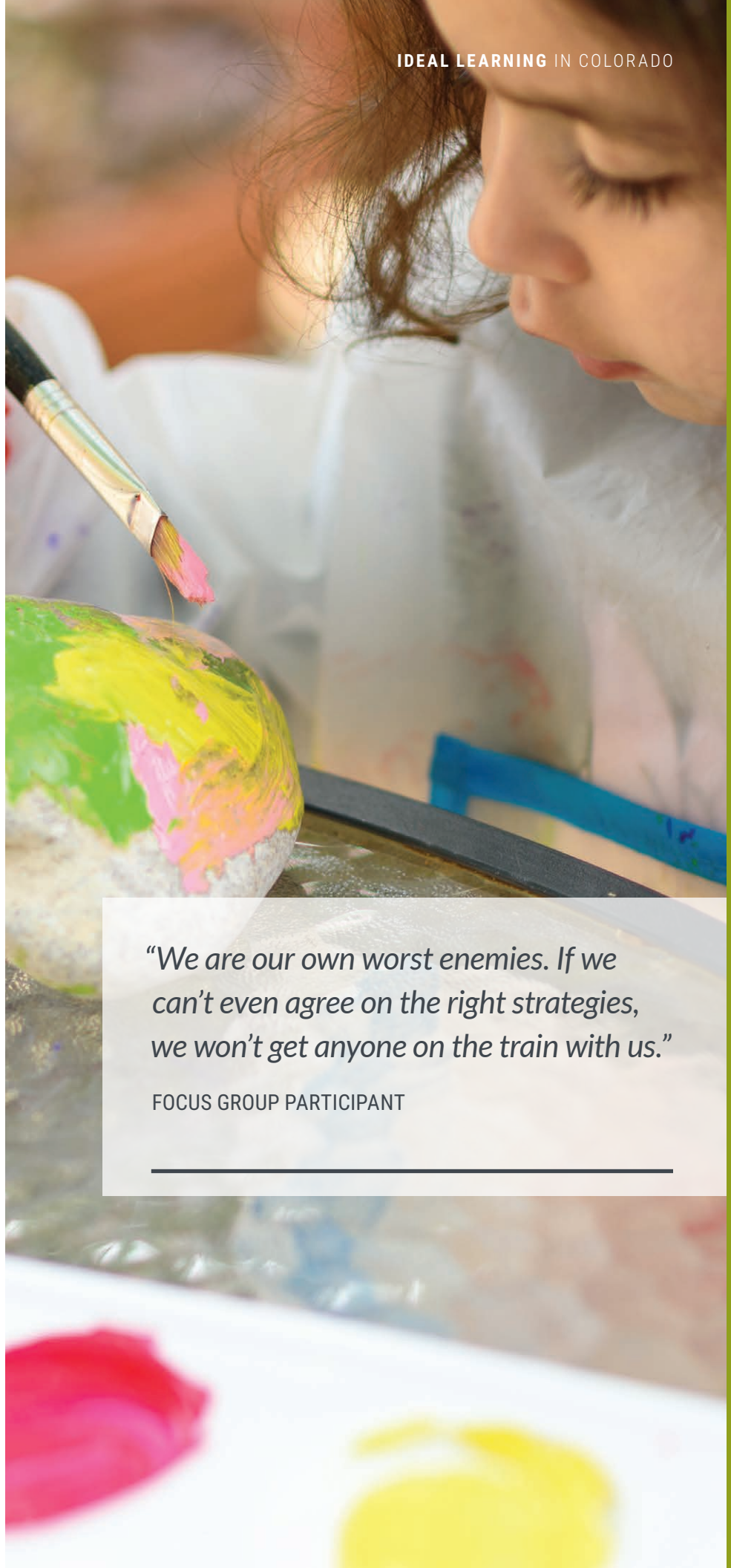
Operationalizing the philosophy

The lack of clarity regarding how student-centered, whole child methods are employed in the classroom or school presents many implementation challenges. It is difficult to promote the growth of Ideal Learning without a commonly held definition of the range of curricula, instructional methods, or assessments.

