

Early Childhood Brief

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Transforming the Early Childhood Workforce: Overview of 2019 Innovation Grants in Colorado

Early childhood teachers play an essential role in society, preparing young children by developing the social, emotional, and cognitive skills and abilities they need to enter school ready to learn and grow. This formative five-year period of development has “profound and lasting effects on [children’s] later learning, social behaviors, and success into adulthood.”² Yet, among Colorado’s early childhood workforce, there is a mismatch between the demanding nature of the work and the limited amount of preparation, compensation, ongoing support, and professional development available to practitioners.³ In addition, the population of children under age 4 in Colorado is expected to grow more than 20 percent by 2026, amplifying the need to recruit and sustain a qualified early childhood workforce.



In 2018, Early Milestones Colorado responded to the workforce crisis by launching the Transforming the Early Childhood Workforce Initiative. This public-private partnership in Colorado was designed to generate locally driven innovations that would transform ways to recruit and retain staff to build a qualified early childhood workforce.¹ The Initiative aims to launch and refine strategies proposed by local partnerships that can bring about workforce change in four areas: (1) targeted recruitment, (2) education and career pathways, (3) working conditions, and (4) compensation. Although specific innovations are tailored to the needs and context of the grantees’ communities, together they can signal promising directions for practice and policy that could be broadly applicable throughout the state. This brief describes the innovations and progress of the grantees from Year 2 of the initiative.

Grantee innovations

Between May 2019 and April 2020, Early Milestones Colorado awarded workforce innovation grants to five grantees whose work spans 21 counties across Colorado. All five grantees’ innovations had elements designed to address targeted recruitment, education and career pathways, and working conditions as areas of change. Although each innovation might indirectly promote higher compensation of early care and education (ECE) teachers, none focused directly on compensation as a target of change. Increasing the compensation of early childhood educators in a sustainable way is expensive and challenging. It requires buy-in from many partners to produce systematic, long-term solutions that will not have a negative effect on staff if changes are short-lived.

/ The **Early Childhood Council of La Plata County** received an innovation grant for the second year in a row to continue its concurrent enrollment/internship program for high schools in partnership with the Durango School District 9R. The partnership connected students with college-credit-accruing coursework and field experiences along with certification through the local community college.

/ The **Early Childhood Council of Larimer County**, also a second-year grantee, expanded its culturally responsive mentor-teacher program in connection with the Front Range Community College to bolster early childhood teacher (ECT) qualifications. The mentoring approach paired student-teachers with experienced mentor-teachers in the classroom who demonstrated their own high level of competency in core ECT skills.

/ Building on a pilot model developed in Year One, the **Denver Early Childhood Council** rolled out a “no wrong door” recruitment initiative in its second grant year to engage early childhood professionals starting out or early in their career, establish supportive services to retain them, and provide a clear pathway to build a long-term career in early childhood.

/ **Red Rocks Community College**, a new grantee in 2019, expanded the only federally registered child development specialist apprenticeship program in Colorado and complemented the program with innovative pilot courses on mentor teaching and skills instruction in collaboration with other community colleges throughout the state.

/ **Valley Settlement**, also new to the initiative in 2019, launched Child Development Associate (CDA) credentialing courses for high school students in two underserved, rural regions of western Colorado. Valley Settlement focused specifically on recruiting Latinx early childhood professionals to reflect the demographics of the Roaring Fork and Eagle River valleys. Valley Settlement also offered a CDA course in one of the regions for Family-Friend-Neighbor (FFN) providers.

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Mathematica is the learning and evaluation partner for the Transforming the Early Childhood Workforce in Colorado Initiative of Early Milestones. In this role, Mathematica staff work with the grantee teams to incrementally build their capacity to gather information, analyze results, and apply learnings to continually improve the development, implementation, and scale-up of their innovations.
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Implementation lessons and innovation achievements

The workforce innovation grantees have invested creativity, time, and resources into launching strategies to ease local workforce challenges. During the 12-month grant period, grantees moved from ideas to action. Their experiences, successes, and challenges offer lessons on implementation, reveal the milestones they achieved, and suggest directions for policy or system change.

Implementation lessons

/ **Grantees quickly learned what worked well and what did not, and adjusted their strategies in response.** Grantees adapted mentor-teacher trainings in response to student-teacher needs; secured stipends to support high school students’ participation in field placements; distributed career navigation support across staff based on program participants’ needs; found new ways to get real-time feedback from apprentices on the supports they need to succeed; and forged partnerships with area community colleges to ensure that ECE courses respond to critical needs.

/ **Community partners who worked together with the grantees were essential to moving the implementation forward.** Partners who demonstrated shared responsibility, motivation, and investment (of time and resources) helped support implementation progress and lessened the amount of coordination grantees had to do. The organizational capacity of partner agencies affected the extent to which they could share responsibility and accountability with grantees’ teams.

Progress toward building Colorado's early care and education (ECE) workforce

Targeted recruitment

Grantees launched innovations to engage and recruit high school students in an ECE career:

- 34 high school students enrolled in dual-enrollment ECE courses in La Plata County
- 30 high school students were enrolled and retained in courses to earn a CDA in the Eagle River and Roaring Fork valleys
- 1 high school apprentice in Larimer County

Grantee innovations supported new entrants into the ECE field and helped them advance:

- 41 future teachers participated in a federally registered apprenticeship program⁴ through Red Rocks Community College (11 dropped from the program during the year, 11 were added, and 4 graduated).

