

Prior to Preschool: Family and Provider Voices on How Universal Preschool is Impacting Child Care for Infants and Toddlers

Early Milestones Colorado | November 2025



Introduction

The past few years have brought major changes to Colorado’s early childhood landscape. In 2023 the state launched the Colorado Universal Preschool Program (Universal Preschool), offering up to 15 hours per week of free preschool for every child in the year before kindergarten, as well as for some three-year-olds¹. During the first two years of implementation, more than two-thirds of eligible four-year-olds enrolled. **Given its scale, Universal Preschool represents a major shift in how families access child care and early learning settings for their three- and four-year olds—and raises important questions about how the program is affecting the broader child care system, particularly for infants and toddlers.**

Although Universal Preschool has been a major step toward creating a more equitable early learning system for Colorado’s preschool age children, the state has not made similar investments to support families with infants and toddlers. Before children reach preschool age, many families struggle to find and afford quality child care. On the other hand, Colorado did implement temporary financial incentive programs to help protect and expand the availability of infant and toddler care, such as the Emerging and Expanding Grants and the Colorado Universal Preschool Program Provider Bonus Payments—both of which are no longer available.

This brief builds on our earlier report, [*Balancing Act: The Impact of Universal Preschool on Child Care for Infants and Toddlers in Colorado*](#), which found that the overall number of infant and toddler child care spots statewide did not decline during the first two years of Universal Preschool implementation. Most center-based Universal Preschool providers maintained their infant and toddler capacity and did not convert those spots to make room for more

preschoolers. Now in year three of the program, questions remain **about how families and providers are navigating the new system as financial incentives expire, and what supports are needed to sustain and grow care for the state’s youngest children.**

This brief draws on interviews with families and Universal Preschool providers to explore how the program is shaping access to and availability of care for the state’s youngest children. We share families’ experiences seeking infant and toddler care and describe how providers maintained or expanded the number of infants and toddlers they serve. The brief also highlights the supports and policy changes that families and providers identified as most important for strengthening infant and toddler care moving forward.

Infant and Toddler Child Care Capacity refers to the maximum number of children between ages 0 to 36 months who can be cared for by a child care provider. In 2024, there were only enough licensed child care spots to serve 20% of infants and toddlers in Colorado.

The Families and Providers We Interviewed

Between May and July 2025, Early Milestones interviewed ten providers and ten families about their experiences with Universal Preschool and infant and toddler care. Providers were eligible for an interview if 1) they participated in at least one of the first two years of Colorado’s Universal Preschool Program and 2) served infants and toddlers—either at the time or in the recent past. Families were eligible for an interview if 1) they had at least one child under age 4 at the time, and 2) had looked for child care for any of their children within the last two years.



Providers. Of the ten providers we interviewed, three operated Family Child Care Homes (FCCHs), three operated school-based centers, and four operated community-based centers. Six providers accepted the Colorado Child Care Assistance Program (CCCAP). Providers were located in different geographic regions across Colorado—three in rural areas, two in the Denver-metro area, and five in other urban metro areas. All the providers we interviewed were currently serving preschool age children through Colorado’s Universal Preschool Program. All but one provider also had an infant and toddler program.

Families. Of the ten families we interviewed, two lived in rural areas, two lived in Denver, and six lived in Denver suburbs. Families’ household incomes fell between \$34,000 and \$250,000 a year, with most reporting household incomes less than \$100,000 a year. Of the family members we spoke to, three identified as Black or African American, four identified as white, one identified as Latina, and one identified as Asian American. Six of the ten families had one or more infant children (less than 1 year old). Three families had a toddler (1 to 2 years old), three families had a preschool age child (3 to 4 years old), and two families had a child age 5 or older in addition to their younger children.

Key Findings

- Most Universal Preschool providers we spoke to had not reduced their infant and toddler spots to enroll more preschoolers, and some had actually expanded them.
- Universal Preschool providers said financial incentives were essential—without them, they could not have expanded their spots for infants and toddlers.
- Many Universal Preschool providers wanted to expand their infant and toddler programs to meet demand, but they could not overcome staffing and financial challenges.
- Family Child Care Home (FCCH) providers felt underutilized and underpromoted as Universal Preschool providers, saying they often had spots open to serve more children.
- Families said they struggled to find and afford infant and toddler care, though no more so than before Universal Preschool launched.
- Many families had a limited awareness of child care resources, such as Colorado Shines, and an unclear understanding of Universal Preschool.

Provider Voices

Few Providers Dropped Infant and Toddler Spots, and Some Expanded Them

Of the changes the providers made to their spots for infants and toddlers since Universal Preschool launched, five made no changes, three increased spots, and two reduced spots—but only one of whom did so as direct result of Universal Preschool. **The one provider that dropped infant and toddler spots to focus exclusively on Universal Preschool did so because it was too difficult to manage both infants and preschoolers as a Family Child Care Home (FCCH).**

“I had four 18-month-olds and found out that doing UPK and having those that young was so challenging.”