Degree of implementation

There is broad disagreement regarding the degree of implementation a school or district requires to qualify as an Ideal Learning environment. Some argue that only specific and comprehensive models would qualify (e.g., a school with Montessori-trained teachers and leaders that uses only Montessori instructional methods and materials). Others allow for a wider range of implementation (e.g., a Montessori-inspired school that only incorporates some elements of instructional methods and materials).

Objective, agreed-upon standards for Ideal Learning implementation that can measure the degree of fidelity to the model are necessary to ensure curricula, learning environments, and instructional practices meet a standard threshold. Such standards and measures do not currently exist across Ideal Learning models.



"We are our own worst enemies. If we can't even agree on the right strategies, we won't get anyone on the train with us."

FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

GENERAL EDUCATION SYSTEM

The expanded implementation of Ideal Learning is equally impacted by factors challenging Colorado's education system as a whole.

Low per-student funding

In 2017, Colorado spent an average of \$9,809 per student per year in elementary and secondary school (40th in the US). Colorado's funding level is well below the national average of \$12,201 per student and far below leading states that spend over \$20,000 per student each year.⁴ Funding challenges impact all schools and may prevent the adoption of Ideal Learning, if these approaches are viewed as cost prohibitive. These models require specialized professional learning for teachers and leaders, different student/teacher ratios, and investment in materials and equipment. Comprehensive data on the costs of Ideal Learning classrooms compared to

traditional classrooms is unavailable, but a common belief is that these models are more expensive.

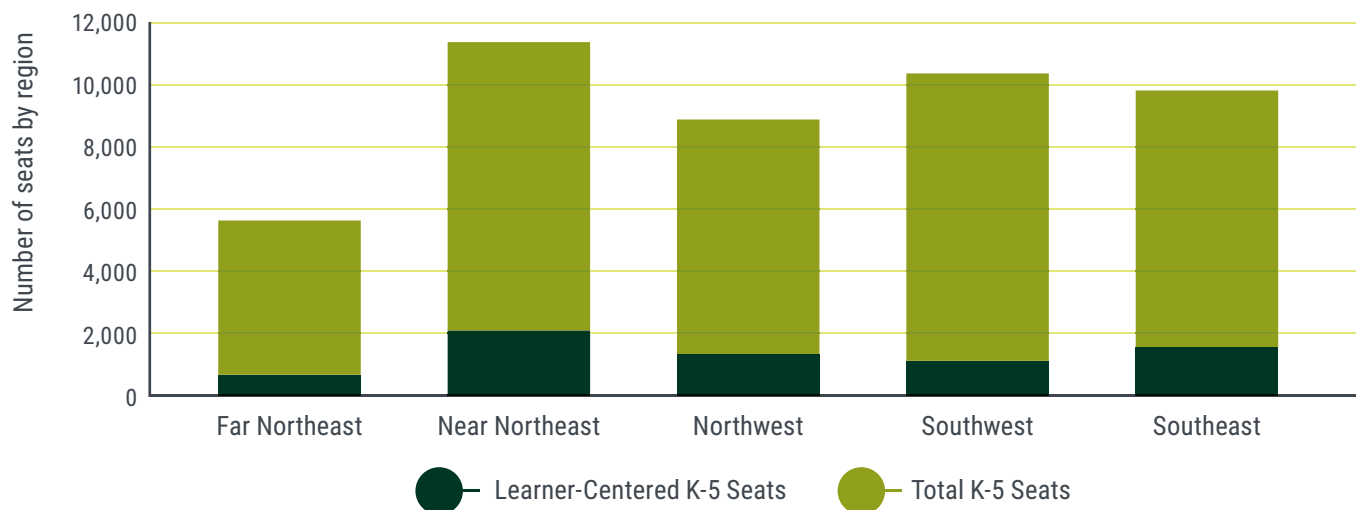
Limited family choice

Under Colorado's open enrollment policy, families may enroll their children in any public school that has availability, including one that is outside of their district boundaries. Despite legal and philosophical support for choice, actual choice remains limited. Some school districts, such as DPS, have embraced and actively promoted choice to encourage innovation and performance improvements. However, access to and enrollment in different types of schools are not

NATIONAL ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOL FUNDING 2017 • PER STUDENT



FIGURE 1
PROPORTION OF DENVER PUBLIC SCHOOLS K-5 LEARNER-CENTERED SEATS TO TOTAL K-5 SEATS, BY REGION



Source: A+ Colorado. (2019). *Unequal choices: School model diversity in Denver Public Schools*.

