

**BOETTCHER CATALYST GRANT**

**Raising Rural Voices to Strengthen  
Universal Preschool Implementation  
Report**

June 2024



**EARLY MILESTONES**  
COLORADO

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ADVANCING OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHILDREN'S SUCCESS

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## Acknowledgments

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In Fall 2023, Colorado officially launched the Universal Preschool (UPK) Program. Every Colorado child is eligible for at least 15 hours of funded preschool the year before entering kindergarten. Families can qualify for additional hours depending on qualifying factors. In the first year, families saved an average of \$600 a month on child care costs.<sup>1</sup>

With the generous support of the Boettcher Foundation, Early Milestones Colorado (Early Milestones) conducted an interview series to understand the rural experience of Universal Preschool implementation. Rural child care providers and families face unique barriers when participating in statewide programs. Some barriers include transportation, access to the internet and technology, lack of services, and systems that do not align to rural communities' needs. This report delves into the successes and challenges of Universal Preschool in rural Colorado and provides a set of recommendations for strengthening the program for rural communities in the years to come.

In Spring 2024, Early Milestones conducted 24 interviews with early childhood providers and Local Coordinating Organizations (LCOs) representing 32 counties with rural communities across the state. In each of the four rural LCO catchment areas, Early Milestones interviewed at least one Family Child Care Home (FCCH), Head Start grantee, school district, community-based center, and LCO.

All interviews will remain anonymous, and Early Milestones will not share the names of those interviewed or their organizational affiliation. Due to the small number of providers in rural areas, the names of the organization's counties will also not be shared. Direct quotes are indicated in italics throughout the report.

*"I do appreciate you letting our small school have a voice, because it definitely is hard. If there are things we want to say, I don't think our voice is really going to matter as much as the city."*

## Successes of Implementation

The three most mentioned successes when interviewees were asked about their experience with Universal Preschool were the strength of community relationships, the impact of the funding, and the support of their LCO.

### 1.) Community Relationships

Many interviewees specifically mentioned that their community banded together during the first year of Universal Preschool to help spread the word, provide services, recruit more providers, and support child care programs. Providers and LCOs mentioned that implementing a system like Universal Preschool was successful because they had already established trusting relationships, navigated programs like Colorado Preschool Program

(CPP), and had strong roots in their community. Without that established trust, some believed that providers and families would not have readily signed up for Universal Preschool. A primary related concern was losing trust with families if they could not meet community expectations for Universal Preschool. Many named this strength as the reason their community had high levels of participation in Universal Preschool, and many interviewees stated they were fully able to meet the needs of their community in the first year of implementation.

*“We're really embedded in the community. We know who has young children so we can help them navigate the system and the new application process. They felt like they were talking to someone they knew. And so there was a confidence level there.”*

*“We are a hands-on kind of community and have a lot of people that need hands-on.”*

*“One of the great things about living in a rural community that's small is we get to have very, very tight knit close relationships with a hundred percent of our licensed centers.”*

## **2.) Impactful Funding**

Interviewees spoke about the impact that Universal Preschool funding had on providers, families, and their community. They mentioned that the funding was able to ease the burden on families who were struggling, help providers maintain or expand operations, reach more families, and invest in the community. Family child care homes in particular spoke about their gratitude for being included and the benefit of the funding to their programs. Providers brought up that they did not have to spend hours chasing grants, they could hire substitutes, and could provide additional services to children with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs).

*“Where we're at is a very high-cost area. With COVID, everything went up and it made it very financially difficult for a lot of our parents. And this has relieved them and that has been a big bonus for our community.”*

*“[This] level of funding in our small rural community has never, ever happened, and not even close to anything else on that scale.”*

*“[It helped] those families that kind of hit the cusp, on paper they look like they make too much money, but if you were to talk to them in real life, they are struggling a lot.”*

*“Home providers have never been able to participate in Colorado Preschool Program, and this was something I think is amazing that we actually got to participate in this. It's nice to be acknowledged that our work that we do here is the same as a center or a school district.”*

### 3.) LCO Support

Another success that most providers mentioned was the support of their LCO. Many providers brought up that their LCO provided high levels of guidance throughout the first year and made a huge impact in the success of their Universal Preschool experience. Providers spoke highly about how their LCO helped them understand UPK processes, assisted with registration issues, and supported them as they navigated funding procedures.

*“This first year sounds like it was really dreadful around the state. For some people, it was not for us. [Our LCO] was terrific. [They were] right there helping us through it. I really can't say enough about how that helped.”*

*“I've always had a real strong relationship with the LCO. I've worked with them in the past. They're great support in navigating the UPK and giving that support that's needed.”*

*“I don't think we could have been as successful that first year with the implementation of UPK without [our LCO]. There were a lot of moving parts and [they were] able to help providers and myself navigate through those and fix things when things went awry.”*

## Challenges of Implementation

The primary challenges that impeded implementation of Universal Preschool in rural communities were the registration process, communication about the program, mixed delivery difficulties, and transportation and technology barriers.

