



SUSTAINING & ADAPTING DURING THE PANDEMIC

The Enduring Impact of COVID-19 on Early Care & Learning Providers

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EARLY MILESTONES
COLORADO

Colorado's early care and learning providers have spent more than 18 months navigating new challenges created by the pandemic. Locations closed, enrollment declined, and providers were on the front line of ensuring children's health and safety amid uncertainty.

To measure the impact of COVID-19, Early Milestones Colorado surveyed providers in the summer of 2020 and again the following winter.¹ This brief highlights changes that providers experienced over the past year.

Continuing Challenges

PANDEMIC-RELATED CLOSURES

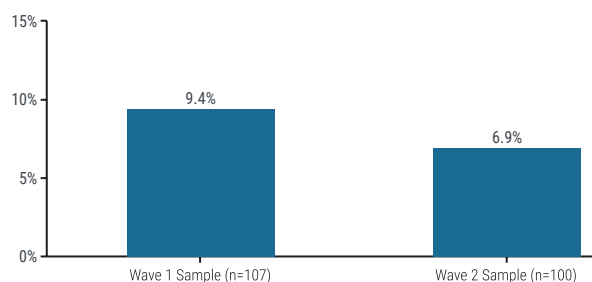
In the summer of 2020, nearly 10% of responding providers had closed due to the pandemic. By January, roughly 7% of providers were closed temporarily or permanently. For those likely to reopen, many provided interim services to families such as meals and remote instruction.

ENROLLMENT DECLINE

In the summer of 2020, statewide enrollment of children under 12 had dropped by 53%. This improved by January of 2021, with 38% less children enrolled than before the pandemic began. Enrollment decreased more with school-age children than with children five or younger.

Nearly three quarters of providers (72%) say that reduced enrollment is at least partially due to families choosing not to return to pre-pandemic care arrangements. 61% of providers also reduced group sizes to follow social distancing guidelines.

Change in pandemic-related closures over time



“I have had to stop paying myself. I hope to keep my school open, but without more grant funding help, I will have to close soon.”

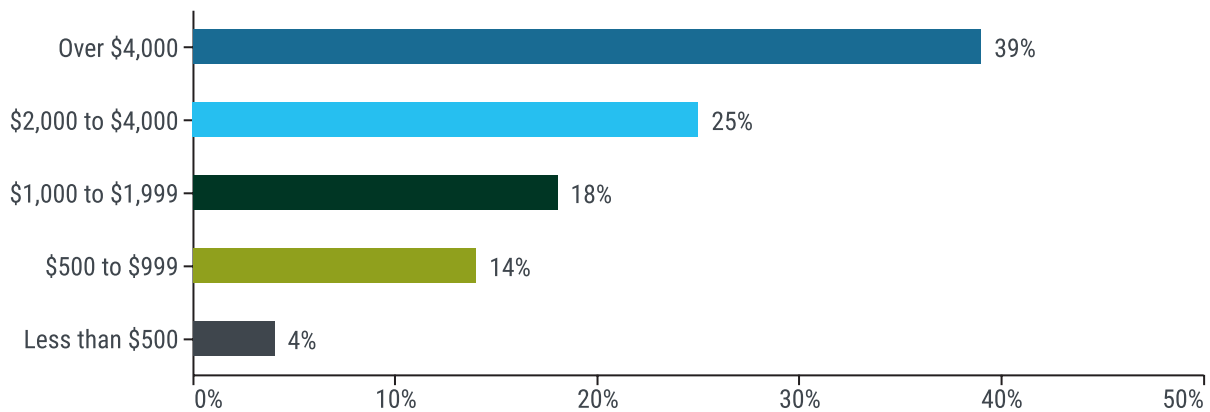
“The workload and stress for our current staff has increased substantially. It has been impossible to find any individuals to come in and work in our current conditions.”

¹ Data represents the same population of Colorado-based early care and learning providers from surveys completed in June of 2020 (1,207 respondents) and January of 2021 (1,450 respondents).

