

# Instructional Practice

Colorado Universal Preschool **Quality Standards** | Brief 4 of 4 | June 2025

## Why It Matters

High-quality instructional practice supports whole child development and helps children learn key skills that set them up for success in school and everyday life.<sup>1</sup> This quality standard addresses the learning experiences offered to children in preschool.

## What's Required

Preschool providers must use a learning approach that: 1) aligns with the [Colorado Early Learning & Development Guidelines](#) (Guidelines), 2) uses assessment to inform instruction, 3) is culturally, developmentally, and linguistically appropriate, and 4) is inclusive of diverse needs for individuals. As long as these four essential criteria are met, preschool providers may choose the learning approach that works best for the children they serve. The table below defines these four essential criteria.



CRITERIA	DEFINITION
<b>Aligns with the Guidelines</b>	This means the learning approach addresses each domain of early learning in the Guidelines, which are complementary to and aligned with Colorado's academic standards.
<b>Uses assessment to inform instruction</b>	This means the learning approach uses developmentally appropriate methods to gather information about children's learning and development, for the purpose of informing decisions about activities, materials, and individualization.
<b>Is culturally, developmentally, and linguistically appropriate</b>	This means the learning approach provides an environment where experiences are meaningful, relevant, and based on a child's individually identified strengths and needs, interests, cultural background, family history, home language, and structure.
<b>Is inclusive of diverse needs for individuals</b>	This means the learning approach includes opportunities to individualize based on children's strengths and needs, either to make activities and materials more accessible or more challenging, or adapt them in another way that best meets the child's needs.

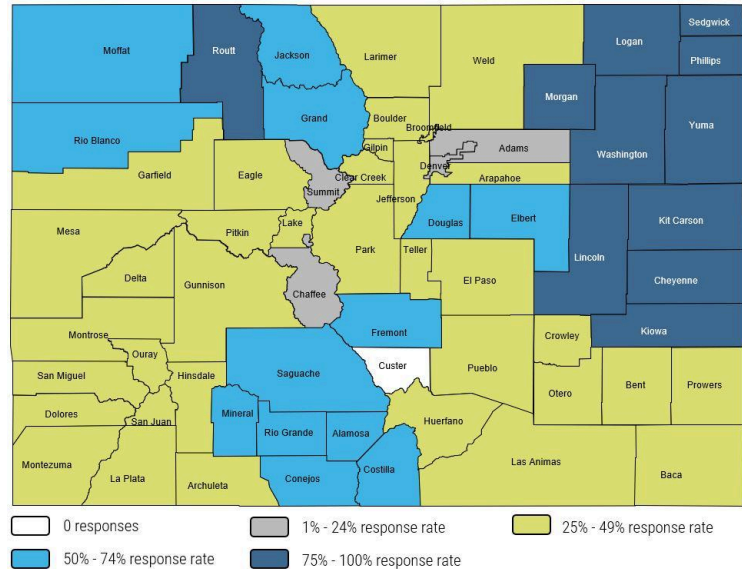
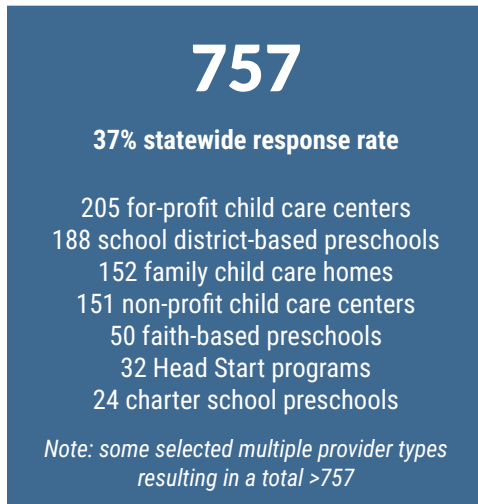
Quality of classroom interactions and environments support learning and development in preschool settings. Research shows that on-site observation by appropriately trained observers using valid and reliable observation tools is a critical part of quality assessment and improvement, so the quality standards require preschool providers to receive an independent observation at least every 3 years that measures the quality of the 1) adult-child and child-child interactions and 2) overall learning environment, including student and staff supportive services. Preschool providers receiving an ECERS-3 observation of their classroom through Colorado Shines are already meeting this requirement.

<sup>1</sup> Edwards, S. (2021). [Process quality, curriculum and pedagogy in early childhood education and care](#). OECD Education Working Papers, No. 247.

## Provider Quality Self-Reports

In August 2024, the Colorado Department of Early Childhood (CDEC) invited all 2,045 preschool providers participating in the 2024-25 school year to complete a voluntary online self-report. The form asked about their Instructional Practices. The CDEC also asked the 32 Local Coordinating Organizations to help spread the word. The self-report form was open for four weeks.

A total of 757 preschool providers from 63 of Colorado's 64 counties completed the self-report. These providers represented a wide range of preschool settings.



## WHAT PROVIDERS SAID

These findings reflect what preschool providers reported about their own practices. The information was not verified. Because participation was voluntary, this information should not be seen as a full picture of the Universal Preschool Program. The goal of reviewing the 2024-25 responses was to support resource development, not to assess quality.

