



SUSTAINING & ADAPTING DURING THE PANDEMIC

Family & Provider Sentiments About Colorado's Proposed Universal Pre-K Program

January 2022



EARLY MILESTONES
COLORADO

The quality of experiences in a child's first five years is critical to long-term success. This is when children most rapidly develop neural connections, learning and social skills, language, self-control, and working memory.¹

To ensure success for all Colorado children, the state must create equitable access to high-quality pre-kindergarten (pre-K) programs that provide meaningful connections and early learning foundations. Building upon its research into the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Colorado's early care and learning sector, Early Milestones asked child care providers and families in early 2021 about universal pre-kindergarten (UPK), which is slated to begin in 2023.* This brief explores data for decision-makers to consider when developing an equitable UPK system during a global pandemic.

Colorado's Universal Pre-K Program

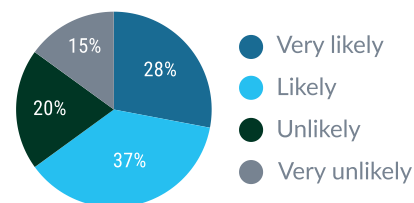
On November 3, 2020, Colorado voters passed a ballot measure (Proposition EE) that will pay for all children in their year before kindergarten to attend preschool at least 10 hours per week. Children from low-income families or those who may not be ready for kindergarten will have access to more preschool. The program starts in the fall of 2023.

PROVIDER PARTICIPATION

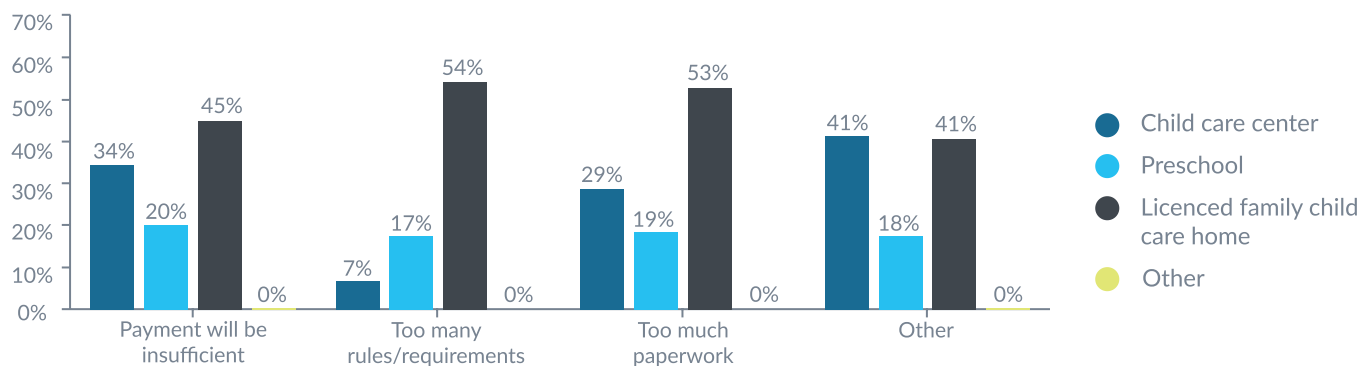
Two-thirds of Colorado child care providers surveyed stated they are likely to participate in UPK (65%), including nearly all licensed preschools (94%). Providers based in frontier counties shared the greatest likelihood (78%), compared to nearly three-quarters of rural providers (72%) and two-thirds of urban providers (62%).²

Almost one-third of center-based providers (31%) and nearly half of family child care home (FCCH) providers (45%) said they do not plan to participate in UPK. Among providers intending to opt out, the most common anticipated reasons are too many rules or requirements for UPK (49%), insufficient payment (48%), and paperwork (44%). FCCH providers were more likely to say that rules, requirements, and paperwork were key barriers. *Other* concerns included lack of space, curriculum, lack of care for infants and toddlers, religious affiliation, public/private status, or the provider had plans to retire.

Likelihood Providers Will Participate in UPK



Reasons Child Care Providers Would Not Participate in UPK



* Data represents 4,022 families and 1,450 early care and learning providers based in Colorado who completed surveys in early 2021 about their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Among these, 2,573 families and 720 providers answered questions specific to UPK.