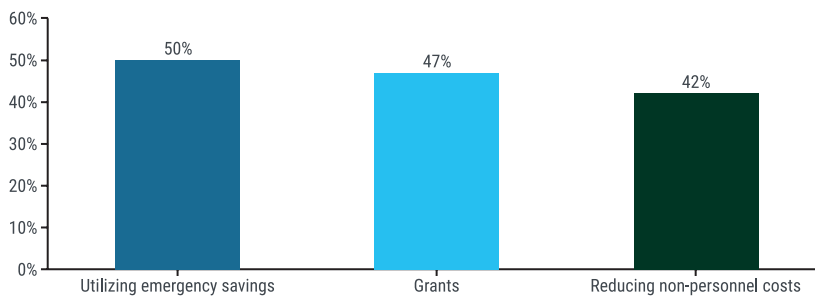
LOST REVENUE

Most providers lost revenue during the pandemic. Almost two-thirds would need at least an additional \$2,000 each month to match pre-pandemic income. Faced with reduced enrollment and rolling closures, providers now worry they can't sustain much longer. For providers who had lost significant enrollment, almost 60% were not confident they could sustain their business.

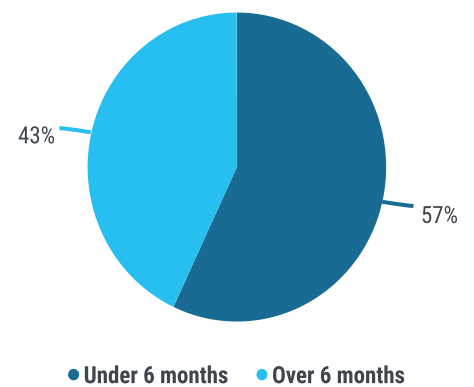
Additional monthly funds needed to reach pre-pandemic revenue (n=1,121)



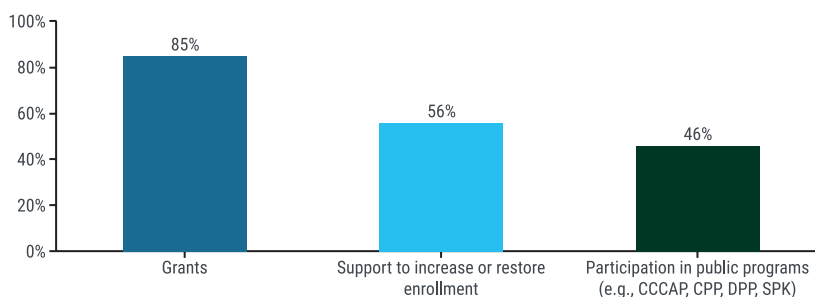
Top 3 ways providers are sustaining programs



Providers' expected sustainability with current enrollment (n=524)



Top 3 most useful supports for staying open, reopening, or returning to financial stability



Considerations for Change

Fund Sustainability. Stimulus grants and Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) loans have helped stabilize the state's early care and learning provider landscape in the short-term. However, providers need continuing support to stay afloat. Many are small businesses without access to commercial lending. Until enrollment improves, providers need supplemental and ongoing assistance through grants and forgivable loans.

Identify Available Space. Social distancing guidelines forced providers to make difficult enrollment decisions. They need more space but have less money to pay for it. Consider local programs that allow businesses to offer temporary use of available space to providers.

Support Workforce Sustainability. Providers face unpredictable staffing due to pandemic-related closures. Providers are calling for a reliable substitute referral pool to stabilize coverage for care. Though this is a unique moment, creating a stronger, more flexible workforce can improve long-term workforce stability. State and local partners can recruit and guide new candidates through education pathways.

Make Funding More Flexible. Public funding programs, such as the Colorado Child Care Assistance Program (CCCAP) and the Colorado Preschool Program, were critical lifelines for many providers. Relaxing funding restrictions (e.g., expanded absence policies) and reimbursing providers for the cost of care can help them survive through closures and low enrollment.

Prioritize Real-Time Data. Parents need timely and accurate information about child care openings and health and safety protocols. A system with real-time information to match available slots with families in need of care will better support families and providers.

Partners

Early Milestones is grateful to our project funders, without whom this effort would not be possible. We also thank our many partners who are helping to distribute surveys, interpret data, and develop communication tools.



The Colorado Health Foundation

Suggested Citation

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