* Schools identified only as "K-3" are included in "Total K-5 Seats." Additionally, the degree to which Ideal Learning approaches are implemented by individual schools was not evaluated in the A+ Colorado study.

⁴ US Census Bureau. (2019). *2017 public elementary-secondary education finance data* [Data set]. Retrieved from census.gov/data/tables/2017/econ/school-finances/secondary-education-finance.html.

equitable across neighborhoods (Figure 1).⁵ Beyond the limited availability of Ideal Learning schools, a shortage of reliable transportation creates significant logistical challenges for some families and removes the opportunities of Colorado's open enrollment policy.

Limited teacher autonomy

Educators cited limited teacher autonomy as a barrier to implementing Ideal Learning methods in the classroom. Many expressed an interest in seeing more student-centered learning but felt that school districts and building-level leaders are generally prescriptive about instructional methods and curricula. Key informants shared stories of teachers “going rogue,” using more progressive teaching methods when they were not being observed and reverting to more direct instruction when a supervisor was in the room.

Limiting autonomy hinders skilled teachers who could effectively employ student-centered teaching in their classrooms. At a more systemic level, this also may deter creative and innovative professionals from entering or remaining in the field. Effective Ideal Learning leans more heavily on teachers who can think on their feet, respond flexibly to children's emergent needs and interests, and act as sensitive guides. If the profession cannot attract this type of educator, it will continue to be difficult to expand the reach of Ideal Learning models.

Collaboration challenges

Key informants reported that schools experience difficulty collaborating across grade levels. While there is commonly work done to align exit standards for one grade with entrance standards for the next grade, it is less common to see teachers across grades collaborate on instructional methodology.

Local control across a large number of districts

Colorado is a local control state and grants a great deal of authority to its 178 local school districts. This makes it exceptionally difficult to require any specific instructional model or approach statewide. Growth of Ideal Learning models must be approached district-by-district and will likely be the result of incentives, rather than mandates.

Systems not designed to best meet student needs

A hallmark of Ideal Learning models is that they strive to be responsive to student needs above all else. School systems remain designed around long-standing traditions that are outdated for many of today's children, such as long summer breaks (which lead to “summer slide”), lock-step grade levels based on age not student competency, and rigid sequences for teaching subjects.

Gaps in alignment between pre-K and early elementary education

Colorado school districts are making real efforts to align pre-K and K-3 systems, but there is still a wide gap separating the two. The two systems have different funding sources, oversight, and accountability systems, which exacerbates alignment issues. Another challenge is that most children in Colorado either attend private pre-K programs or do not participate in any formal early education.

It is worth noting that most key informants believe the majority of pre-K programs use at least some elements of Ideal Learning because it is the intuitive way to teach very young children. However, the alignment gap between these systems provides little opportunity for K-3 educators to experience and learn from quality pre-K practices.

“There is a fundamental tension between something that requires patience — namely child development — and a system that is inherently impatient. Many of the positive aspects and benefits of whole child approaches don't show up in test scores, but test scores are emphasized in our accountability-driven culture and system.”

FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

⁵ A+ Colorado. (2019). *Unequal choices: School model diversity in Denver Public Schools (an A+ orange paper)*. Retrieved from apluscolorado.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Unequal-Choices-School-Model-Diversity-in-Denver-Public-Schools.pdf.



PERCEPTION/AWARENESS

The widespread adoption of Ideal Learning suffers from perception and awareness barriers. The benefits of this approach are not widely known among parents, educators, and policymakers alike. For some there is a perception these approaches lack rigor and are less likely to produce strong academic results. The field does not have a coherent body of widely accepted evidence that Ideal Learning methods produce meaningful gains for children, and the absence of concrete data makes arguments for and against Ideal Learning largely subjective.

Parent awareness is limited and varies by socio-economic status.

