



Colorado Evaluation & Action Lab

UNIVERSITY OF DENVER

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for government agencies and a
bridge to the research community

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► Community Innovation and Resilience for Care and Learning Equity (CIRCLE) Grants

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*with actionable insights,
synthesis, and editorial support
from the Colorado Lab*



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Overview

The Colorado Department of Early Childhood (CDEC) used federal and state stimulus funding to implement the [Community Innovation and Resilience for Care and Learning Equity \(CIRCLE\) Grant Program](#). This activity supports [CDEC's strategic goal](#) #1 to ensure all families, regardless of their background or circumstances, have equal access to Colorado's comprehensive system of early childhood services. The CIRCLE Grant program aimed to provide innovation grant funding to child care providers and other community, education, or governmental partners to pursue innovative solutions to challenges worsened by the pandemic. Goals for each individual project varied from making child care more affordable to filling gaps in infant and toddler care to strengthening providers' financial stability to boosting workforce preparation and contributing to the health and learning of all children, including those with disabilities and those with developmental delays and dual-language learners.



CDEC partnered with Early Milestones Colorado to serve as the intermediary designated to implement the CIRCLE Grant program. As the intermediary, Early Milestones selected Marzano Research to evaluate CIRCLE Grants. CDEC has also partnered with the Colorado Evaluation and Action Lab (Colorado Lab) to coordinate the evaluation of stimulus-funded activities, and the Colorado Lab is aligning with Marzano's evaluation efforts to synthesize findings across stimulus evaluation activities.

What We Will Learn by the End of the Evaluation



- Clarity around the overall goals, key elements, and short-term outcomes of the CIRCLE Grant program, which provided a helpful framework given the widely varying focus areas of grantees.
- Whether the short-term outcomes were met and key elements of the CIRCLE Grant program were implemented.
- Promising strategies from CIRCLE Grant recipients that could be used to meet CDEC's strategic goals.

The content in this brief represents insights from the CIRCLE evaluation completed August 2023.

Evidence-Based Decision-Making

[Evidence-Based Decision-Making \(EBDM\)](#) recognizes that research evidence is not the only contributing factor to policy and budget decisions. EBDM is the intersection of the best available research evidence, community needs and implementation context, and decision-makers' expertise. Actionable insights across these domains are highlighted in the box below, with supporting evidence and additional information detailed for each in the sections that follow.





Actionable Insights

- Many of the 226 CIRCLE-funded projects align closely with CDEC’s strategic goals. These could be integrated within the department portfolio to support sustainability and scale.
- CDEC successfully demonstrated their short-term goals of the CIRCLE Grant program, such as building a network of grantees and a majority of grantees meeting their goals.
- CIRCLE Grants empowered communities to be creative to address their systemic challenges in early childhood.
- Using an experienced intermediary like Early Milestones to administer CIRCLE Grants helped CDEC form a closer relationship with community programs.
- The timeline for grantees, from application to completing projects, was very tight and put them at risk for not meeting their goals. Similar grants in the future should have longer timelines to better support innovation and equity.
- Eighty percent of CIRCLE grantees are currently without funding to sustain their projects. Grant-writing support would help these entities take advantage of other funding opportunities within and beyond CDEC.

Best Available Research Evidence

Data in this section include final survey data from grantees and Early Milestones staff.

