



THE FUTURE OF PRESCHOOL IN COLORADO | BRIEF 7 OF 7

Community Voices

Universal preschool will be implemented at the local level across the state. Stakeholders who deliver preschool, use preschool services, and support the early care and learning system weighed in on potential opportunities and concerns for Colorado's upcoming preschool expansion. Between October 2020 and April 2021, 47 organizations across the state held 61 listening sessions to gather the thoughts from those they serve. Their input is summarized and reflected in this brief.

Colorado Landscape

Colorado's early care and learning system is complex. Roughly 2,200 licensed centers and preschools have the capacity to serve preschool-age children (3 to 5 years old prior to kindergarten entry), and approximately 1,475 family child care homes are licensed to serve children of mixed ages.¹

34 Early Childhood Councils support the sector and are made up of providers and

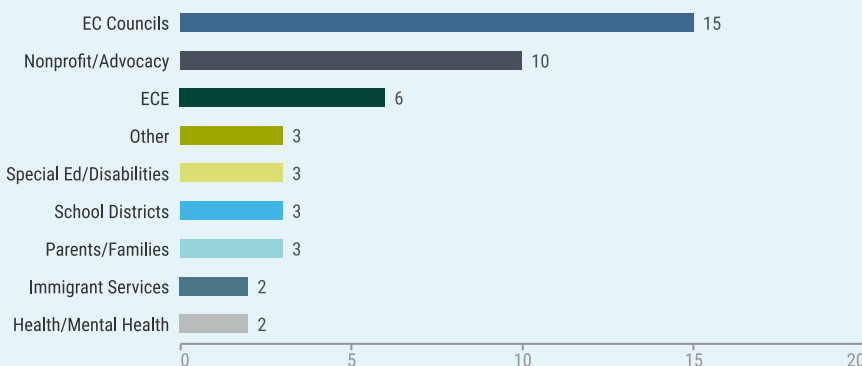
other local system partners. Depending on population density, some Councils serve a single county, while others serve larger regions. Other local and statewide organizations also support the industry through related services, membership support, and advocacy.

During the Future of Preschool in Colorado Engagement Process, nearly half of the Early Childhood Councils gathered stakeholders to provide input. Eight statewide and two local organizations also held listening sessions. Stakeholders included

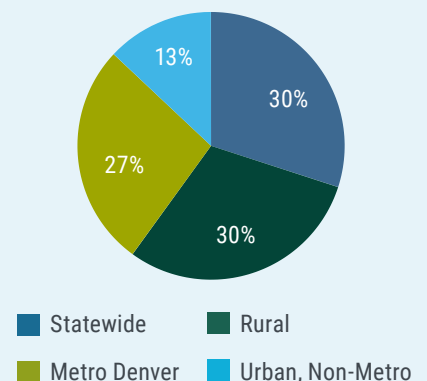
individual early care and learning programs, local child care associations, school district partners, special education and disability interests, family-serving organizations, immigrant services, health/mental health partners, educators, and families.

Almost one-third of stakeholders came from rural communities and another quarter were from Metro Denver. Other non-metro urban areas were also represented. Statewide interests (primarily nonprofit or advocacy organizations) also participated.

AFFILIATIONS FOR ORGANIZATIONS LEADING INPUT SESSIONS (N=47)



SERVICE AREAS FOR ORGANIZATIONS LEADING INPUT SESSIONS (N=47)



¹ Licensing data from Office of Early Childhood (pulled March 24, 2021)

Stakeholder Input

The themes reflected here are based on a synthesis of all community input. These are the most commonly mentioned hopes, goals, and fears voiced by stakeholders across the state as they look to the launch of universal preschool in 2023.

OPPORTUNITIES

Kindergarten Readiness. Stakeholders see universal preschool as an opportunity to help children develop skills and behaviors that will help them once they enter the K-12 system. This includes pre-literacy, getting used to routines, learning to follow directions, and practicing self-regulation.

Developmentally Appropriate Practices. Preschool settings should focus on the whole child and encourage learning through play and social interactions. This supports each child's cognitive development, problem solving, independence, and self-confidence.

Social-Emotional Development. A key goal for universal preschool is that it will help children learn to manage emotions, make friends, develop a sense of self, and learn how to get along with others.