Most key informants felt that parent awareness of different instructional models is generally low, and that awareness of Ideal Learning models is particularly low.⁶ Most feel that parents focus primarily on a safe environment and a positive school experience and focus less on the school's instructional approach.

Key informants raised concerns that different socio-economic groups receive different messages about what makes for a *good* school. Over the past 15 years, much of the growth in school models has come from the “No Excuses” movement. No Excuses schools (e.g., KIPP, Strive, etc.) typically serve low-income students, have high academic expectations, and implement strict

behavior codes. Their instructional methods tend to emphasize direct instruction and memorization and are less likely to use student-centered, emergent teaching. Fueled in part by this movement, many lower-income families believe that their children will benefit most from schools that tightly control student behavior and employ direct instruction models. The current way of assessing school performance, which heavily emphasizes standardized test scores, is complementary to this model. According to a 2017 accountability report from Denver Public Schools, 85% of students in No Excuses charter schools are attending higher-rated schools (in the district's top two rating levels).⁷ This compares to 49% of students in district-run schools.

Higher-income families, who are more likely to exercise greater choice in selecting schools, may have increased awareness of and comfort with Ideal Learning models. These families tend to trust that their children are college-bound and will read and write with proficiency, regardless of school model choice. This, and their children's exposure to more extracurricular activities outside of the school day and school year, may increase their willingness to embrace child-centered early education environments. The Ideal Learning approach is significantly more common in private schools, and wealthy families are less affected by logistic difficulties that may prohibit choice for other families.

⁶ Perception may not reflect reality and attitudes may be changing. [See: Trust for Learning. (2017). Parents as consumers of early education: Research findings 2017. Retrieved from https://trustforlearning.org/assets/F_TFL_ParentasConsumers_FullResearchBooklet_2017_PRINT.pdf].

⁷ Denver Public Schools Portfolio Management Team. (2017). Accountability report: May 2017. Retrieved from drive.google.com/file/d/0BweDVRIGnP4JWDRjS1BTOWVjN28/view.

Educator preparation does not address Ideal Learning adequately

Another concern frequently raised by the key informants is that teacher preparation programs are required to cover such a large body of content that it leaves little time to introduce alternative or progressive teaching methods. There was also concern that teachers are given little exposure to the principles of child development. Informants felt that if teachers understood the science of child development, they may better appreciate and promote Ideal Learning practices.

Polymakers want proof that Ideal Learning works, and there is debate about what evidence is valid

The past two decades of education reform, starting with the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act, have been fueled by the belief that data is the key to improving education. With the nationwide implementation of standardized testing, many policymakers have come to believe that reading, writing, and math scores are the only way to measure the success of a school or an instructional model. It is hard to convince policymakers of the value of alternative school models without evidence of equivalent or better academic outcomes. While Ideal Learning proponents believe that these approaches do produce better outcomes, the body of supporting research is inconsistent. The absence of a data-driven argument about the merits of Ideal Learning is a significant impediment to change.

Educators believe that traditional approaches deliver higher test scores

Without supportive data to demonstrate the benefits of Ideal Learning, many educators remain skeptical. Nearly all key informants interviewed from non-Ideal Learning environments found merit in Ideal Learning models, but also believed that they would fall short of producing mandated academic gains (particularly in literacy). The sense was that these models would not get children far enough fast enough, while more traditional methods would.

ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEMS

Demand for assessments that are scalable and comparable across all schools, teachers, and students has resulted in a system that relies on narrow measures of student success and evaluates schools and teachers on their students' ability to succeed in those areas.

Narrow measures of student success

Colorado students are assessed in reading, writing, and math during grades three and eight; and in science during grades five, eight, and eleven. School and teacher evaluations are based on student assessment outcomes. Other factors, such as school climate and student engagement, are evaluated by some schools and districts but without a peer-reviewed and normed reporting process. Ideal Learning's whole child models are challenged by these limited assessments. Educators are less likely to embrace these models with the continued absence in statewide student assessments of broader outcomes.