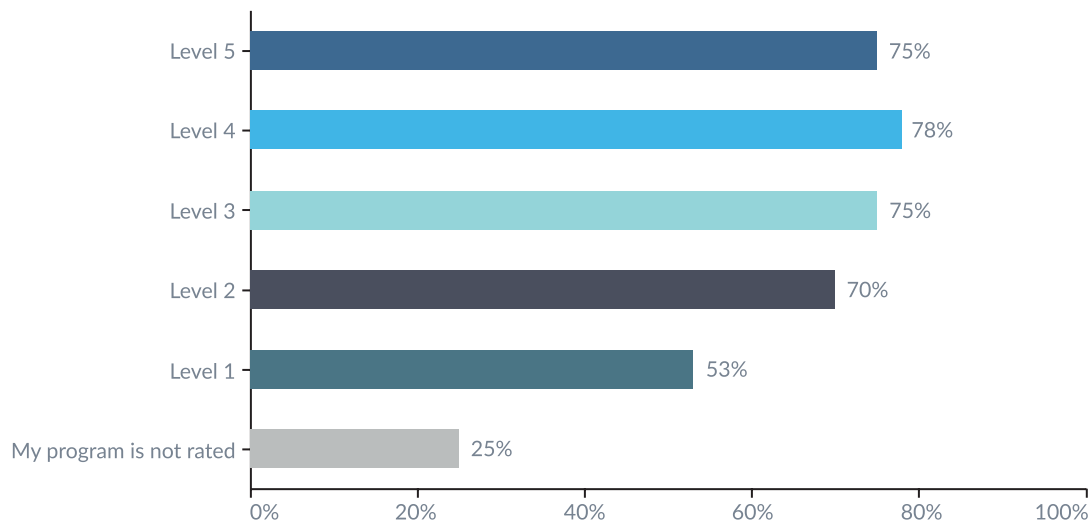
“We would need to receive the same tuition that we charge private payers.”

“Emergent and non-traditional programs should have a place at the table and not be penalized for their model.”

PROGRAM QUALITY & FUNDING SOURCES

In general, the higher a program’s quality rating, the more likely it was to indicate plans to participate in UPK. Three-quarters of publicly funded programs said they are likely to participate (74%), compared to half of programs with no public funding (52%). Higher quality care is more expensive to provide, and small or private programs may struggle to find the funding needed to meet UPK participation requirements.^{3,4}

Percent of Providers Likely to Participate in UPK by Quality Rating



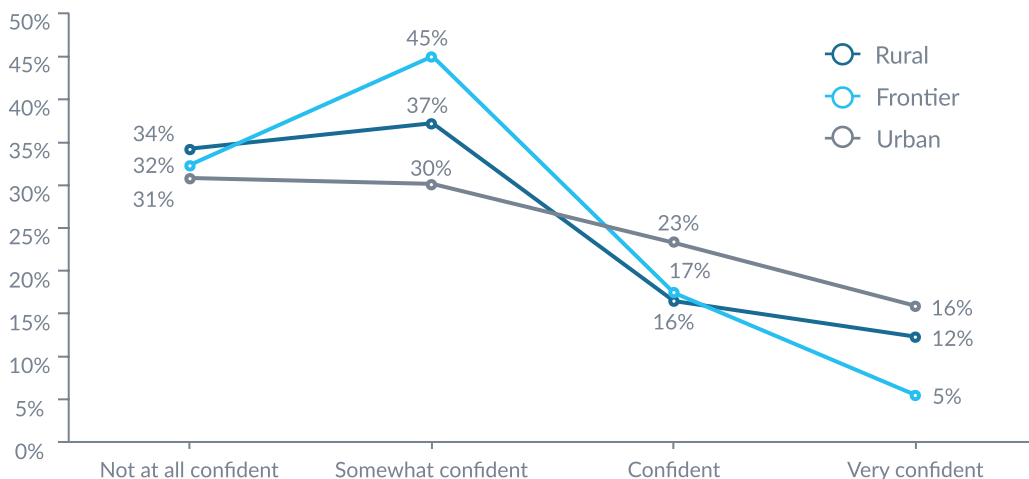
“There is limited information about how money would be given to programs... Private programs who rely on individual payments from families may be set to suffer if the payment rate is not equivalent to what we charge now.”

RECRUITING & SUPPORTING STAFF

Over two-thirds (70%) of providers surveyed have struggled to find enough teachers or caregivers to enroll to capacity during the pandemic. In early 2021, 31% of providers were not confident about finding new staff to expand the number of four-year-olds to be served. Only 15% were very confident. Providers in frontier counties were the least confident about finding staff, and urban providers were the most confident.

Retention of quality staff is as important as recruitment. Providers said that higher pay (83%), increased recognition (76%), and paid leave/time off (74%) are the most important factors in promoting retention.