Access. Families need preschool services that meet a diversity of needs, including for those parents who work full-time or non-traditional hours. The system must also be easy to navigate. Participants are eager to see an overall increase in the supply of quality preschool settings, especially for under-resourced and rural communities.

Culture and Equity. An effective universal preschool program will reflect and support families of all languages and cultures.

Affordability. Universal preschool can bring families into the early learning system who otherwise would not be able to afford it. Stakeholders want to ensure that access is improved through reduction of financial strain and other economic barriers.

Special Education/Inclusion. Stakeholders hope the new system will support earlier Child Find evaluations and seamlessly deliver needed special education or early intervention services.

Family Supports. Stakeholders envision a family-centered universal preschool program. This includes promoting family choice for preschool settings, engaging families in decision making, and offering tools to support learning at home. A successful program will connect families with resources that support health, mental health, nutrition, housing, and transportation.

Workforce Training. A highly trained workforce is central to the development of a strong universal preschool program. Professional development, including cultural and linguistic training, should be a core goal for the program and help professionalize the perception of field.

Use of Funds. Participants hope to see funding support teacher compensation, additional paraprofessionals, and reimbursement for school and community settings that covers actual costs.



FUTURE OF PRESCHOOL IN COLORADO ENGAGEMENT PROCESS

Preschool Policy Leadership Committee (PPLC): Thirty-one governor-appointed members who explore policy ideas for designing and implementing universal preschool.

Preschool Policy Advisory Group (PPAG): Open to anyone with an interest in informing program design, this group is focused on shared learning and input.

Community Input Sessions: One-time meetings hosted by more than 40 local or special-interest groups to get input on people's goals and concerns for universal preschool.

**For more information about the engagement process and methodology, visit earlymilestones.org/futureofpreschool.*



CONCERNS

Transportation. Families can only participate in universal preschool if they can get to it. If preschool settings do not offer full-day care options, children will need to be transported between preschool and other care. Families in rural areas and those who have children with disabilities are especially impacted by transportation shortages.

Equitable Access. Universal preschool must ensure that families of all races, ethnicities, socio-economic backgrounds, and geographies can easily access quality programs within a variety settings. Otherwise, many families will continue to be left out of the state's early learning system.

Special Education. An expanded preschool system will likely uncover more needs for special education and early intervention services. Stakeholders worry that existing staffing capacity is insufficient and a larger mixed delivery system will stretch already thin resources.

Insufficient Hours. Ten hours of preschool per week is not enough to meet most families' needs. Families who require more hours will need affordable, accessible, and convenient wrap-around care options.

Facility Constraints. There is not currently enough space within existing facilities to provide services to all the children who might be eligible. There are also not enough appropriate facilities in many communities to create new preschool programs. This is a particular concern in rural areas and child care deserts.

Administration. Experiences with existing funding programs in Colorado have many stakeholders worried they will be left out or underfunded by the administration of a new universal preschool program. They want this program to operate differently, but fear similar administrative challenges will remain.

Unintended Impacts. Increased funding for preschool could draw resources away from the care of infants and toddlers. Infant and toddler services are far more costly, and providers rely on preschool revenue to sustain them. Family child care homes and family, friend, and neighbor providers are concerned that universal preschool will primarily be located in school and center settings, driving them out of business.

51% of Coloradans live in a child care desert.

A child care desert is any census tract containing more than 50 children under age 5, but either no licensed providers or so few that there are three times as many children as licensed child care slots.

Special Education. An expanded preschool system will likely uncover more needs for special education and early intervention services. Stakeholders worry that existing staffing capacity is insufficient and a larger mixed delivery system will stretch already thin resources.

Workforce. There are not enough qualified educators to meet the needs of Colorado's existing early care and learning sector. Stakeholders expect the shortage to worsen with the launch of universal preschool. Qualified infant and toddler teachers may migrate to preschool, which would cause greater shortages for that age group. Pay for early educators needs to be addressed, so that compensation disparities are not worsened.



EARLY MILESTONES
COLORADO

This brief was produced by Early Milestones Colorado, a non-partisan organization that advances success for young children by accelerating innovation, the use of best practices, and systemic change. The views and opinions offered in this document were collected through the Future of Preschool in Colorado engagement process.

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