Emphasis on standardization

Colorado, like all other states, currently demands a standardized assessment of student learning for its 1,888 schools and nearly one million students. Per the local control philosophy, the state sets learning standards but districts determine how to meet those standards. The challenge is that subjects such as reading, writing, and math, which are essential, are also easier to measure on a large scale than other skills critical to education. Despite state and district claims about the value of critical thinking, creativity, and empathy, little effort has been made to develop and implement assessments of these skills. If student accountability measures remain narrow, then districts will continue to focus primarily on those narrow learning domains. If broader domains and skills were prioritized, Ideal Learning models would likely gain more traction.

Misalignment with early childhood accountability

The only statewide student measures before third grade are READ Act assessments in kindergarten through third grade and a readiness assessment at the start of kindergarten, which assess multiple learning domains. As a result, there is uncertainty about the impact different early education instructional approaches have on later academic outcomes in third grade and beyond. There are logical reasons why there are gaps between early childhood accountability and later assessments. Young children are in a variety of settings prior to kindergarten including many that operate independently of public schools and districts. Additionally, the current accountability system relies on computer-administered tests that are inappropriate for younger ages. The scarceness of longitudinal data about young children's progress in a variety of learning domains makes it difficult to prove, or disprove, that Ideal Learning benefits young children.

Misaligned expectations with the timing and trajectory of literacy development

The READ Act requires multiple interim assessments in early grades and assumes a specific sequence of developing literacy skills. These assessments may not align well with some Ideal Learning models that emphasize a different trajectory for the development of literacy skills and may track progress over a broader time period beyond an academic semester or year. As such, a child could appear to be struggling in kindergarten or first grade on the state required interim assessments but may be adequately progressing along the trajectory of the Ideal Learning model. That child may still meet standard expectations in third grade but would appear to be struggling in earlier grades.

Ideal Learning preparation not recognized for licensure

A more tactical barrier identified by key informants is that the extensive professional learning required for teachers who work in Ideal Learning environments or in particular models (e.g., Montessori, Reggio Emilia) is not recognized for licensure in Colorado. Many consider this preparation equal to, if not better than traditional teacher preparation programs. Educators who want to work in an Ideal Learning environment in public schools must obtain a state teaching license and then undergo additional professional learning to work in the model. The additional investment of time and money deters prospective teachers from these models. Increasing all teachers' exposure to the science of child development in preparation programs could also decrease the need for such extensive additional professional development by Ideal Learning models.

“Teachers are frustrated by the differences between what they are required to do and what they know is best.”

FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT



OPPORTUNITIES

Despite considerable systemic issues impeding a broader adoption of Ideal Learning, Colorado offers a favorable regulatory environment. For example, growing frustration has resulted in opportunities to pilot new accountability systems and calls for changes by community groups and teachers. Political tides seem to be shifting toward innovation.

Local control

Districts or schools wishing to adopt Ideal Learning face less restriction in doing so. With some exceptions, districts are free to adopt new curricula and instructional methods without state permission or intervention.

This suggests that a local advocacy strategy, while challenging, may be the most effective way to advance Ideal Learning in Colorado.

Growing frustration with the status quo

Colorado, like many states, has experienced decades of education reform based largely on increased testing and accountability. Resulting gains in student achievement have been incremental at best. Proficiency in literacy and math has increased by only approximately two points each since 2015. Fewer than half of students in grades three through eight statewide are proficient in literacy, and only 34% are proficient in math.⁸ This sluggish progress may open the door for innovative new approaches. There is ample evidence of changing sentiment with the current education system.

- › **The temporary withholding of Early Literacy grant funds from schools during the 2019 legislative session.** Disappointed with the progress being made in literacy, the Colorado General Assembly unilaterally suspended the state's Early Literacy grant program this past year. The legislature appropriates funds to CDE who has broad authority to administer this grant program, which was authorized under the READ Act. Though the program has since been reinstated, this action signaled that policymakers are assessing how well the program is working.
- › **Increasing scrutiny of teacher preparation programs by the state.** There were no fewer than five bills introduced during the 2019 legislative session to address teacher licensure, principal preparation, and educator preparation programs. The heightened interest in teacher and administrator preparation

follows data that links student outcomes to preparation programs. There may be an opportunity to incorporate new, Ideal Learning-favorable structures and content as preparation programs are being held more accountable for student outcomes.

