

A Critical Investment at a Critical Time:

How the CIRCLE Grant Program
Can Inform the Future of
Early Childhood in Colorado



EARLY MILESTONES
COLORADO



COLORADO
Department of Early Childhood



Overview

All young children in Colorado and the people who nurture them deserve to be valued, healthy and thriving. Nationally, the early childhood sector has long suffered from insufficient public investment and many families have struggled to access the services and support they need. Here in Colorado, leaders and communities took bold steps toward this vision in recent years, expanding free, full-day kindergarten to all families who choose it; implementing voluntary, free preschool for all 4-year-olds in the year before kindergarten; and creating a new, cabinet-level department that is focused on the needs of our state's youngest children. Now, recent landmark changes are helping make the state a national leader in supporting young children and their caregivers.

Even so, families with young children and the early childhood sector in Colorado have continued to face persistent challenges.

These challenges include limited availability and affordability of child care, barriers to the recruitment and retention of early childhood professionals, and uneven support across the state to meet the unique, diverse needs of children and families. These long-standing struggles were amplified to new levels when the COVID-19 pandemic struck in March 2020. The pandemic upended the lives of children, families and caregivers and threatened the already fragile early childhood landscape. Considering the unprecedented challenges facing Colorado communities, state leaders recognized the need to take an innovative approach to stabilizing the early childhood ecosystem – one that would uplift solutions developed by on-the-ground early childhood leaders across Colorado and equip them with the infusion of resources they needed to meet the pressing needs of young children, families and early childhood professionals.

It was in this context that the Community Innovation and Resilience for Care and Learning Equity (CIRCLE) Grant Program emerged as a distinctive approach to steady and strengthen the early childhood sector. It was formed as an innovative partnership among the Colorado Department of Early Childhood (CDEC), Early Milestones Colorado (Early Milestones) and dedicated grantees across the state. The CIRCLE Grant Program leveraged federal early childhood stimulus funds to invest nearly \$23 million in innovative, community-led approaches to strengthening Colorado's early childhood ecosystem – a unique approach among states.¹ Within a short timeframe, CDEC and Early Milestones mobilized to distribute millions of dollars in CIRCLE grants to 218 organizations across the state who had developed creative, equity-focused strategies to address systemic early childhood challenges in their communities. In total, these organizations implemented 226 projects that strengthened the early childhood landscape in Colorado.

At each phase of the grantmaking process, leadership, and staff at CDEC and Early Milestones made intentional decisions to prioritize equity and innovation. They ensured communities had the flexibility they needed to design solutions that were responsive to the local challenges they faced. There is much to learn from the CIRCLE Grant Program as Colorado charts a path forward from the pandemic and continues to seek strategies to address ongoing challenges in the early childhood field. The state now has the opportunity to build on the success of CIRCLE and its grantees, laying the foundation for a brighter tomorrow for Colorado's youngest kids and the people who care for them.

¹ SB21-236, Seventy-third General Assembly, 2021 Session. (Colo. 2021). http://leg.colorado.gov/sites/default/files/2021a_236_signed.pdf.

Community Innovation and Resilience for Care and Learning Equity (CIRCLE)

\$22.5M

in funding distributed to support projects reaching **every Colorado county**

226

grants

218

unique grantees

64

projects in rural or frontier communities

CIRCLE grantees included:

97

licensed center-based child care providers

72

community-based nonprofit organizations

20

Early Childhood Councils

12

school districts

11

higher education institutions

9

family child care providers

4

government agencies

1

license-exempt child care program

In total, CIRCLE projects reached:

120,000+

parents or caregivers

75,000

children from birth to kindergarten-age

19,000

early childhood professionals

20,000

infants and toddlers

2,000+

dual language learners

1,000+

immigrant and refugee families

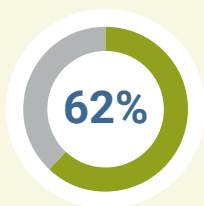


A Visionary Effort in a Changing Early Childhood Landscape

A Global Crisis Exacerbates Early Childhood Challenges

Long before the COVID-19 pandemic gripped Colorado and the world, Colorado's early childhood ecosystem faced barriers to meeting the needs of young children, families and early care and education professionals. Rural and urban communities alike struggled with crippling child care shortages, and families often languished on waitlists for care that could be years long. In the year before the pandemic struck, Colorado's licensed child care settings only had enough capacity to serve approximately two-thirds of young children who likely needed care.² Some families prefer care outside of a licensed setting, such as Family, Friend and Neighbor (FFN) care, yet data suggest that too many families struggled to access the care they need, regardless of the care setting.³ Even when care is available, many families cannot afford it as the cost of child care outpaces housing costs in many communities. Despite the high cost of tuition, providers operate on thin margins, and teacher wages have long been inadequate and left many early childhood educators struggling to meet their own needs.