Providers' Confidence in Finding Enough Qualified Staff to Expand for UPK



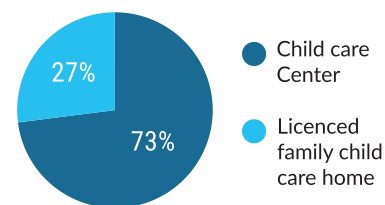
"[UPK] is great on paper. However, funding for it and finding teachers is going to be a nightmare. We can't find quality staff now. Why would anyone think we would find staff then?"

CAPACITY CONCERNS

More than one-third (38%) of licensed providers surveyed said they would likely need to reduce services for infants and toddlers to have capacity for more 4-year-olds. FCCH providers represent most of this group (73%).

Even before the pandemic, more than half (51%) of Coloradans lived in an infant and toddler child care desert, defined as an area with at least three children for each available slot.^{5,6} Rural (35%) and frontier (29%) providers reported being more likely than urban providers (20%) to reduce infant and toddler spaces to create capacity for UPK. Should this happen, it would reverse recent efforts to increase statewide capacity for children under four years old. Adequate capacity for all ages is an ongoing concern.⁵

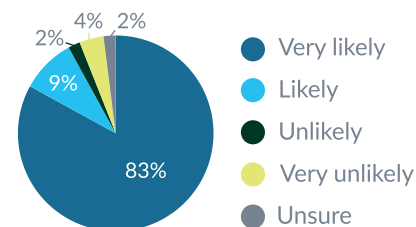
Programs Likely to Reduce Infant/Toddler Services



FAMILY DESIRE FOR UPK

Nearly all families surveyed with a child under the age of four (92%) said they would be likely to send their child to UPK if money was not a factor. However, responses differed across racial and ethnic groups, with Indigenous (17%), Black (10%), and Hispanic/Latinx (8%) families most unsure about whether they would send their children to preschool. Of those who were unsure, more than one in three expected that a need for full-day care would be a barrier. Potential barriers to enrollment listed as *Other* include a lack of information about options, health risks associated with COVID-19, and wanting to provide direct care for their child.

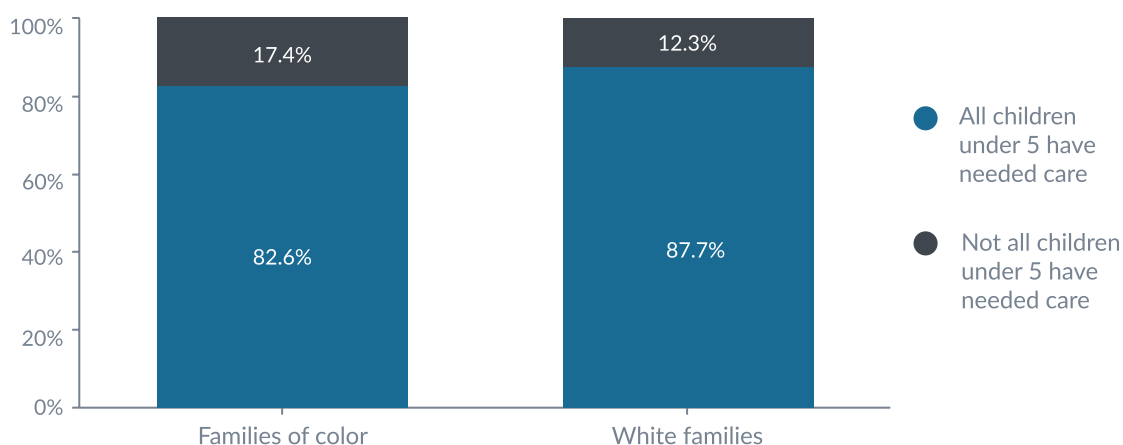
Likelihood Families Would Participate in UPK if Money Was Not a Factor