- › **Coalition calling for changes in accountability.** In April of 2019, a coalition of twelve organizations called for changes to the School Performance Framework (SPF) in DPS. In an open letter to the district, the coalition stated that "Denver Public Schools should launch a community process to examine how we measure school quality in order to have a more comprehensive view of how we are preparing our students for life." More importantly, they added: "The SPF has struggled to signal real whole child indicators and induce creative school models."⁹ If the district reviews its evaluation system, there may be an opportunity to better align accountability with Ideal Learning.
- › **Authorization of pilot alternative school-level accountability systems.** Senate Bill 19-204 authorizes districts or cohorts of schools to pilot accountability systems that supplement the state's current system. Given the freedom to propose new ways of thinking about both student and school-level success, pilot participants are likely to consider measures that align well with Ideal Learning models. If this pilot is successful, it could be a major opening for widespread reform of the state's accountability system.

A favorable administration

Governor Jared Polis has demonstrated a strong commitment to early childhood education during his first legislative session by successfully championing full-day kindergarten funding for all Colorado children. He also has a history of supporting school choice and autonomy, having founded New America Schools, a charter school network.

⁸ Colorado Department of Education. (2019). SchoolView Data Center. [Data set]. Retrieved from: <https://www.cde.state.co.us/schoolview>.

⁹ A+ Colorado. (2019) Coalition calls for community discussion on measuring school quality in Denver. Retrieved from <https://apluscolorado.org/reports/coalition-calls-for-community-discussion-on-measuring-school-quality-in-denver>.

Governor Polis' entrepreneurial background and strong track record for creating innovative businesses signal that executive leadership in the state may be more favorable to the types of changes needed to advance Ideal Learning than during previous administrations. However, the governor's influence on implementation remains circumscribed (see "The Colorado Context," page 5).

Strong building blocks in place

Colorado can leverage a number of established assets to promote and accelerate the adoption of Ideal Learning models.

- › **Early Learning and Development Guidelines.** These guidelines cover learning and development for children from birth through age eight. They are multi-domain and address approaches to learning, health and physical development, social-emotional development, and all areas of academic attainment. The guidelines elevate the value of Ideal Learning by emphasizing developmentally appropriate and individualized instruction, and they can be leveraged to inform policy and conversations around operationalizing Ideal Learning.¹⁰
- › **Colorado's Competencies for Early Childhood Educators and Administrators.** These guidelines for educators teaching children through age eight are multi-dimensional and include the promotion of skills and best practices complementary to Ideal Learning. The competencies can inform conversation about operationalizing Ideal Learning and may be part of a framework to guide alternative opportunities for teacher licensure.
- › **Kindergarten Readiness Assessments.** Colorado requires all students in publicly funded kindergarten to receive a developmentally appropriate, multi-domain assessment. The approved instruments include the Desired Results Developmental Profile for Kindergarten, Teaching Strategies Gold, High Scope Child Observation Record, and the North Carolina Kindergarten Entry Assessment. Each of these instruments uses observation and other developmentally sensitive methods to assess multiple dimensions of child development. The fact that these whole child instruments have been accepted as valid approaches to child assessment is strong precedent for encouraging and promoting similar whole child assessments in first through third grade.
- › **State-level P-3 Office.** The Colorado Department of Education P-3 Office is dedicated to aligning pre-K through third grade education. The office philosophically supports whole child development, including social and emotional development.

¹⁰ An update to the Colorado Early Learning and Development Guidelines will be made available in early 2020 (see: <https://earlylearningco.org/>).



“You need accountability structures to inform the system; to inform parents, students, and educators; to allow for competition and comparison. However, the available metrics are so limited that it is really hard to develop a standard, easy-to-implement metric on child development. Is an incomplete picture better than no picture at all?”

FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT



“Creating more alternative pathways to accountability is a real opportunity. There will always need to be some basic form of apples-to-apples comparisons to enable continuous improvement, competition and choice, but the state should complement/supplement those with more nuanced measures that recognize quality in different ways.”

FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

Recommendations

None of the barriers identified in this study are insurmountable. Ideal Learning can gain a stronger foothold in Colorado through a sustained effort to unite supporters, increase awareness of the benefits, and change accountability systems to expand multi-dimensional measures.