### 1.) Registration

The majority of interviewees voiced frustration with the BridgeCare registration process. Many raised the point that the process was not designed for rural communities, especially communities with only one provider. Several providers noted that some families experienced so many difficulties with the process that they opted out of participating. The primary challenges centered around the number of steps in the process, the inability of the provider to make changes if families made a mistake, and technical glitches including matches being deleted or not being able to find applications.

*“Because we are rural, because we're small, these are our kids. We know who they are. We know their families. We've had all their siblings. People know us. People want to be in our program. The parent frustration with their saying, what on earth is going on? I tried to register, and I had this problem, I had that problem, and I haven't been accepted. And the inability to fix anything on our end, that about made me crazy.”*

*“I understand why they're doing it in the cities, but it makes no sense for us.”*

*“They just, they gave up. Family after family. [They said] this is too much.”*

## **2.) Communication About Universal Preschool**

A number of those interviewed also named challenges with communication about Universal Preschool. Providers mentioned they were not aware of what communication was sent to the parents and LCOs did not know what communication was sent to the providers. Many felt that the outreach about Universal Preschool was not reaching those most in need of services, including marginalized and unhoused families in rural areas. Providers also mentioned the lack of availability of resources in languages other than English. Others felt their feedback was not being listened to.

*“It was hard to get some of the parents to sign up because they didn't know what it was. I don't think it was well explained and it was just pushed out. Especially in a small community. So, we did have some reservations and we had to work through with some of our families.”*

*“They're [Colorado Department of Early Childhood] expecting that you see these immediately on their timelines and their expectations that you can deliver this data to them is very unrealistic. [Providers] don't check email until eight o'clock at night and maybe they've missed the deadline and it's not coming to them and their native language.”*

*“A lack on the [Colorado Department of Early Childhood] side [is support] for the Spanish speaking community. They don't have translators or emails don't go out in Spanish. They're definitely missing the marketing on that aspect.”*

## **3.) Mixed Delivery**

Another primary concern was the lack of guidance about the [mixed delivery](#) system. Mixed delivery systems spread funding across a variety of different program and provider types to ensure high-quality care.

Interviewees reported families needing to make difficult decisions when it came to their children with IEPs, given the smaller number of providers in rural areas. Some providers mentioned that they were not sure how to legally contract for special education services and others gave examples of families selecting full-time programs instead of programs that could provide special education services. In some communities, the school district is the only provider that can provide special education services, which puts working families in a bind since the programs are not year-round.

*“They had to choose whether they meet their family's needs or meet their child's needs and have to move them to a different school where they weren't comfortable.”*

*“Mixed delivery has kind of been killed by UPK in our community.”*

*“For a working family who's under an IEP who's trying to access this program, they're really getting the short end of the stick.”*

*“I had another mom who said, if I [go to the school district], I'm going to have to quit my job.”*

*“I am highly concerned that we have families that are declining Head Start services and special education services. For an under-resourced family, or for a family that has a child that's been diagnosed with a developmental delay, [families] decline those services and attend a program that maybe better meet [their] hours.”*

#### **4.) Transportation and Technology**

The majority of those interviewed named transportation and technology as the two biggest barriers facing rural families participating in Universal Preschool. Families often must travel far distances to get to a provider. Many interviewees mentioned that there was no broadband in their community, and that some families do not have internet access where they live.

*“It's challenging for families when there is one provider who is offering Universal Preschool, but they're 45 minutes to an hour's drive away.”*

*“Transportation's another huge thing, especially in rural communities. There is no funding to get UPK kids to preschool.”*

*“In our mountain schools, cell service does not exist all the way up the canyon. [Families] can't just pull up their phone and go on the application and check it. And because the application requires them to go in multiple times, they can't just apply and get in. They have to apply, they have to confirm that they've applied, they have to match, then they have to accept their match, and then they have to finish the enrollment. There are too many steps.”*

Other challenges that interviewees mentioned were:

- **Liability Insurance:** Some Family Child Care Homes brought up the difficulty in attaining liability insurance. *“In this rural community, there aren't many insurance providers, or they won't insure you, or you can't even think about getting a million-dollar policy.”*

- **Capacity and Availability:** Many of those interviewed expressed concern about the lack of full-time options and spots open in their community. *“While Universal Pre-K has reached more overall total children, it has reached far fewer at-risk kids.”*
- **LCO Support for Family Child Care Homes:** Half of the Family Child Care Homes interviewed felt their LCO did not provide sufficient support, especially when marketing different programs. *“They are not doing any outreach as far as shared services. I think that shows the inability to show home providers as educational settings.”*

## Recommendations and Next Steps to Strengthen Implementation for Rural Communities

Each interviewee was asked for their recommendations on how Universal Preschool could be strengthened for rural communities. The top three responses related to direct enrollment, technology support, and funding.