ACCESS & AFFORDABILITY NEEDS: THE PANDEMIC & UPK

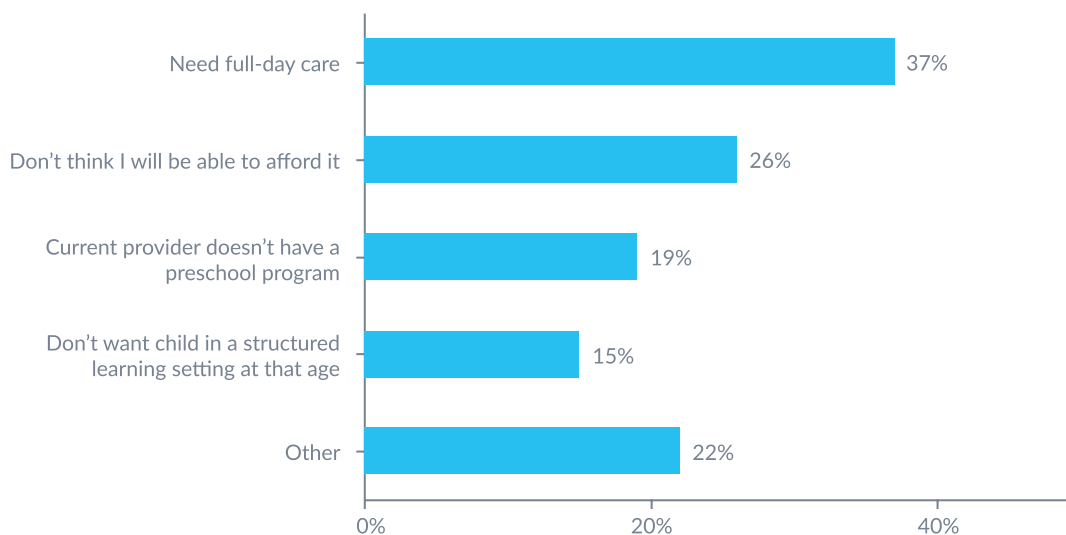
In early 2021, families indicated that their greatest child care needs were finding care during traditional work hours (53%), before- or after-care (29%), and flexible care to accommodate inconsistent schedules (26%). Overall, 14% of families said their children under the age of five did not have needed care. Of these families, 41% said the reason was because they could not afford care, and 39% said they could not find it. Hispanic/Latinx families (19%) and families of color (16%) were more likely not to have needed care for children under five. Similar needs will be priorities for families considering participation in UPK. Though UPK offers a minimum of 10 hours of preschool for all four-year-olds, a need for full-day care would be an enrollment barrier for many families. Three-quarters of families (74%) said they prefer at least 20 hours per week, and two in five prefer full-day arrangements (41%).

Families Who Have Needed Care for Children Under Five



Affordability of care continues to be a significant concern. Given that one in four families (26%) are anticipating that UPK will be unaffordable, cost will remain a barrier to UPK enrollment for many if state funding only covers 10 hours per week.

Reasons Families are Unlikely to Send Their Child to Preschool



FAMILY UPK PREFERENCES

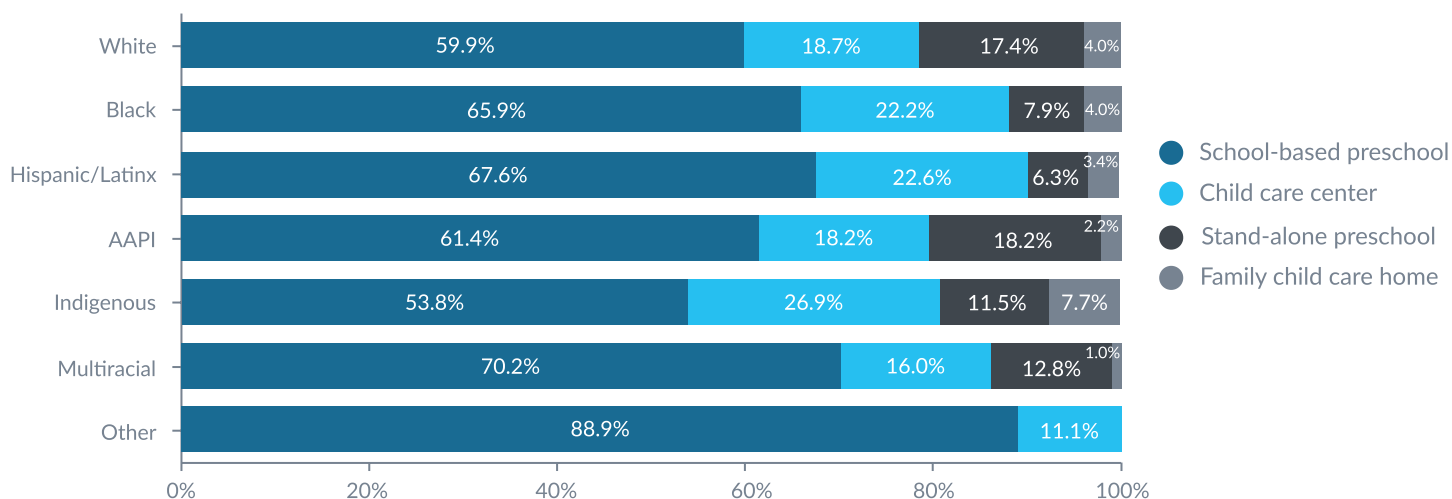
An essential goal for UPK is to provide equitable opportunity for all Colorado children to achieve their full potential. A bedrock of this principle is ensuring families can access their preferred type of provider.