Providers were asked to describe their learning approach. They were not responsible for ensuring that their learning approaches met the Instructional Practice standard. A significant finding was the difference between how providers classified their learning approach, compared with their descriptive self-report. Learning approaches were organized into three categories:

1. **Published, whole-child curricula:** includes curricula that address all domains of early learning and development, as defined in the Guidelines. This category does not include home-grown or domain-specific curricula.
2. **Validated learning approaches:** includes learning approaches that require a provider to submit documentation to a third party for validation. For example, providers participating in Head Start or accredited by organizations like the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) or the American Montessori Society (AMS) are required to submit documentation or undergo monitoring, to verify they meet that organization's standards. If those standards meet Colorado Preschool Program requirements, providers should not be required to duplicate efforts.



3. **Independent learning approaches:** offers a pathway for providers using independently developed curricula or a unique blend of domain-specific curricula to meet the requirements. This is a key component of a system designed to recognize Colorado providers' strengths and values, while still assuring the quality standards are being met.

A flexible approach to Instructional Practice is supported by research. The National Academy of Sciences reports that all-in-one curricula are not required for a positive impact on children's academic and social-emotional skills. In fact, research demonstrates the effectiveness of play-based approaches and domain specific curricula on learning and development of preschool children.<sup>2</sup>

#### *Published whole-child curricula\**

Most providers (52%) said they use a published whole-child curriculum (see list below). Notably, 12% of these responses indicate that providers were unsure if they were using a whole-child curriculum. Instead, those responses described use of a combination of curricula, a general educational philosophy, resource lists, an assessment, or participation in accreditation or Colorado Shines. Of providers using a published whole-child curriculum:

- 45% use **Creative Curriculum**
- 11% use **Experience** (formerly Mother Goose Time)
- 8% use **OWL: Opening the World of Learning**
- 6% use **Lillio Learning** (formerly FunShine Express)
- 3% use **Frog Street**
- 3% use **proprietary curricula** (ex: Wonder of Learning by the Goddard School, Early Innovators by LaPetite)
- 2% use **High Scope**
- <1% use **another curricula** (ex: Carol's Affordable Curriculum, Tools of the Mind, PreK on My Way)

*\*Although the CDEC has not finalized an approved preschool curricula list, these findings offer a starting point for review.*

#### *Validated learning approaches\**

Some providers (23%) reported their learning approach was reviewed by a third party (see list below). Again, 10% of provider responses indicate that they were unsure if they were using a validated approach. Instead, those responses described the use of a proprietary curriculum (designed by a for-profit child care center), or named Child Care Licensing or Colorado Shines as the reviewer of their learning approach. Of providers using a validated learning approach:

- 34% monitored by **Colorado Department of Education**
- 19% monitored by **Head Start**
- 18% accredited by **NAEYC**
- 10% accredited by **Cognia** (formerly AdvanceEd)
- 3% accredited by **NECPA**
- 2% accredited by **American Montessori Society**
- 1% accredited by **Association of Christian Schools**
- <1% accredited by **another organization** (ex: NAFCC)

*\*Although the CDEC has not finalized an approved preschool accreditation list, these findings offer a starting point for review. The CDEC has approved monitoring by the Colorado Department of Education and Head Start.*

#### *Independent learning approaches (25%)*

Some providers said they had developed their own learning approach. This category includes a formal or informal home-grown or educator-created curricula, and published domain-specific curricula. Domain-specific curricula focus on one or more domains of early learning, such as math, literacy, or social-emotional learning. In these instances, providers use a variety of learning approaches to address all domains of the Guidelines, with flexibility to customize their approach to the needs of the children and families they serve. Of the providers in this category:

- 53% reported that they **created their own learning approach**
- 47% reported that they **use a combination of domain-specific curricula**

<sup>2</sup> National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. 2024. A New Vision for High-Quality Preschool Curriculum. Washington, DC: National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/27429>.

Providers using an independent approach were asked to complete a rubric to self-report on each domain of early learning and reflect on their learning approach's alignment with the quality standard requirements (see [Independent Approach Guidance](#)). To determine if the rubric presented a barrier to reporting, providers were asked how long it took to review their practices and self-report using the provided form. The majority (64%) said it took one hour or less to complete.

## Key Takeaways

The Instructional requirements will be rolled out over time to give providers a chance to adjust while continuing to serve families. **Any decisions about program quality should consider how changes may affect families' access to care.**

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Many providers already use practices that align with the Instructional Practice standard.

- Nearly half of all providers using a published, whole-child curriculum reported **use of Creative Curriculum**, a developmentally appropriate curriculum under consideration by the CDEC for approval in the Resource Bank.
- And, more than half of all providers using a verified learning approach are already having their instructional practices **monitored and approved by the CDE or Head Start**.



Providers want more tools and support to better understand and apply the quality standards.

- Responses indicated a need for further explanation of the **difference between general educational philosophies and an intentional approach to fostering learning and development** that aligns with the Colorado Guidelines.
- Responses indicated a need for additional information about the **relationship between Colorado Shines and the Universal Preschool Program**.



Providers are looking for help to connect with local partners to strengthen their work.

- Findings indicate that most providers using independent learning approaches believe they are in compliance with the four required criteria. Ideally, providers would be **offered training** before completing the rubric to increase accuracy of self-reports.
- Local coordination could **support coaching and mentorship** for providers implementing published, whole-child curriculum and offer resources on validated learning approaches.

## Acknowledgements

The Colorado Department of Early Childhood (CDEC) generously provided data from the online self-report forms completed by providers. Katie Squibb, PhD, and Morgan Janke, MPA, from Early Years Forward, conducted the analysis for this brief.



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