Family Child Care Home Provider

Most providers we spoke with had not made any changes to their infant and toddler program since becoming Universal Preschool providers, and four of the five had no plans to do so in the future. One provider, however, did mention plans to increase spots for infants and toddlers moving forward.

Three other providers said they had expanded their infant and toddler capacity since the launch of Universal Preschool. They explained that this decision was driven by two key factors: strong community need and available state financial incentives. In each case, providers described seeing clear demand from families who struggled to find infant and toddler care in their area. They viewed expanding these programs as essential to meeting families’ needs. Providers also emphasized that state financial supports were critical—without them, the cost of expanding would have been too high.

Some providers mentioned they knew of several FCCHs that reduced infant and toddler spots. Due to limitations in state data, it is not possible to determine if this was a greater trend. One provider said they were impacted by

another community-based center ending their infant and toddler program to focus on Universal Preschool, insofar as that prompted their infant and toddler waitlist to exceed 170.

Financial Incentives Helped Providers Maintain and Grow Infant and Toddler Capacity

Over half of the providers we interviewed (70%) received funding through incentive programs and stimulus funds. They used the funds to improve facilities, purchase materials, support teacher training, and, in some cases, expand their programs.

Providers also sought other sources of funding for their infant and toddler programs. One third of providers benefited from [CIRCLE funding](#), a statewide program that awarded \$22.5 million in grants to strengthen and expand the early care and education system in Colorado. Several providers knew they received funding but could not recall the source. **One third of the providers we spoke to said these grants enabled them to open new infant and toddler rooms and purchase the necessary supplies to operate them. As one provider reflected:**



“That’s one of the big reasons we were able to quadruple in size. We had three classrooms and went to twelve. That was a game changer.”

Community-Based Child Care Center Provider

All the providers we spoke to who received funding emphasized that the application and reporting process for these funds was smooth and not overly burdensome.

Financial Incentives to Maintain or Increase Infant and Toddler Capacity

During the initial launch of Universal Preschool, there were several financial incentive programs available to child care providers to help them maintain or increase their capacity to serve infants and toddlers. **The following financial incentive programs are no longer available to providers.**

1. **Emerging and Expanding Grants:** Beginning in 2020, providers could apply for grants ranging from \$3,000 to \$50,000 to help with costs like expanding existing programs or opening new child care programs. Priority was given to providers in child care deserts and those offering infant and toddler careⁱⁱ.
2. **Colorado Preschool Program Provider Bonus Payments:** In 2023, Colorado passed SB23-269, which created a program to provide a one-time bonus payment to UPP providers who maintained or increased their licensed capacity to serve infants and toddlersⁱⁱⁱ.

3. **CIRCLE:** The Community Innovation and Resilience for Care and Learning Equity (CIRCLE) Grant Program awarded \$22.5 million in grants to make early childhood services and systems more equitable, inclusive, and sustainable. Funding for the CIRCLE Grant Program came from federal COVID-relief sources, including the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) and the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations (CRRSA) Act.
4. **Child Care Licensing Incentive:** From October 2021 to July 2023, Colorado offered a one-time \$5,000 bonus to child care providers who became newly licensed. These incentives were also funded through ARPA.

Providers Want to Expand Infant and Toddler Care but Face Major Barriers

Providers recognized that infant and toddler spots are a critical need in their communities. Many providers noted that while they often have the physical space to serve more infants and toddlers, they lack the funding needed for renovations, infant-specific equipment, and ongoing staffing costs.

Staffing emerged as a critical challenge, as providers struggled to hire and retain qualified infant and toddler teachers. Several also expressed a hesitation to expand because of the financial imbalance between infant care—which requires higher costs and lower staff-to-child ratios—and preschool care.

This finding is supported by a recent statewide study, reporting that 1/3 of family child care homes and community-based centers have unused or underused space for child care. The study also found that 47% of providers are interested in expanding, but access to capital is the biggest barrier.^{iv}

“Even though I have open classrooms for infants and toddlers, we wouldn’t convert them. The overhead and staffing mean we need preschoolers to balance the budget. Because of the overhead and the staffing combined, I need those preschoolers in there to kind of make it balanced and so that we don’t go completely under.”¹

Community-Based Child Care Center Provider

Family Child Care Homes (FCCHs) Feel Underutilized and Underpromoted

The Family Child Care Home (FCCH) providers we spoke to said they often have spots open and could serve more children. In their view, this unused availability was the result of being underpromoted as Universal Preschool providers. Home-based providers felt they were not promoted to families as consistently as center-based programs.

“I feel like we need to educate the public about what a home child care provider does and how we’re educating the children just as much.”

Family Child Care Home Provider

FCCH providers recommended several strategies to address this problem. Providers emphasized the need for greater public education about the value of home-based care.

Two other strategies they mentioned were increased flexibility in licensing ratios for experienced providers, and easier, less burdensome processes for obtaining waivers to offer transitional classrooms. Several providers mentioned they could take care of additional infants and toddlers if they were allowed.