Colorado families surveyed strongly prefer school-based settings (62%). However, preference for other provider types varied across income levels and racial and ethnic groups. Lower-income families said they prefer pre-K providers in school-based (64%) or center-based settings (22%), compared to higher-income families (60% and 18%, respectively). Hispanic/Latinx families preferred school-based preschools (68%) and child care centers (23%). Most white families also preferred school-based preschools (60%), with similar rates of preference for child care centers (19%) and stand-alone preschools (17%).

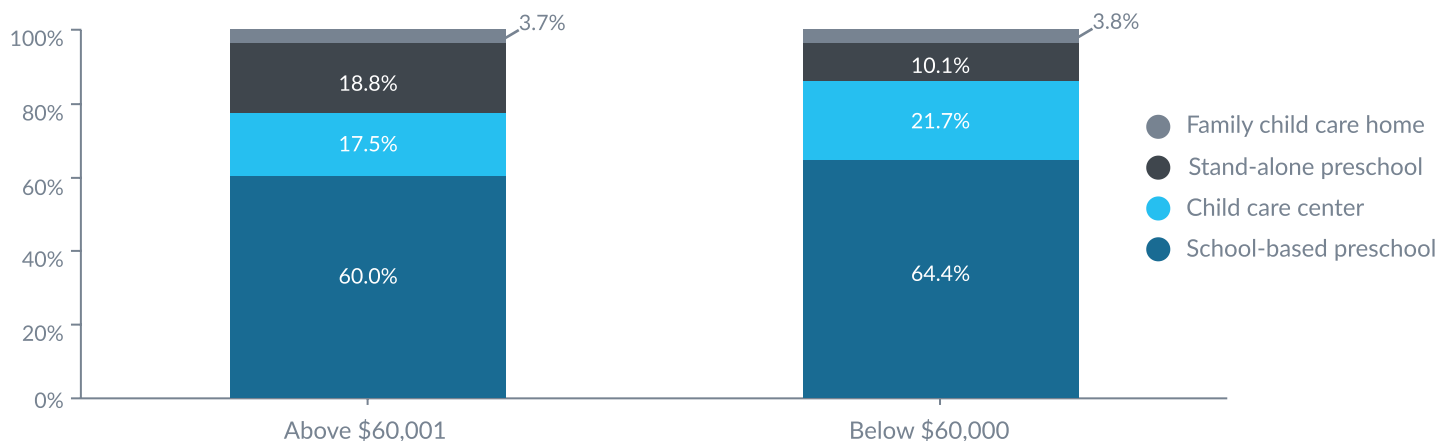
Families also shared a desire for UPK programs that are culturally and linguistically representative of the communities they serve. Three-quarters (74%) of families said they prefer teachers who speak their child's language. Nearly one in five (18%) said it is important for their child to have a teacher who looks like them.

When selecting a pre-K program, families overwhelmingly shared a preference for highly trained teachers (86%), research-based curriculum or approaches (82%), and high quality ratings (80%).