Pre-Pandemic Snapshot of Colorado's Early Childhood Landscape



The share of Colorado children under age 6 with all parents in the labor force who **could be served in a licensed child care setting** (2019)

\$14,000

The **average annual cost of center-based child care for a toddler** in Colorado (2018)

\$28,687

The **median wage for a child care educator** in Colorado (2019)

Sources: Calculations using Colorado Department of Early Childhood's Colorado Licensed Child Care Facilities Report and the U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey; Child Care Aware; and the Colorado Department of Labor and Employment.

² Analysis of data from the Colorado Department of Early Childhood's Colorado Licensed Child Care Facilities Report and the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey.

³ Colorado Health Institute. (2022). Colorado is facing a child care crisis: New Colorado Health Access Survey data indicate many families struggle to access child care. Retrieved from https://coloradohealthinstitute.org/sites/default/files/file_attachments/CHAS%20Brief%20Child%20Care%20web.pdf.

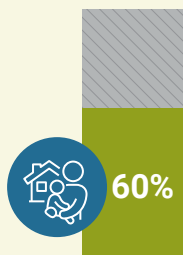
In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated all of these challenges for the early childhood sector — and created new ones. Nearly half of all Colorado families lost employment income in the initial months of the pandemic, with families of color hit particularly hard.⁴ Families with young children faced sudden and drastic changes to their child care arrangements. They scrambled to juggle their jobs and care for their children when stay-at-home orders required child care providers to shut down abruptly. Families with low incomes, families of color, and families who spoke a language other than English were particularly affected by child care struggles during the initial months of the pandemic.⁵

Child care providers — already strained and under-resourced before the pandemic — faced their own uphill battle as they grappled with temporary closures, dramatically reduced enrollment and challenges meeting their own basic needs. A June 2020 Early Milestones survey revealed that nearly 10% of Colorado’s child care providers had closed their doors since March 2020, and enrollment had plummeted by more than half statewide.⁶ Among Colorado’s child care workforce, nearly one-quarter reported being laid off or furloughed, and nearly half reported household income loss. Among FFN care providers, more than half reported experiencing a decrease in their household income as a result of the pandemic.⁷

Support for Colorado’s early childhood sector was urgently needed before the pandemic; once COVID-19 struck, the need for significant investment in the field became imperative.



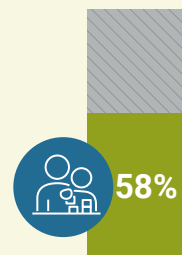
The COVID-19 Pandemic’s Impact on the Early Childhood Ecosystem



The share of Colorado families with young children who had to **change their child care arrangements** early in the pandemic according to research by Early Milestones in 2020.



A June 2020 survey conducted by Early Milestones found that **enrollment among Colorado’s child care providers had plummeted by half** since the pandemic began.



More than half of FFN providers surveyed in 2020 reported they had **experienced a decrease in household income** due to the pandemic.

Sources: Early Milestones Colorado and the Butler Institute for Families, Graduate School of Social Work, University of Denver.

⁴ Delap, S., Franko, M., Nicolau, K., Silva-Padrón, G., & Thornton, C. (2021). Measuring the Impact of COVID-19 on Colorado’s Early Care and Learning Sector. Denver, Colorado: Early Milestones Colorado. Retrieved from <https://earlymilestones.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/COVID-Wave-1-Report-Web.pdf>.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Roberts, A., Chung, P., Franko, M., & Swain, S.R. (2020). Colorado Shines Brighter Preschool Development Grant: Informal child care provider needs assessment survey 2020. Butler Institute for Families, Graduate School of Social Work, University of Denver. Retrieved from <https://dcfs.my.salesforce.com/sfc/p/#410000012srR/a/4N000000i4Y9/XaXE05k0XteCb.zvAgYOPf25m-wi4ItA3DmNX3tn3uw>.

Policy and Funding Changes Reshape Colorado's Early Childhood Landscape

In the midst of the upheaval brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, several turning-point changes were occurring in Colorado's early childhood sector. These shifts would have significant implications for young children, families, and early childhood professionals. Some recent policy changes, such as the creation of a universal preschool program that provides a minimum number of hours of preschool for every 4-year-old in the state, were the culmination of decades of advocacy to elevate the needs of young children and their families. Following the passage of the universal preschool ballot initiative,⁸ advocates and state leaders laid the groundwork for the establishment of Colorado's first-ever cabinet-level department focused specifically on young children, and CDEC was formally established through legislation in spring 2022.⁹ The new department unifies Colorado's early childhood system and oversees programs that help ensure young children, families and early childhood professionals are valued, healthy and thriving.

The infusion of hundreds of millions of dollars in federal pandemic relief funding also altered Colorado's early childhood landscape and resulted in an unprecedented level of new resources for early childhood programs across the state. Colorado invested \$271 million in federal stimulus funds to stabilize the child care sector during the pandemic and make it easier for families to access the resources they needed for their young children. The state directed these stimulus funds to initiatives to reduce child care tuition for families during a time of widespread economic hardship; help child care providers get licensed; incentivize providers to participate in quality improvement programs; and offer scholarships for child care professionals to get their Child Development Associate (CDA) credential or complete free early care and education (ECE) coursework, among other activities.

