Colorado Evaluation & Action Lab
UNIVERSITY OF DENVER

Early Childhood Evaluation Hub: Early Insights

A synthesis of evidence building in 2023

Stimulus Funding. The Colorado Department of Early Childhood (CDEC) administered over $700 million in federal and state stimulus funding between 2021 and 2022 to address pandemic recovery needs and strengthen Colorado's early childhood sector.

Evidence-Building. The Colorado Evaluation and Action Lab serves as the Early Childhood Stimulus Evaluation Hub, coordinating and overseeing high-quality evaluations of nearly 20 of the over 40 stimulus-funded strategies. Research teams are conducting the evaluations with the Hub synthesizing and aligning findings to activate learnings for policy and program improvements.

Early Insights. The initial phases of the evaluation work can be used to help inform:
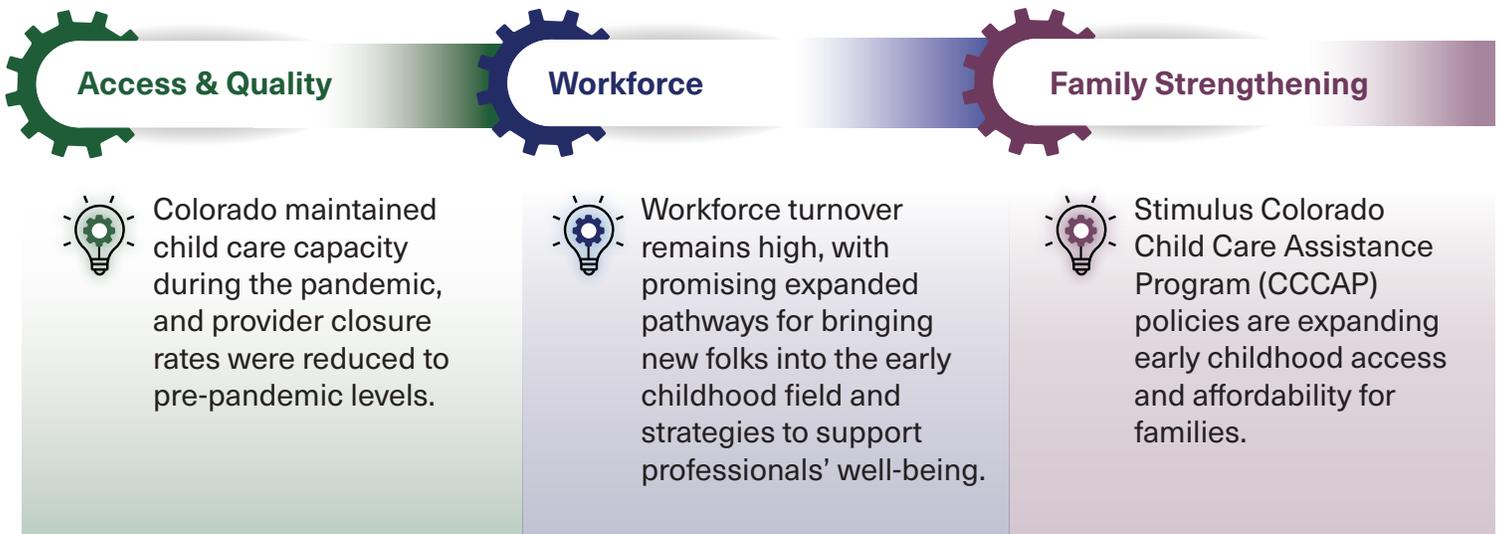
- CDEC stimulus program leads and funding recipients on course corrections and continuous improvements as they implement stimulus-funded activities.
- Legislators and policymakers on funding and policy decisions to continue or advance critical strategies post-stimulus funding.

This synthesis of early insights is based on evidence briefs developed by the Hub evaluation teams. Interim findings will be shared in spring 2024 and final findings will be shared in fall 2024.

Top-Line Early Insights

Funding Strategy and Context

Colorado is effectively distributing stimulus funds across the state, though the compressed state funding timeline and dispersed nature of funding, in an already-complex early childhood landscape, made it challenging for providers to achieve objectives.

Access & Quality	Workforce	Family Strengthening
Colorado maintained child care capacity during the pandemic, and provider closure rates were reduced to pre-pandemic levels.	Workforce turnover remains high, with promising expanded pathways for bringing new folks into the early childhood field and strategies to support professionals' well-being.	Stimulus Colorado Child Care Assistance Program (CCCAP) policies are expanding early childhood access and affordability for families.

Funding Strategy and Context

Funding areas were identified by community stakeholders and approved by the Colorado Legislature, with implementation managed by CDEC.

Funding Environment. Colorado secured stimulus funding to address pandemic recovery and strengthen the early childhood sector at the same time the new CDEC launched.

- Stimulus funding was implemented in the context of several ongoing early childhood initiatives (Universal Preschool, CCCAP, PDG), and demand for services is only increasing as stimulus funding comes to a close.

- Colorado had been losing child care capacity prior to the pandemic, which only exacerbated existing challenges such as workforce shortages and insufficient availability of child care slots.

Funding Approach. 2,300+ child care providers, families, and others provided input to inform funding priorities, resulting in more targeted uses of stimulus funds than in other states.

- Required approval of stimulus strategies by the state legislature truncated the time available to implement activities and deterred some providers from accepting the funding at all.

- Alternative funding models that are less restrictive and direct to communities could better support equity in funding distribution, especially for smaller entities and in rural areas.