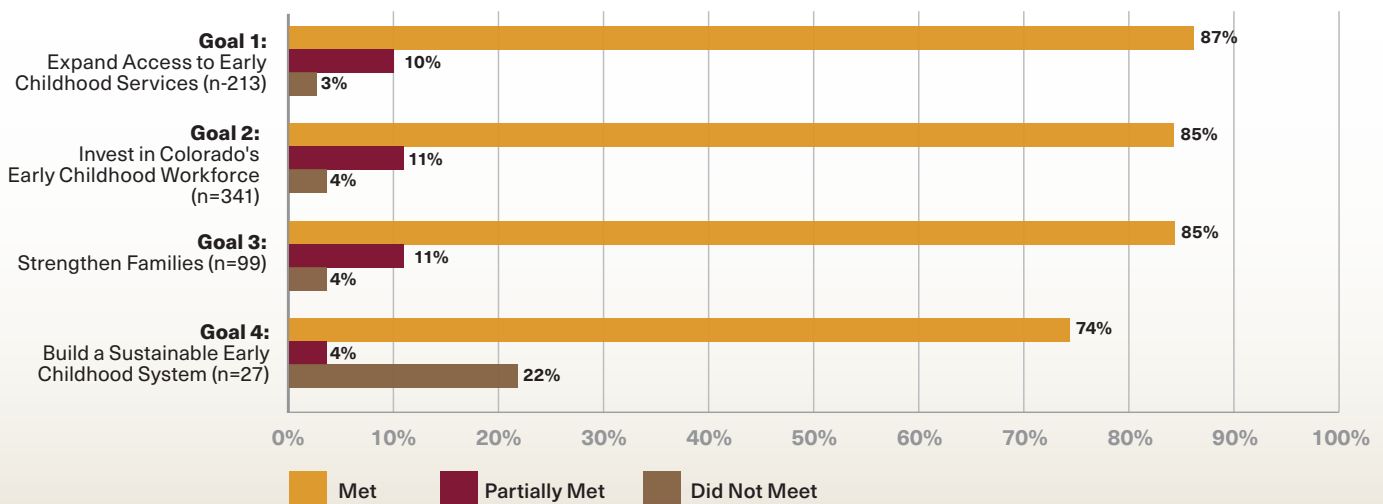
CDEC successfully demonstrated their short-term goals for the CIRCLE Grant program. The evaluation team was able to help CDEC create a clear [theory of change](#) and what they hoped to see in terms of short-term outcomes and key elements of the CIRCLE Grant program. Demonstrated short-term outcomes included:

- Grantees indicated that they experienced an accessible process, and the technical assistance (TA) received from Early Milestones was a key facilitator of project success.
- Grantees increased their capacity to seek additional funding to support their CIRCLE projects and other organizational goals.
- Networks were built among grantees because of participation in learning communities and intentional connections developed through the intermediary activities.
- Grantees increased their partnerships with early childhood organizations and entities more broadly in Colorado.
- Grantees made progress on their CIRCLE project goals to address systemic challenges (Figure 1).

Early Milestones staff identified the following as key elements of the CIRCLE Grant program:

- Individualized TA throughout implementation, including pre- and post-award
- Facilitated and intentional learning communities among grantees
- Community-driven projects, strategies, and goals
- Flexible funding mechanism
- Projects centering on innovation and equity
- Network of grantees cultivated

Figure 1. CIRCLE project plan outcomes by CDEC strategic goals



Community Needs & Implementation Context

Data in this section include final survey data from grantees and Early Milestones staff.

CIRCLE Grants empowered communities to be creative to address their systemic challenges in early childhood. A portfolio of local innovations was established through the CIRCLE Grant program that addresses systemic challenges in early childhood with the potential to scale and/or replicate statewide. CIRCLE Grants were found to be a valuable flexible funding mechanism that supports organizations to implement projects not eligible through other means. This indicates that an innovative grant program like CIRCLE has the potential to allow local organizations to help make progress toward statewide goals with locally responsive approaches.



The flexibility of the Early Milestones team to allow for budget revisions so that our small, rural school could still use the funding and move forward with purchasing a curriculum that [we] could not have considered in the past.