Amid these monumental shifts and challenges, on-the-ground early childhood leaders and service organizations across the state were hungry for resources to put their ideas into action — and to support young children, their families and the child care providers who helped keep communities afloat during the pandemic. In the spring of 2021, Colorado leaders came together to develop a new approach to supporting the work of early childhood changemakers across the state.



⁸ In 2020, Colorado voters passed Proposition EE. This ballot measure gave a portion of the state tax on tobacco and nicotine products to a universal, voluntary preschool program. The program, Universal Preschool Colorado, was established through House Bill 22-1295.

⁹ House Bill 22-1295 established the Colorado Department of Early Childhood and created the Universal Preschool Colorado program in response to the passage of Proposition EE.

The CIRCLE Story: How the CIRCLE Grant Program Emerged as a Beacon of Hope for Families and Early Childhood Professionals

A Bipartisan Legislative Effort Offers Relief for the Early Childhood Sector

Behind the transformative power of the CIRCLE grants lies a significant investment in Colorado's future. In response to the challenges young children and the people who care for them were facing during the COVID-19 pandemic, Governor Jared Polis and the Colorado General Assembly recognized the urgent need to support Colorado's early childhood field. They took swift action through a bipartisan legislative effort to invest millions of federal and state dollars in the early childhood sector – a critical part of Colorado's economy.

Senate Bill 21-236 was sponsored by Senators Tammy Story and Jerry Sonnenberg and Representatives Kerry Tipper and Tonya Van Beber. It created four new grant programs designed to channel federal pandemic relief funds to support the early care and learning landscape in Colorado as it navigated the ongoing challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁰ Among these four programs was the CIRCLE Grant Program, to which the legislature allocated nearly \$23 million in federal stimulus funding.

Senate Bill 21-236 established the CIRCLE Grant Program to support projects to:



Make child care more affordable



Increase access to care for infants and toddlers



Strengthen child care providers' business practices to make them financially sustainable



Strengthen the health and well-being of families



Boost child care workforce participation



Enhance Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Services Part C and Part B transitions



Contribute to the health and learning of all children, including those with disabilities or developmental delays and dual language learners



The CIRCLE Grant Program leveraged federal early childhood stimulus funds to invest nearly **\$23 million** in **innovative, community-led approaches** to strengthening Colorado's early childhood ecosystem – a unique approach among states.

¹⁰ In addition to the CIRCLE Grant Program, SB21-236 created the Employer-based Child Care Facility Grant Program; the Early Care Education Recruitment and Retention Grant and Scholarship Program; and the Child Care Teacher Salary Grant Program.



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A Unique Partnership Forms to Meet the Early Childhood Landscape's Needs

From its inception, the CIRCLE Grant Program was unique in its structure and approach. It was formed as an innovative partnership between CDEC and Early Milestones, a nonprofit organization that advances success for young children by accelerating innovation, the use of best practices and systemic change. CDEC selected Early Milestones as the trusted partner to distribute the CIRCLE grants on a short timeline, ensuring that funds reached those who needed them most in an agile and equitable manner.

Early in 2022, Early Milestones took on this critical responsibility. The goal was to work quickly to ensure that the early childhood field, along with their community, education, and governmental partners, could access the necessary resources to overcome the urgent challenges they faced. As the selected lead implementing agency and intermediary, Early Milestones worked closely with CDEC to administer the program. Having Early Milestones in this innovative intermediary role allowed for the nimble distribution of grant funds and deeply individualized, hands-on support for grant applicants and grantees, ultimately supporting successful grantee project implementation.



Equity and Innovation in Action: Designing the CIRCLE Grant Program with Community Needs at the Center

The unprecedented nature of pandemic-driven challenges and the disproportionate impact on families of color and families with low incomes necessitated a different approach to grantmaking — one that held innovation and equity as core values and that infused them into every step of the process, from application to implementation and evaluation.

CIRCLE grant implementation decisions made by CDEC and Early Milestones were driven by the need to meet the field where they were. Leadership and staff in both organizations made intentional decisions to structure the application process, funding approach, technical assistance, and other facets of the grant program in a manner that created an equitable and relationship-based experience for each organization along the way.