INTERNAL REVIEW

A first step in promoting Ideal Learning in Colorado is to create a widely accepted understanding of what is meant by the term and guidance on how to assess the degree to which schools and classrooms are effectively implementing this approach.

Create a shared description of how to operationalize Ideal Learning that aligns with state standards and deploy related tools and technical assistance for educators and policymakers

While there is currently significant shared language and shared philosophy about Ideal Learning, there is not a detailed and concrete description of what it looks like in practice beyond certain specified programs (e.g., Tools of the Mind). It would be valuable to utilize current building blocks and add other core documents and tools, aligned with state education standards, to provide a comprehensive and precise description of Ideal Learning that includes:

- › desired learning outcomes by grade level for pre-K through third grade;
- › instructional methods by grade level and/or by subject;
- › key elements of curriculum by grade level;
- › key elements and approaches to student assessment;
- › key elements of educator skills, competencies, and an appropriate way to assess them at both the classroom and the building level; and

- › a measurement system for schools to evaluate readiness for implementing Ideal Learning and/or to self-assess their progress toward implementing an effective Ideal Learning environment.

Leverage existing assets that support Ideal Learning

Many of the necessary supports for Ideal Learning are already in use in Colorado. Expanding or more broadly adopting these tools can further the growth of Ideal Learning.

- › Promote the use of the Early Learning and Development Guidelines, which are aligned with K-12 academic standards. Consider integrating the Guidelines with any new Ideal Learning rubric.
- › Ensure the planned revision of Colorado's Competencies for Early Childhood Educators and Administrators aligns with and enhances existing teacher preparation standards and consider methods to integrate with K-12 rubrics.
- › Promote *ready schools* efforts to assess the sensitivity of the school environment to young children's learning and family needs.
- › Leverage CDE's P-3 Office to reach a statewide audience and to communicate the benefits of Ideal Learning approaches that are aligned across pre-kindergarten and early elementary education.

PERCEPTION/AWARENESS

Once shared understanding of Ideal Learning's instructional methodology and curricula is established, proponents can collaboratively advocate for more widespread adoption. A formal group should be created to analyze and promote systems that would lead to the spread and sustainability of best practices, build the body of evidence to support growth of the model, and increase awareness among all key audiences.

Create an ongoing Ideal Learning collaborative from a diverse group of stakeholders

- › Recruit stakeholders with expertise in research, public relations, data analysis, policy, and communications.
- › Develop a shared agenda that details specific desired changes at the district and state levels.
- › Coordinate the promotion of specific policies and practices at the district and state levels.

Consolidate existing research and/or gather longitudinal data specific to Colorado

Building a data-driven case to support the adoption of Ideal Learning will accelerate promotion at the state, district, and school levels.

Several key questions should be considered during this data collection.

- › What are the long-term academic outcomes, specifically literacy and numeracy, for Colorado students who are in Ideal Learning environments in K-3? Are they different than outcomes for students who are only in these settings in pre-K? Are they different than outcomes for students who are in more traditional K-3 settings?
- › What are the other important outcomes, such as social and emotional development, physical and mental health, and moral performance? How are those outcomes measured? Are outcomes different for students who are in K-3 Ideal Learning environments? Are they different than outcomes for students who are only in these pre-K settings? Are they different than outcomes for students who are in more traditional K-3 settings?

Inventory existing schools using Ideal Learning practices and identify model schools

Highlighting schools that implement Ideal Learning effectively will help to make the concept more concrete, which may inspire organic growth of these practices.

Keeping an inventory of where Ideal Learning schools operate and data about the demographics they serve will also illuminate logistic challenges and other gaps in access and equity.

Improve awareness of and support for Ideal Learning

Better informing parents, educators, and policymakers about Ideal Learning will take an organized and sustained effort. A stronger understanding of the benefits of Ideal Learning models will influence positively the demand for more schools employing these methods.