One provider said, for example, “I know that I’m fully capable of expanding my ratio by myself.” Additionally, most home-based providers mentioned the difficulty attaining a transitional waiver for their program. They brought up that if it was easier to attain a waiver, more FCCHs would expand their infant and toddler spots.

Family Voices

Families Struggle to Find and Afford Infant and Toddler Care

The families we interviewed described significant challenges finding and affording infant and toddler care. They cited long waitlists, high costs, and limited flexibility in scheduling—issues they faced both before and after Universal Preschool began. Child care remained particularly unaffordable for middle-income families, who earned too much to qualify for subsidies yet still struggled to cover the high costs.

“Paying \$2,000 a month [for child care] is a second mortgage. We’re not low enough income to receive support, so we feel stuck in the middle.”

Infant Parent

The families we interviewed said they had not personally seen any changes in their providers’ infant classrooms since the launch of Universal Preschool. None reported that their providers had closed or reduced infant care to make room for preschool spots. Families noted that infant care was still hard to

find, but they did not feel that availability had worsened since Universal Preschool began.

Many described Universal Preschool as a positive step toward improving affordability in early care and education. However, they also emphasized that it did little to ease the ongoing challenges of finding and affording infant and toddler care, which remains more expensive than preschool.

Families Have Limited Awareness of Resources and Unclear Understanding of Universal Preschool

Most families interviewed had limited awareness of available child care resources, including Colorado Shines—the state’s online resource where families can search for and evaluate licensed child care providers. Among those who had used Colorado Shines, families found it valuable but suggested improvements. Families wanted clearer guidance about child care program options, and reviews of child care providers to help inform their decisions.

“There’s no guidebook to help me figure out how to do this, what I should be looking for. I don’t know how people do this.”

Infant & Toddler Parent

Many of the families we spoke to had a limited understanding of Colorado’s Universal Preschool Program. These families were confused about the eligibility rules for Universal Preschool and found it difficult to navigate the available options. Even families who may have qualified for more than the base number of hours said they did not have a clear understanding about how the program works or how additional hours are determined. Among the

families who were more familiar with Universal Preschool, many felt that the base number of hours the program covers was insufficient to meet their child care and work needs.

"The only thing was, I love the fact that they offer the UPK program, but with only 10 hours, that's like two hours per day. When you think about it, how much are they actually learning in those two hours?"

Toddler Parent

Recommendations

1. **Improve Family Access to Information.** Families need clear, accessible information to navigate the child care landscape. Outreach should be strengthened for Colorado Shines and Raising Colorado Kids and targeted toward channels that families regularly rely on for information—such as workplaces and social media platforms. User-friendly tools should be developed to help families compare child care options and access reviews from other families.
2. **Expand Financial Incentives for Providers.** SB 23-269 and federal COVID-relief funds (ARPA and CRRSA) helped providers sustain or expand infant and toddler care, but those funds have now expired. Replacing them with targeted state and philanthropic investments is essential. Grants should focus on reducing capital barriers and supporting staffing, while also improving provider awareness of opportunities such as [the Family Child Care Home Facilities Improvement Grant](#)^v. Although HB 24-1273 allocates state funds for the development of new child care facilities^{vi}, these dollars are not directly available to existing providers.
3. **Invest in the Infant and Toddler Workforce.** Providers often have the physical space to expand but staffing challenges and financial instability make expansion difficult. Expanding pathways into the infant and toddler workforce is essential. This includes offering paid internships, bilingual training programs, and retention incentives. Additional support should be provided to encourage providers to maintain low staff-to-child ratios, which are critical for high-quality infant and toddler care.
4. **Support and Promote Family Child Care Homes (FCCHs).** FCCHs are an important and potentially underutilized part of the child care system. Increasing their visibility in Universal Preschool and child care referral systems can help families access available spots. This could reduce administrative burden and expand capacity where it is most needed.

Conclusion

Universal Preschool is an important step forward for Colorado's families, but ensuring access to care for infants and toddlers remains a pressing challenge. Providers want to expand, and families need affordable options—but without continued investment and better system supports, child care for infants and toddlers will remain constrained. Colorado now has good evidence that targeted incentives can work. With federal relief dollars ending, state leaders and philanthropy must step in to sustain momentum and address persistent barriers in the infant and toddler system.

Partners

Early Milestones Colorado thanks our funder, Rose Community Foundation, whose generous support enabled this work.

Suggested Citation

Landes, Emily, Laura Freeman Cenegy, and Courtney Thornton. 2025. "Prior to Preschool: Family and Provider Perspectives on How UPP is Impacting Child Care for Infants and Toddlers." Denver: Early Milestones Colorado.

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ⁱⁱⁱ Colorado General Assembly. 2023. *Senate Bill 23-269: Colorado Universal Preschool Program Provider Participation Bonus Program*. Approved June 2, 2023. Retrieved June 9, 2025, from <https://leg.colorado.gov/bills/sb23-269>

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