An application process with equity at its core: From the very start, the application and selection process for CIRCLE grants took steps to prioritize equity and innovation and ensure the funds reached those who were closest to the challenges their community was facing — and thus were best positioned to address them. Key features of the application and selection process included:

- **Highly individualized technical support:** The Early Milestones team helped applicants — some of whom had never applied for a grant — develop and conceptualize their project ideas and provided feedback to help them increase their likelihood of securing funding. They offered one-on-one support to applicants as needed, making more than 250 touchpoints with grantees during the application process. The Early Milestones team connected with applicants using the methods that worked best for them, whether it was via phone calls, text messages, one-on-one meetings, e-mails or office hours. Office hours were also offered outside of regular business hours to ensure staff at early care and education programs could access support.
- **Language accessibility:** Applications were accepted in both English and Spanish, reducing language barriers for applicants serving Colorado's Spanish-speaking communities.
- **Multiple rounds of application review:** The application process for CIRCLE grants was distinctive in that it included three rounds of review. At each round, applications that failed to secure funding were offered targeted support and individualized feedback, including suggestions on how to strengthen their application for the next round and an explanation of why their projects were not chosen for funding in the prior round.
- **Community review process:** An application review was conducted through a community review process in which community leaders and subject matter experts from a variety of early childhood-focused backgrounds participated alongside staff from Early Milestones and CDEC. Final funding decisions were made by Early Milestones and CDEC, considering the merits of the application, geographic distribution, organization type distribution, and project focus area.

Defining Innovation and Equity in the CIRCLE Grant Program

Innovation: Piloting new or novel strategies to address longstanding early childhood challenges.

Equity: Introducing or deepening diversity, equity, and inclusion practices to better serve diverse families, and/or removing barriers to access for historically marginalized children.



The CIRCLE Grant Program
received

965
applications

\$100M
in funding requests

In total, the CIRCLE Grant Program received 965 applications, totaling more than \$100 million in funding requests — far outpacing the interest anticipated by Early Milestones and CDEC.

Early disbursement of funds: The CDEC and Early Milestones teams centered grantees' needs when developing the structure for distributing grant funding. Twenty percent of each grantee's funding was disbursed up front, giving grantees more flexibility and peace of mind than a structure in which all costs are reimbursed after the money has been spent. CDEC and Early Milestones worked together to secure a waiver for this approach, which was unusual among reimbursable grants funded by stimulus efforts. This funding approach was especially critical to the ability of early care and education programs to apply for funds; the tight margins on which many early care and education programs operate meant that many would not have been able to cover implementation costs upfront.

A committed project team: Early Milestones dedicated a full-time Project Director and a full-time Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) Director to the CIRCLE Grant Program. These leaders guided and shepherded a team of seven Project Managers. The Project Managers were responsible for providing technical support for the projects within their portfolios, offering support with monitoring budgets and facilitating budget revisions, supporting and co-leading grantee learning communities and staying apprised of current CIRCLE grantee projects and activities. Nearly 90% of CIRCLE Project Managers reported being in daily e-mail communication with the grantees in their portfolio. The team also included a full-time accounting manager and contracted fiscal support to manage the cost-reimbursable nature of the grant and support grantees through this added layer of complexity.

“

Reimbursable grants are difficult for all programs but especially for smaller programs and family child care home providers. The initial disbursement of funds was imperative to get folks cash in hand to begin the work as quickly as possible!"

- EARLY MILESTONES
PROJECT MANAGER

“

*I loved meeting with a small intimate group of ladies from Colorado Springs. It was great to hear about others' grants, things that are working, and also limitations. Getting ideas from others on building workforce and discussing mental health were highlights for me. It is nice after being on Zoom the entire grant to see beautiful smiling faces and happy joyous voices. Lunch was nice and so love my new book **Bodies Are Cool!** Thanks for hosting!"*

- CIRCLE GRANTEE, REGIONAL
EVENT PARTICIPANT,
COLORADO SPRINGS

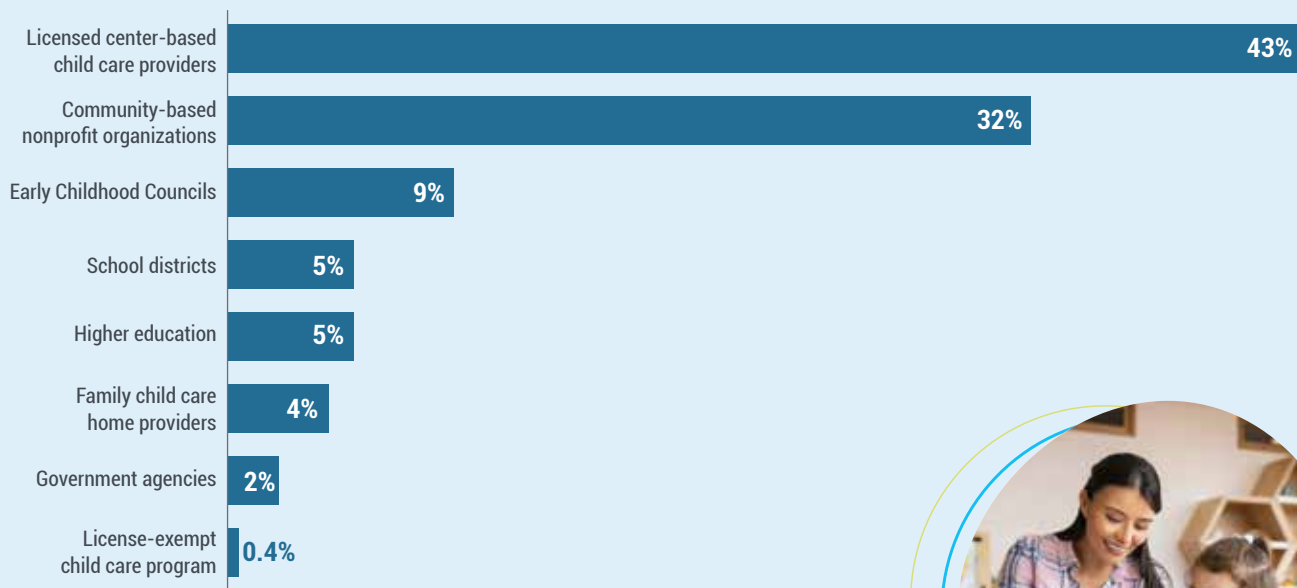
Robust technical assistance and Learning Communities: CDEC and Early Milestones were invested in building the overall capacity of the CIRCLE grantees, ensuring they could continue to be drivers of positive change in their communities after the CIRCLE program ended. Technical assistance (TA) provided to grantees was intentional to build relationships, support innovation and equity, and create a community. Throughout the grant period, Early Milestones offered eight optional webinars for grantees on topics ranging from grant writing to communications strategy to how to advance racial justice in early childhood.