- › Develop a parent messaging platform and outreach program. Messages should appeal to diverse audiences and emphasize the benefits of Ideal Learning methods for young children. Messages could also build upon what many parents understand to be an appropriate preschool learning environment, including more self-directed and independent learning.
- › Improve and promote understanding of child development among all stakeholders. A comprehensive messaging campaign would reach parents, educators, and policymakers, leveraging ongoing efforts by CDE and the Colorado Department of Human Services (CDHS) to communicate the Early Learning and Development Guidelines. Having greater awareness of child development among all audiences would contribute to greater appreciation for Ideal Learning approaches.
- › Work with community organizing groups to increase awareness of the benefits of Ideal Learning, particularly among lower socio-economic groups, and to increase demand for accessible schools that use these practices.
- › Leverage the attention generated by new full-day kindergarten funding, as well as anticipated policy action for universal pre-K in 2020, to promote consistent, developmentally appropriate and aligned practices for pre-K through third grade.

ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEMS

As the adage goes, *what gets measured gets done*. Growing discontent with the state's current accountability system provides opportunities to review how to best evaluate both student performance and school performance.

Publicly support Colorado's pilot alternative accountability project and lend advice and assistance as warranted

The passage of Senate Bill 19-204 creates a unique opportunity to re-examine accountability at the state level. Stakeholders should promote the inclusion of measures that align with the Ideal Learning philosophy. Once the pilot is completed, it will also be important to ensure that it informs a more comprehensive effort to make long-term changes to the state's accountability system.

Engage in systematic discussion of the measurement of progress toward literacy for grades K-3

Because the READ Act is so fundamental to the work of K-3 educators, it is important for stakeholders to work with state officials to identify and understand alignment and implementation challenges for Ideal Learning. More informed discussion can lead to solutions in which Ideal Learning practices are adapted to enhance early literacy, and state instructional and assessment requirements are adapted to better align with Ideal Learning models.

Create a path to teacher licensure and principal licensure through Ideal Learning preparation programs

The professional learning required for Ideal Learning practitioners is not recognized for licensure and may deter professionals from pursuing this training. Colorado has established precedent for alternative licensure for both teachers and principals. Ideal Learning stakeholders should explore how their preparation programs may become part of alternative licensure, as is true for certain Ideal Learning pedagogies in other states.¹¹ The state could pilot alternative licensure with a district like DPS, which is already implementing several Ideal Learning programs.

GENERAL EDUCATION SYSTEM

The state is largely hands-off with local school districts, which creates an opportunity to engage districts that are ready to explore or adopt Ideal Learning. A handful of smaller districts could be identified to partner with Ideal Learning experts and become demonstration sites. Lessons learned from these districts could inform future adoption and improve public awareness.



¹¹ Eight states formally recognize Montessori training for state licensure. Another six are considering similar legislation (S. Webb, personal communication, October 24, 2019).



“It is incumbent upon us to figure out more robust ways to talk about outcomes — not just kid outcomes, but also teacher satisfaction and organizational changes.”

FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

Conclusion

Many educators inherently believe Ideal Learning practices benefit the development of young children. However, several complex barriers hinder widespread adoption:

- › **a lack of shared understanding for how to implement the model;**
- › **a scarcity of data that demonstrates Ideal Learning's effectiveness;**
- › **low awareness;**
- › **an accountability system misaligned with Ideal Learning tenets; and**
- › **limited resources.**

Despite these challenges, Colorado's flexible policy environment and continued investment in early childhood create an opportunity for significant change, starting with actions to:

- › **leverage current state assets (e.g., Early Learning and Development Guidelines) that support Ideal Learning, pre-K through third grade;**
- › **inventory existing schools with successful models, including data on outcomes and student demographics;**
- › **support Colorado's alternative accountability pilot project; and**
- › **formalize an Ideal Learning collaborative that builds upon current interest and commits to tackle next steps.**

Wider adoption of Ideal Learning in Colorado requires leadership from diverse and connected stakeholders who are willing to help resolve outstanding issues; seize windows of opportunity; and champion the benefits of these methods with policymakers, educators, and parents. The current state environment offers numerous opportunities to advance Ideal Learning access and promote equity. The time is right to work together toward change.



EARLY **MILESTONES**
COLORADO

EARLYMILESTONES.ORG



[@EARLYMILESTONESCO](https://www.facebook.com/EARLYMILESTONESCO)



[@EARLYMILESTONES](https://twitter.com/EARLYMILESTONES)