### 1.) Direct Enrollment

The majority of those interviewed mentioned that direct enrollment would strengthen Universal Preschool implementation in their area. They suggested that the registration process should be simplified to include fewer steps. Many brought up that they should at least be able to accept a match on behalf of a family in their program due to internet and accessibility concerns. Some interviewed advocated for more local control like the K-12 system.

*“I think the other piece that was challenging is that we weren't able to just directly refer families to get them enrolled. We're a rural community and a lot of our families don't have internet access if they're in the outlying parts of our county.”*

*“That's still my number one thing, is let us register our own kids and we can put them in the system and report to you. Our kids are going to come to our program. They live here, they're going to come here. This is the only option. I understand on the front range there are people competing for programs. It has just been a nightmare for us. All of that has been very frustrating.”*

### 2.) Funding

While most of those interviewed said the funding has been impactful, they also recognized the need for additional funding to provide other critical services. The number one support mentioned was mental health services. Rural providers raised the need for funding to



specifically address increased mental health concerns. Additional funding needs were related to transportation for rural children, curriculum requirements, and LCO operations. Some of those interviewed also requested more clarity on braided funding for Head Start and Universal Preschool.

*“We had the biggest increase in behaviors and social concerns from second grade down that we’ve ever seen. These are our COVID kiddos. These are our families that are struggling. If we want to make a difference with young children, we should [spend] on mental health, on training for teachers.”*

### **3.) Technology Support**

Many of those interviewed spoke about the need to better support families through the process, especially with technology. In some communities, they mentioned that grandparents are often the primary caregivers for the children. They might not have access to internet and their knowledge of how to use technology can be limited. Some recommended having registration events with a tablet and a hotspot, paired with the ability to directly enroll families. Interviewees mentioned that when families are unsure about how to fill out the application, it creates errors that take weeks or even months to resolve.

*“We can get them all the way through the first part. We can provide iPads, we can do open houses, we can go up to the schools and meet them there. But it isn't enough if I can't get back to them to sign in. And then when they do get back to sign in and the platform doesn't work, they're not going to keep trying.”*

Other recommendations include:

- **Responsive Communication and Feedback Loops:** Some of those interviewed expressed frustration that their feedback seemed to be ignored and requested more responsive communication.
- **Language Access:** Many interviewees raised the need for resources translated into other languages, including the application, provider agreement, and the provider and family handbooks. The mostly commonly requested language was Spanish, but some interviewees mentioned that families needed access to the application in other languages.
- **Relationship Building:** Some spoke of their desire for more focus on relationship-building across the system to develop trust and rapport. Tensions were mentioned between different types of providers and entities, and in order to work together effectively those needed to be addressed. *“You got to build relationships first.”*

- **Mixed Delivery:** A number of those interviewed brought up that the mixed delivery system needs to be better clarified. *“I know we are allowed to do that with UPK. The problem is, I don't have any of the rules that we have to follow.”*
- **Impact on Three-Year-Olds:** Many of those interviewed expressed concern that three-year-olds were getting left behind by Universal Preschool and recommended that there be more research on this topic.
- **Food Insecurity:** Some of those interviewed brought up the increased needs families are experiencing and want more ability to help with food insecurity. *“It just amazes me how much food scarcity is really affecting a lot of these parents.”*
- **Family, Friend, and Neighbor Support:** A few of those interviewed mentioned that FFN care is widely used in their communities. They recommended supporting FFNs and helping them get licensed to relieve capacity issues.

## Conclusion

As rural communities are unique, so was the rural experience of implementing Universal Preschool. Some providers spoke highly of their experience, while others had more difficulty navigating the program. A common theme was that statewide programs are built for urban areas, not rural communities. Statewide programs tend to assume that those participating have access to the internet, technology, transportation, and services such as special education and mental health support. As the Universal Preschool Program enters its second year, there is the opportunity to refine the program with rural experiences in mind.

*“It's gone really well. It's been great to have that support. Like we've talked about the LCO's been amazing, the children, the families. It's been really good.”*

*“The challenges have been too many to count, honestly. I get that it applies to big city Denver, but the rest of us were doing just fine.”*

*“There's definitely been big improvements. There was such a lack of information, even from a provider standpoint in the first year that just having the experience from a first year to the second year. I feel so much better getting into this next year and what I'm going to be able to have and provide for these children.”*