Early Milestones also hosted and facilitated quarterly Learning Communities, which served as gatherings of grantees whose projects addressed similar challenges. These Learning Communities created a grantee network and fostered partnerships, providing opportunities for grantees to learn from each other and build their individual and organizational capacity. A series of in-person regional events also offered grantees the opportunity to connect in person, meet staff from Early Milestones and CDEC and take part in a book fair featuring children's books and professional texts related to early care and education; diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI); and leadership.

Community-Driven Solutions to Meet Systemic Challenges: How CIRCLE Projects Responded to the Diverse Needs of Colorado Communities

Following the application process, 226 CIRCLE grants were awarded to 218 unique grantees. Grant recipients included early care and education providers, early childhood councils, nonprofit organizations and local government entities. Together, these organizations touched every county in the state, reaching young children, families and early childhood professionals in all corners of Colorado. More than 60 projects focused on rural and frontier communities, where families often face compounding barriers to accessing the support they need for their young children.

CIRCLE GRANTEES SPANNED SEVERAL DIFFERENT ORGANIZATIONAL TYPES, WITH LICENSED CHILD CARE PROVIDERS COMPRISING THE LARGEST GROUP.



CDEC and Early Milestones were intentional in designing the CIRCLE Grant Program to ensure that grantees could pursue solutions that were responsive to the needs of their unique communities — letting those closest to the challenges be the ones to lead toward solutions. Each grant recipient took on specific early childhood system challenges worsened by the pandemic, with innovative and thoughtful projects at the core of their work. Grantees harnessed their resilience and creativity to implement projects that expanded access to child care for infants and toddlers, offered mentorship and coaching opportunities for child care providers, connected early childhood professionals to peer networks and mental health support, and supported families and professionals in navigating the child care system, among dozens of other innovative efforts.



CIRCLE grantees touched **every county in the state**, reaching children, families and early childhood professionals in all corners of Colorado. More than 60 projects focused on **rural or frontier communities**.

CIRCLE Grants in Action: Stories of Impact

Each of the CIRCLE grant-funded projects created ripple effects of positive change in their communities, and each has an inspiring story that could help inform the future of early childhood investments in Colorado. On the following pages, are just a few examples of the incredible work accomplished by the field of CIRCLE grantees, presented with the recognition that every CIRCLE project led to beneficial changes for the children, families and professionals they served.



Building a Roadmap:

The Efshar Project Charts a Path Toward Improved Educator Compensation and Benefits

Denver and Boulder counties



The Efshar Project was created to build Jewish identity and ensure quality early learning experiences at Jewish ECE centers. Like most child care programs across the state, the 12 ECE centers in The Efshar Project's network have experienced significant challenges with recruiting and retaining educators. All of its partner schools wanted to increase educator compensation and offer competitive benefits, including retirement funds — but all lacked the ability to offer higher salaries and competitive benefits in a sustainable way.

The Efshar Project used their CIRCLE grant to strengthen the ECE workforce and business practices of seven child care programs in Denver and Boulder counties through targeted workforce recruitment and retention strategies. Over the course of a year, they developed a roadmap for a network of ECE schools to collectively address challenges around workforce recruitment and retention. They built on pilot programs that increase access to career mentorship, coaching and communities of practice. They also completed a cost study to understand the true cost of care across their network of ECE centers and to identify strategies to reallocate resources to staff.

As a result of their work, 78% to 90% of school leaders reported increased support to address workforce issues in the spring of 2023. Nearly 70% of educators were involved in at least one pedagogical and leadership core offerings provided by The Efshar Project.