Education and career pathways

Grantee innovations supported ECE teachers in earning qualifications or building skills to lead classrooms and improve the experiences of children:

- 66 individuals have earned or will earn their ECT by participating in four of the five innovations during the past year, and more may achieve this certification.⁵
- 22 teachers participated in an accelerated pathway to an ECT certification in Denver.
- 17 students were part of a cohort that completed courses and received support from mentor-teachers in Larimer County.
- 42 students will have participated in the Early Childhood Institute, which offered early childhood education courses in an intensive format in La Plata County.



An **Early Childhood Teacher (ECT) certification** is needed in Colorado for a teacher to hold responsibility for a single group of children working under the supervision of a director.

- 9 skills instructors were hired and trained to provide side-by-side support and instruction to 75 students working in center-based settings in conjunction with five partner community colleges, including Red Rocks Community College.
- 25 home-based providers enrolled in a course to earn a CDA through Valley Settlement.

Working conditions

Grantee innovations developed mentor-teachers to provide support to new entrants into the workforce:

- 4 teachers completed newly developed community college courses in mentoring through Red Rocks Community College.
- 35 mentor-teachers worked with apprentices as part of the Childcare Development Specialist Apprenticeship Program.
- 20 mentor-teachers were trained to provide culturally appropriate in-classroom support and coaching to provisional ECTs in Larimer County.

/ Grantees found that launching their innovations took more time and coordination than they expected. All grantees thought, in hindsight, that a full-time, dedicated staff person would be ideal to guide project work. One grantee attributed the presence of a full-time specialist with making the connections between employers and apprentice teachers to ensure participation targets were achieved.

/ High school counselors played a pivotal role in identifying and recruiting students with the motivation to enroll in and complete ECE courses. Three grantee innovations engaged high school students in college-level ECE courses or credentialing to introduce them to an ECE career and start them on building the necessary skills and qualifications to become ECE educators. Grantees sought to build counselors' knowledge about new

ECE courses and improve communication with students in the areas of course-matching and conveying that early childhood work is a viable career pathway. Later rounds of recruiting were more successful than the first rounds because grantees built on the lessons they learned, including the need for better communication.

/ **Grantees found success with customized approaches to preparing and supporting mentor-teachers.** Three grantees' innovations relied on mentor-teachers who made it possible for centers to hire apprentices and provisional ECTs to fill critical classroom gaps quickly while ensuring high quality care for children. Each of the three innovations incorporated the training and use of mentor-teachers or skills instructors to provide personal and professional support to new or developing teachers within center-based settings. Each grantee took a distinct approach to training and supporting mentor-teachers—ranging from a college-credit-bearing set of courses on mentoring in the ECE field to a customized, culturally conscious training on mentoring by a local team.

Directions for policy or system change

Insights from the grantees' experiences point to areas in which policy or system changes could better support entry into and participation in the early childhood workforce.

/ **The multiple pathways people can take to achieve an ECT certification are confusing, and the time that certification takes leaves centers stretched to find qualified teachers to lead classrooms.** Three grantee innovations developed or supported accessible pathways to ECT qualification that were responsive to the needs of potential ECE teachers and centers in their communities.

/ **The professional development system might exacerbate inequities when it comes to who enters the field and how they progress in a career.** Two grantees focused their innovations on attracting

Latinx individuals into the ECE field and supporting coursework for Spanish-speaking students and ECE professionals in their preferred language. One grantee found that intense support with career navigation was often needed to help individuals interpret the requirements and determine where they were in progressing toward ECT certification. A second grantee provided CDA courses as a viable pathway to attract and support individuals who were pursuing an ECE career and were likely to stay in the local area.

/ **Partnerships (both formal and informal) within the ECE industry and across other sectors play an important role in addressing the more systemic issues facing the ECE workforce.** All five Year Two grantees reflected on the critical role that relationships and partnerships played. Partnerships forged with other community stakeholders were, in many cases, a key ingredient in achieving success. In particular, strong partnerships between Colorado's early childhood councils, community higher education institutions, and workforce development agencies offer promise for increasing the accessibility of recruitment and ongoing professional development for the ECE workforce.

Endnotes

¹ Two Colorado-based philanthropic organizations (the Buell Foundation and Gary Community Investments), along with the Colorado Departments of Education and Human Services, make up this public-private partnership convened by Early Milestones Colorado.

² Duncan, G., K. Magnuson, A. Kalil, and A. Ziol-Guest. "The Importance of Early Childhood Poverty." *Social Indicators Research*, vol. 108, 2012, pp. 87–98.

³ Schaack, D., and V. Le. "Colorado Early Childhood Workforce Survey 2017 Final Report." Denver, Colorado: University of Colorado Denver, 2017.

⁴ Red Rocks Childcare Development Specialist Apprenticeship Program started the grant year with 30 apprentices.

⁵ The Ft. Lewis intensive courses were delayed due to COVID-19. The La Plata council reported that eight students would achieve ECT or director qualification after coursework but could not verify how many would be ECT versus director qualified. All are included in this summative count.