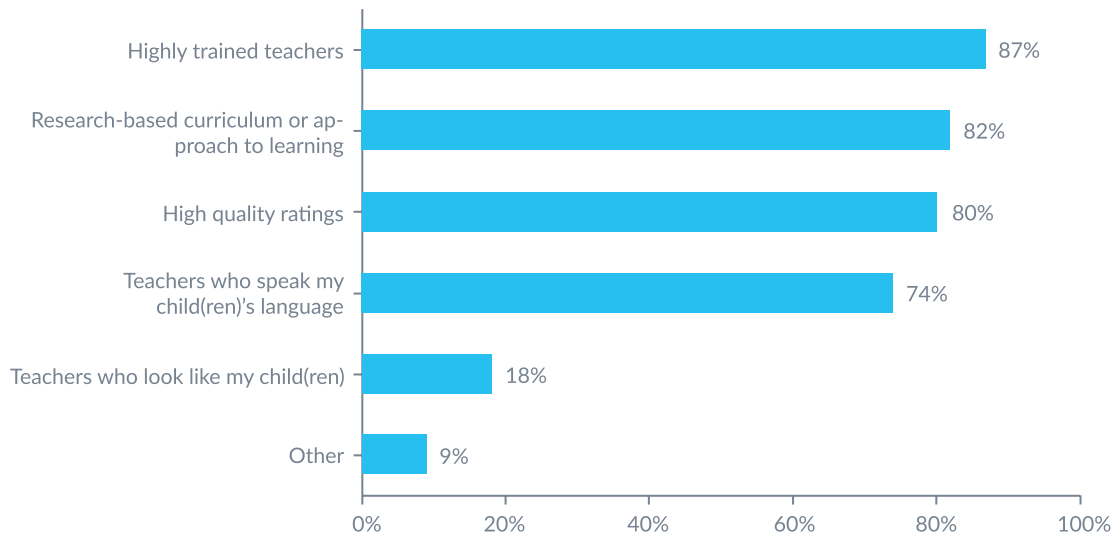
Family Preference for Preschool Provider By Race/Ethnicity



Family Preference for Preschool Provider by Income



Factors Families Consider Important When Selecting a Preschool



Considerations & Opportunities

Fund and structure UPK to maximize participation. As outlined in the [Colorado Universal Preschool Recommendations](#), funding should reflect the actual cost of care. Adequate funding and efforts that ease administrative burdens will help increase provider participation. Subsidizing additional hours of care for some families and supporting an array of provider types will help increase enrollment. The state will need to monitor capacity changes across early care and learning settings to ensure that UPK does not deepen existing shortages for certain age groups (i.e., infants and toddlers) and communities.

Ensure equitable access to high-quality programs. The [Colorado Universal Preschool Recommendations](#) call for work with stakeholders, including families, to develop unified program standards. It is critical to support all types of providers in meeting these standards and strengthening the services provided to families. To meet equity goals, the state will need to continuously monitor and respond to program and family participation by geographic area, income, race/ethnicity, provider type, and other factors.

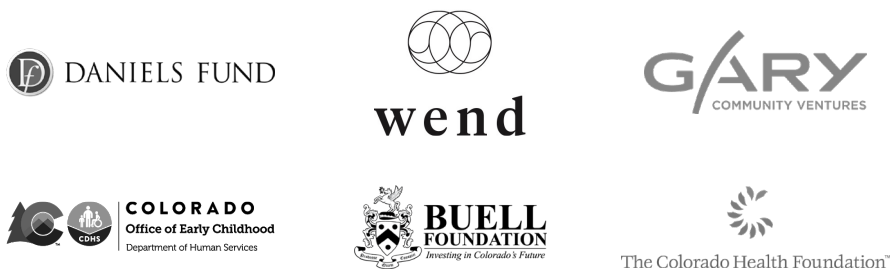
Support workforce recruitment, retention, and training. Workforce retention and well-being are essential to the success of UPK. Paying providers a living wage and creating a wide range of aligned professional development resources can help to build up a qualified workforce and retain staff over the long term. The state should also invest in recruiting and training program staff that are culturally and linguistically representative of the communities they serve.

References

- ¹ Bernier, A., Carlson, S. M., & Whipple, N. (2010). From external regulation to self-regulation: Early parenting precursors of young children's executive functioning. *Child development*, 81(1), 326-339.
- ² U.S. Census Bureau (2020). Urban and Rural. Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/geography/guidance/geo-areas/urban-rural.html>.
- ³ Cohen-Vogel, L., Sadler, J. R., Little, M., & Merrill, B. (2020). (Mis) Alignment of instructional policy supports in Pre-K and kindergarten: Evidence from rural districts in North Carolina. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*.
- ⁴ Franko, M., Brodsky, A., Wacker, A., & Estrada, M. (2017). Bearing the cost of early care and education in Colorado: An economic analysis. Denver: Butler Institute for Families, Graduate School of Social Work, University of Denver.
- ⁵ Lawal, N., Robinson, E. & Bustos, E. (2020). "Reversing the Loss of Infant Toddler Child Care Slots in Denver." Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Social Policy.
- ⁶ Malik, R., & Hamm, K. (2017). Mapping America's child care deserts. Washington, DC: Center for American Progress.

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.



Suggested Citation

McGee, D., Delap, S., Nicolaou, K., & Franko M. (2022). *Sustaining & Adapting During the Pandemic: Family & Provider Sentiments About Colorado's Proposed Universal Pre-K Program*. Denver, Colorado: Early Milestones Colorado.