Beyond the Four Walls:

The Children's World School Opens the Door to Outside Play for All Kids

Lakewood



Outside play is a vital part of childhood. It provides children with opportunities to move their bodies, experience new sights, sounds and sensations, and build new skills. However, outdoor play spaces are not always designed and built to be accessible for children with disabilities and children with developmental delays. Recognizing the importance of outdoor play for all kids, the Children's World School — a play-based preschool in Lakewood — used their CIRCLE grant to ensure equitable access for children with disabilities and children with developmental delays by making the outdoor space at their school safe, accessible and inclusive for all children.

At the time they applied for their CIRCLE grant, the closest playground designed for children with disabilities was located more than two miles away, making it inaccessible to many families in their community. The Children's World School set up their redesigned play spaces to include important developmental elements of outdoor education, including sensory materials, water play, creative art materials and building materials. A closing survey of families and community members found that 100% believed that the new play spaces were more inclusive and accessible than the previous playgrounds.

CIRCLE Grants in Action: Stories of Impact

Cultivating Connections:

ABC House Bilingual Preschool
Mentors a New Provider and
Meets a Critical Need in the
Community

Aurora



ABC House Bilingual Preschool knows that sometimes the most impactful changes are made one person at a time. As a family child care home in Aurora, ABC House Bilingual Preschool offers care in Spanish and English for up to 12 children. This provider used CIRCLE grant funds to support her program aide through the process of opening her own in-home child care program. By the end of the project, the aide had opened her own bilingual child care home with a large license, serving an additional 12 children and expanding access to care in the community.

Another important goal of ABC House Bilingual Preschool's CIRCLE grant was improving access to child care for dual language learners and ensuring the children they care for are proud of their ability to speak Spanish. ABC House also aimed to remove barriers to care for families who prefer part-time care — which can be challenging for in-home providers to offer and difficult for families to find. Support from the CIRCLE grant allowed the provider to pilot a part-time care model, and the provider was ultimately able to make part-time care a permanent part of their offerings to families. During the grant period, ABC House Bilingual Preschool was able to serve seven children from families that speak a language other than English and 16 families who needed part-time care, filling a vital need in the community.

Expanding Access to the Great Outdoors: AdventureMe Supports Development Through Inclusive Nature Play

Black Forest



As a nature-based school, AdventureMe understands the magic that can happen when young children are given the freedom to explore their natural environment. The licensed micro-forest and nature school serving children ages 3 to 5 in El Paso County's Black Forest community used their CIRCLE grant to expand access to outdoor and therapeutic play for children who require additional support. Their therapeutic program helped children with additional needs build critical social-emotional skills in a natural environment through small class sizes and the support of specialized therapists, including an occupational therapist and a speech therapist.

Outdoor occupational therapy is gaining ground in the U.S., but sessions are typically conducted individually without the incorporation of peers. AdventureMe's innovative approach, however, ensured children with additional needs could explore their surroundings alongside their peers, creating a more inclusive experience for all children. In a survey administered at the end of the program, all families reported seeing improvements in their children, and 100% of families enrolled in the initial session signed their children up for the second session. AdventureMe also chose to pursue a nonprofit status because of their CIRCLE grant experience, with the goal of continuing to support this project in future years.

CIRCLE Grants in Action: Stories of Impact

Investing in the Workforce and Nurturing the Whole Child:

Caring Kids Preschool Creates a Pathway to Early Childhood Careers and Supports Families' Basic Needs

Rifle



Child care providers across Colorado struggle to meet the demand for care in their communities, in large part due to workforce challenges — and these challenges are particularly acute in rural areas of the state. Located in Rifle, Caring Kids Preschool offers safe, nurturing and affordable child care for children ages 6 weeks to 7 years old. They used their CIRCLE grant to increase access to care for children ages birth to 3, boost workforce preparation and support the mental health and well-being of children and families.

Caring Kids Preschool recognized that investing in entry-level staff and training them through mentorship and hands-on classroom experience are key strategies for reducing workforce shortages in the child care field. They developed an apprenticeship program that mentored and provided on-the-job training to six apprentices earning \$17 an hour, above the median entry-level wage of \$14 per hour for child care educators in Colorado.¹¹ By the end of the grant program, five of the six apprentices would remain employed at the center, and one planned to remain in the child care field in a different capacity. As a result of the apprenticeship program and the increased staff capacity it provided, Caring Kids Preschool was able to add 18 more child care slots — a significant amount in a small, rural community like Rifle. The center was able to have all of its classrooms open and operating at full capacity, without any disruption due to staff shortages. Moving forward, they will partner with an apprenticeship program through Colorado Mesa University and Western Colorado Community College that will provide funding for their entry-level employees, as well as funding for mentorship.

Caring Kids Preschool also created a Community Liaison Consultant position to improve mental, physical and social-emotional health of families with young children in the community. They were able to offer some type of assistance to 100% of the families enrolled at the center, including diapers and wipes, access to technology, and food and clothing for families in need.

¹¹ Median entry level wage data from the Colorado Department of Labor and Employment's Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics, 2022.