- CIRCLE Grantee

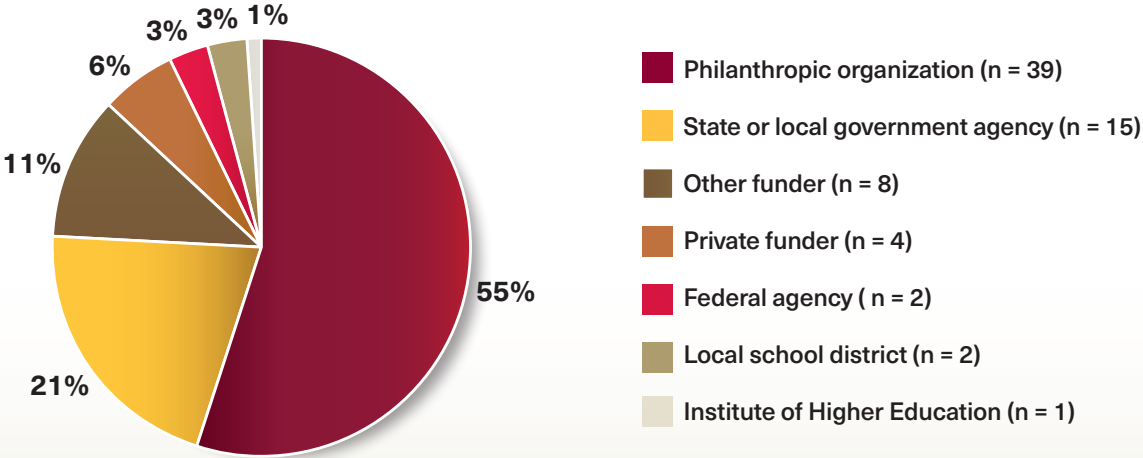
The timeline for grantees, from application to completing projects, was very tight and put them at risk for not meeting their goals. By the time the state legislature appropriated funds for CIRCLE Grants, grantees only had 9-12 months to launch, implement, and wrap-up their projects. It felt like it ended as soon as it was getting up and running, and grantees faced challenges with hiring, spending down the funds, and meeting their goals in time, especially given the innovative nature of projects. Grantees and Early Milestones most frequently suggested the need for a longer planning and implementation timeline, greater staff or organizational capacity, and more funding to address challenges. Local entities need a period of onboarding to the grant implementation process, particularly organizations that have never participated in such a process or have

limited capacity related to grants. Fifty percent of grantees reported having to adjust aspects of their CIRCLE project from what was originally planned. Implementation challenges were most often due to new learnings about the systemic challenge or target population of their project, insufficient timeline to implement what was planned, and recruitment of participants.

Eighty percent of CIRCLE grantees are currently without funding to sustain their projects.

For many grantees, CIRCLE was their first experience with grant writing. Only 23% of grantees indicated that they have secured additional funding to sustain aspects of their CIRCLE project beyond the grant period. These 51 grantees have been quite successful in obtaining substantial support to sustain their projects, with supplemental funding ranging from \$5,000 to \$1,300,000 (with an average of \$146,088). Grantees primarily secured additional funding from philanthropic organizations (Figure 2). Of those who haven't yet secured funding, a majority indicate that they plan to seek it to sustain their projects. Early Milestones held grant-writing workshops in July 2023. Continued grant-writing support would help these entities take advantage of other funding opportunities to sustain their CIRCLE projects.

Figure 2. New funding sources secured by type



Sample: n=71 (71 funding sources secured by 51 grantees)
Source: Final evaluation survey

Decision-Maker Expertise

Data in this section come from meetings with CDEC stimulus program leads and Early Milestones.

Using an experienced intermediary like Early Milestones to administer CIRCLE Grants helped CDEC form a closer relationship with community programs. Through Early Milestones, the CIRCLE Grant program allowed CDEC to uniquely and genuinely connect with providers, as opposed to a top-down approach. The partnership with Early Milestones provided a unique ability to develop relationships with grantees that would not have been feasible without an intermediary.

Many of the CIRCLE-funded projects closely align with CDEC's strategic goals and showed success toward these goals. There is an opportunity to learn a tremendous amount from the successes of CIRCLE grantees, particularly since their goals align closely with the CDEC's strategic

goals. The grant period did not incorporate time for Early Milestones to provide a “warm handoff” between the grantees and CDEC staff so lessons learned could be applied to future program and policy decisions. Some examples of CIRCLE grant potential contributions to strategic goals include:



Expand Access to Early Childhood Services: Early Connections Learning Centers filled gaps in infant and toddler care by coaching family child care home providers to strengthen their business practices. The coaches supported workforce training and increased the quality of their services to provide more Early Head Start opportunities.



Invest in Colorado's Early Childhood Workforce: Colorado Mountain College bolstered the early childhood workforce by removing barriers for Spanish-speaking students. The college developed eight new bilingual training courses and created a substitute educator pool so students could learn on the job.



Strengthen Families: The Spring Institute for Intercultural Learning ensured dual-language learners accessed early childhood education by helping immigrant and refugee families navigate services.



While there were constraints in terms of timing and other challenges such as recruitment, retention, and capacity, the impact the CIRCLE grantees have made in one year has been absolutely remarkable. It is a testament to the dire need for this type of funding support, and the passion of grantees to transform inequitable systems and provide the best possible care for children in Colorado.

- CIRCLE Project Manager