- Leveraging existing data infrastructure to centrally track the distribution of funds was challenging due, in part, to limited access to timely information on reach and equity in funding distribution.

Funding Partnerships. Public-private partnerships to administer funding and programs were critical to the success of stimulus strategies.

- Partners accelerated funding distribution, connected with communities, promoted equity, responded to emerging needs, and increased the ability to reach new providers and partners.

- Early Childhood Councils played a critical role in outreach, application, and implementation support, often with limited capacity and overhead.

Access & Quality

Children thrive when all families have equal access to a comprehensive system of early childhood services.

Early Insights for Evaluated Activities	Stimulus Strategies
⚙ Availability — *Open, operate, and expand early childhood programs and services.*	
Expanding child care. There is huge demand for capital improvements/maintenance among early childhood providers; there is a big learning curve for managing construction projects. • Grantees are filling gaps in child care deserts. • Projects are time intensive and external technical assistance is a critical support. **Navigation services.** Navigators help facilitate licensing of home child care providers and support families to find child care options. • Flexibility in funding is needed to support Navigator staff, as they are difficult to recruit and Early Childhood Councils are absorbing the roles. • Navigators are viewed as a 'go-to' resource for providers; combining FCCH and AOC Navigator roles could streamline support.	• Emerging & Expanding Grants • Employer-Based Child Care Grants • Community Innovation and Resilience for Care and Learning Equity (CIRCLE) Grants • Family Child Care Home (FCCH) Navigator Program • Availability and Outreach of Child Care (AOC) Navigator Program • Access to Inclusive Care: Project Include

⚙ Quality — *Improve quality of programs and services.*

Home provider network. A pilot is supporting home providers with technical assistance, licensing kits, and business training.

- Leverage FCCH Navigator input to better understand and meet FCCH provider needs.
- Maintain a spectrum of support for FCCH providers from intensive to light touch.

- Staffed FCCH Network

⚙ Sustainability — *Sustain early childhood programs and services; improve financial viability.*

Financial viability. New CCCAP policies increase provider reimbursement rates and provide pay based on enrollment, helping providers close revenue gaps and maintain continuity of care.

- New CCCAP policies position Colorado to meet proposed federal rules that aim to strengthen financial stability.
- Implementation of CCCAP policies varies by county; administrators are not leveraging policies to recruit providers, focusing instead on retention.

- Child Care Stabilization & New Provider Success Grants
- CCCAP Enrollment-Based Payments-Infants and Toddlers
- CCCAP Increased Absence Payments for Preschoolers
- CCCAP Reimbursement Rate Increase for Child Care Providers
- Establish a Substitute Fund

⚙ Workforce

Early childhood professionals thrive when they are supported across early childhood care and education settings.

Early Insights for Evaluated Activities	Stimulus Strategies

⚙ Preparation — *Provide diverse pathways to bring knowledgeable workforce into the field.*

Qualification opportunities. Stipends, scholarships, and apprenticeships provide diverse career pathways to gain early childhood knowledge and enter the field.

- The variation in implementation of credential/qualification pathways influences program quality and recruitment of applicants.
- More opportunities in Spanish and other languages are needed to increase diverse applicants.
- More intensive outreach and engagement efforts are needed to reach and support those new to the field.

- Workforce Recruitment and Retention Program
- Free ECE 1011 and 1031 Coursework
- Apprenticeship Program
- CDA Support Specialist Program
- CIRCLE Grants

⚙ Retention — *Improve wages; provide a supportive work environment.*

Teacher support. A pilot is boosting teacher salaries, and various supports for well-being are targeting teacher retention.

- Wage increases have helped to recruit teachers; concerns remain for how to maintain the wage level.
- Many providers receiving stimulus grants still have high turnover.
- Demand remains high for health and mental health support.

- CCCAP Teacher Salary Increase Pilot
- Workforce Sustainability Grants
- Establish a Substitute Fund
- Early Childhood Mental Health (ECMH) Consultation
- Staffed FCCH Network

⚙ Advancement — *Expand professional development opportunities.*

No evaluation was conducted for these activities.

Family Strengthening

Families thrive when caregivers have the skills and knowledge they need to raise healthy, happy children.

Early Insights for Evaluated Activities	Stimulus Strategies
⚙ Accessibility — *Reduce barriers; help more families afford programs and services.*	
Financial relief. CCCAP policies are lowering family co-pays for child care services and limiting payments required for absences. 💡 New CCCAP policies position Colorado to meet potential federal rules that aim to relieve family financial burdens.	• CCCAP Reduced Co-Payments for Families • Stabilization Grant Family Financial Relief
⚙ Choice & Enrollment — *Support families to select and enroll in high-quality programs.*	
Expanded eligibility. Increased income limits makes it possible for more low-income families to qualify for CCCAP and access affordable, quality child care. 💡 County administrators are not leveraging CCCAP policies as a tool to recruit additional families due to long provider waitlists. 💡 Families still have limited awareness that they meet new, expanded income thresholds to participate in CCCAP. 💡 Child care availability is not being updated regularly.	• CCCAP Expanded Income Eligibility for Families • AOC Navigator Program
⚙ Resilience & Support — *Tailor support to equip families to care for young children.*	
Mental health. Increasing access to early childhood mental health services has been shown to decrease suspensions and expulsions for children and reduce stress for adult caregivers. 💡 Delivery of program activities for ages birth to 5 better align with CDEC than CDE, where some programs currently live.	• ECMH Consultation • Early Literacy & Family Engagement • CIRCLE Grants

View all stimulus-funded strategies and the outcomes they are helping to achieve.