Community-Led Change: MANAUS Lays the Groundwork for a Local Early Childhood Funding Stream

Roaring Fork Valley



MANAUS is a social justice nonprofit based in the Roaring Fork Valley that works in partnership with others to help create sustainable solutions that further equity within the community. In the Roaring Fork Valley, as in many communities, demand for early care and education programs far outpaces supply. In response to the challenges families face in accessing the services they need for their young children, MANAUS used their CIRCLE grant to support an inclusive community planning process. This allowed them to develop strategies for increasing access to early care and education for young children in the Roaring Fork Valley. During the grant period, they hosted planning meetings with strong and diverse representation from coalition partners, completed a viable and meaningful service plan and solicited feedback from the community to ensure the plan is responsive to the challenges families and child care providers are facing. This process has laid the groundwork for MANAUS, together with its coalition of partners, to work toward passing Colorado's first special tax district dedicated to funding early care and education. They hope to gain approval to put the measure on the region's ballots in the fall of 2024. Funding generated from the ballot initiative would be transformative for the young children, families, providers and employers in communities from Parachute to Aspen.

CIRCLE Grants in Action: Stories of Impact

Meeting the Unique Needs of Family, Friend and Neighbor Providers: Colorado Statewide Parent Coalition Helps FFN Caregivers Work Toward Licensure

Front Range



Family, Friend and Neighbor (FFN) providers are the most common source of non-parental child care, according to national research, and thus they play a central role in the child care ecosystem. Colorado Statewide Parent Coalition (CSPC) is a nonprofit organization that builds power and supports a movement in marginalized communities of families and child care providers. It operates the Providers Advancing School Outcomes (PASO) program, which provides culturally and linguistically relevant training for FFN providers of color through a virtual learning platform, home visits and coaching.

The organization used its CIRCLE grant to support workforce preparation and increase access to child care for infants and toddlers and dual language learners by increasing the number of high-quality child care spots from culturally and linguistically diverse providers. Using their CIRCLE Grant, CSPC informed 73 FFN providers in the CSPC PASO course about licensing opportunities and supported 37 providers to begin the licensing or qualified exemption process. At the conclusion of the grant period, one provider had received their license, two received qualified exemptions and more than 30 providers had applied for their license and received materials to support their space.

"The people in the problem understand the need best": Good Food Collective Harnesses the Community's Wisdom to Improve Early Childhood Services for Latinx Kids

La Plata County



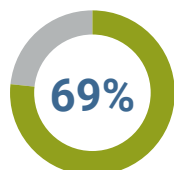
Families in La Plata County face a dearth of child care options that offer culturally and linguistically relevant care for Spanish-speaking or Latinx families. Good Food Collective — a nonprofit organization that addresses food security, food justice and equity in Southwest Colorado — applied for CIRCLE support to create a Child Care Coalition.

Envisioned as a cross-sector, community-led working group, the Coalition will work to create systematic change in early childhood education and care to support dual language learners, cultural competence and healthy families. As part of their work to build the coalition from the ground up, Good Food Collective hosted presenters to train community members on essential knowledge related to child care, language justice, and culturally relevant education models. Over the course of the grant period, they completed a needs assessment for Latinx early care and education in La Plata County and recruited nine members for the coalition. Good Food Collective is actively working to identify more partners who can contribute to a strategic plan for better serving Latinx kids in Southwest Colorado communities.

How CIRCLE Strengthened Grantee Organizations and Fostered Partnerships

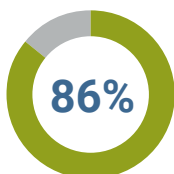
Building grantee capacity was a core component of the CIRCLE Grant Program's mission. Here is how grantees report being impacted by their participation in the grant program.

CIRCLE grants fostered new partnerships in Colorado's early childhood field.



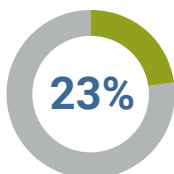
of grantees reported developing new partnerships through participation in CIRCLE. Among those who reported developing new partnerships, the average number of new partnerships formed was five.

Implementing CIRCLE projects helped grantees feel more comfortable applying for grant funding in the future.



of grantees report being comfortable or very comfortable applying for additional grant funding as a result of implementing their CIRCLE project.

Many grantees have secured funding to help ensure the sustainability of their projects.



of grantees report having secured additional funding to implement aspects of their project beyond the grant period.

CIRCLE grantees are committed to continuing the important work begun through CIRCLE.



of those grantees who have not yet secured additional funding, have plans to do so.

“

The thing I am most proud of from this project is that fact that it was our first major grant and we took away a lot of learning experiences. If and when the time comes to complete another grant, we are going to know to plan better and know what our actual capacity is to handle something of this level.”

- CIRCLE GRANTEE,
EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION
PROGRAM, EL PASO COUNTY



Looking Ahead: Lessons for Future Early Childhood Investments

In a short timeframe, the CIRCLE Grant Program has set the stage for larger systemic change under the leadership of the CDEC. The commitment of CDEC and Early Milestones leadership and staff, combined with the passionate efforts of early childhood professionals across the state, is building a brighter future for Colorado children and the people who care for them. Every child deserves equitable access to high-quality early care and education, and the projects developed and led by the CIRCLE grantees have propelled Colorado closer to that reality.

In reflecting back on the CIRCLE Grant Program, it is important to note that the fall of 2023 marks an inflection point for the early childhood field in Colorado and across the nation. The federal child care relief funding that buoyed thousands of Colorado early care and education programs during the COVID-19 pandemic expired at the end of September, with potentially dire consequences for families with young children and early childhood professionals. These funds helped child care centers and family child care providers stay open during the pandemic, kept child care educators employed, and ensured families could rely on stable care for their children while they worked.¹² In a survey of child care providers in Colorado, nearly half of all providers surveyed reported their programs will have to raise tuition when stabilization funds run out.¹³ More than one in five reported their program would have to cut wages or be unable to sustain wage increases implemented with federal relief funds.¹⁴ The loss of these funds has the potential to erase much of the progress Colorado and other states have made toward building a stronger early childhood system in recent years.

As Colorado leaders chart a path forward from the pandemic and build on the recent landmark policy changes in the state's early childhood sector, lessons learned from the CIRCLE Grant Program can point the way toward effective strategies for strengthening the early childhood ecosystem. Key findings from the development and implementation of the CIRCLE Grant Program include:

1

CIRCLE built a robust portfolio of innovative, community-driven solutions to persistent systemic early childhood challenges. Many of these solutions have the potential to be replicated in other communities or scaled up statewide. Many of the 226 CIRCLE-funded projects align closely with CDEC's strategic goals. These projects could be integrated within the department's portfolio to support sustainability and scale. State leaders should build on the success many grantees experienced and look to them for strategies to expand infant and toddler care, offer support to providers to boost their well-being, or remove barriers to workforce recruitment and retention.

2

Providing communities with the flexibility and freedom to develop the solutions that are right for them is key to success. Colorado is an incredibly diverse state — in terms of geography, race and ethnicity, and languages spoken, among other factors. What works in one community won't always be successful in another. The most effective solution to a challenge will always come from the people who are closest to the problem. Early childhood community leaders are well-versed in the systemic challenges facing the early childhood landscape and how they play out in each of their communities. The CDEC and Early Milestones teams trusted that grantees could develop solutions that were responsive to their community needs and equipped them with the resources and flexibility they needed to implement them.

¹² Administration for Children and Families, Office of Child Care. (n.d.). Colorado ARP Child Care Stabilization Fact Sheet. Retrieved from https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/occ/Colorado_ARP_Child_Care_Stabilization_Fact_Sheet.pdf.

¹³ National Association for the Education of Young Children. (2022). Uncertainty ahead means instability now: Why families, children, educators, businesses, and states need Congress to fund child care: Colorado. Retrieved from https://www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/globally-shared/downloads/PDFs/our-work/public-policy-advocacy/colorado_naeyc_2022_fall_survey_0.pdf.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Looking Ahead: Lessons for Future Early Childhood Investments

3

Funding opportunities should ensure timelines are sufficient and match the scale of the grant's intended outcomes. The timeline for CIRCLE grantees, from application to completing projects, was very tight and put them at risk of not meeting their goals. By the time state funds were appropriated, grantees only had nine to 12 months to launch, implement and wrap up their projects. Similar grants in the future could have longer timelines to better support grantees' ability to innovate and develop equitable solutions to their communities' challenges. They could also center grantee needs in the funding structure. Cost-reimbursable structures are challenging for on-the-ground programs who operate on tight margins. A funding structure in which grantees receive a portion of their funding at the beginning of projects can help ensure their success.

4

Partnering with an experienced intermediary organization allows for more individualized support and an equitable, relationship-based grantmaking process. Using an experienced intermediary like Early Milestones to administer CIRCLE grants allowed for the nimble distribution of funds, which was especially important given the brief timeline for distributing and expending grant funds. Partnering with an experienced intermediary also allowed for deeply individualized support for grantees, from application to implementation and evaluation, ensuring their needs were centered throughout the process and helping promote the success of their innovative projects.

The CIRCLE Grant Program, a critical investment at a critical time, has strengthened the landscape of early childhood services in Colorado through partnerships with dedicated leaders in dozens of communities. Moving forward, Colorado has the opportunity to build on the successes of the program to create an even brighter future for every young child in the state.

For more information about the CIRCLE grants, please visit: earlymilestones.org/circle or scan the QR code below.

To learn more about the Colorado Department of Early Childhood federal stimulus programs, visit: cdec.colorado.gov/federal-stimulus-funding



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Some grantees expressed that they had these ideas for years and never had the funding and even belief that it could ever be done. CIRCLE gave opportunities to try new things. I feel the lessons learned from CIRCLE are the most important aspect. Many organizations could feel much more prepared to implement if something like CIRCLE ever comes again.”

- CIRCLE PROJECT MANAGER



EARLY MILESTONES
COLORADO



COLORADO
Department of Early Childhood