



Colorado Evaluation & Action Lab
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Using data to drive action

Universal Preschool Evidence-Building Hub: Annual Evidence-Building Strategy Report

State Fiscal Year 2026

EVIDENCE-BUILDING STRATEGIES:

1. Update foundational resources for evaluation and evidence-informed design approach.
2. Guide year 2 of the process evaluation.
3. Lead evidence-informed design efforts to improve program implementation.
4. Engage an expert advisory group to inform evidence-building efforts.
5. Improve program data to support evidence-based decision making.
6. Advance CDEC evidence-based decision making.
7. Support program communication and accountability efforts.

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Snapshot of Evidence-Building Strategies

The Colorado Evaluation and Action Lab (Colorado Lab) serves as the [Universal Preschool Evidence-Building Hub](#) (Hub) for the Colorado Department of Early Childhood (CDEC). The goal of this Hub is to support the Colorado Universal Preschool Program's (UPK's) evaluation and evidence-informed design efforts. This annual report provides seven evidence-building strategies related to: 1) program evaluation and evidence building, and 2) evidence-based decision making support. The following summarized strategies reflect Hub priorities for the remainder of state fiscal year (SFY) 2026.

Program Evaluation and Evidence Building

Strategy 1: Update foundational resources for evaluation and evidence-informed design approach. Update foundational evidence-building resources to demonstrate how the program has adapted, inform key indicators to track progress, and communicate effectively about the program.

Strategy 2: Guide year 2 of the process evaluation. Support Child Trends in executing year 2 process evaluation activities and delivering relevant and actionable outputs.

Strategy 3: Lead evidence-informed design efforts to improve program implementation. Support evidence-building efforts related to using formative child assessments to inform teaching and learning and provide consultation on UPK quality monitoring approaches.

Strategy 4: Engage an expert advisory group to inform evidence-building efforts. Organize regular opportunities for expert advisory group to inform evidence-building activities.

Evidence-Based Decision Making Support

Strategy 5: Improve program data to support evidence-based decision making. Execute priorities in the Data Support Plan to improve the UPK evaluation and broader CDEC reporting.

Strategy 6: Advance CDEC evidence-based decision making. Collaborate with UPK and CDEC leadership to use the Hub's evidence to guide UPK program improvements and opportunities to align across CDEC program areas.

Strategy 7: Support program communication and accountability efforts. Implement the Hub's communication plan and roadmap to address legislative accountability requirements and key partner engagement.



Table of Contents

- Snapshot of Evidence-Building Strategies..... 1**
 - Program Evaluation and Evidence Building.....1
 - Evidence-Based Decision Making Support1
- Table of Contents..... 2**
- Acknowledgements 3**
- Suggested Citation 3**
- Introduction..... 1**
 - Evidence-Building Approach2
 - Evidence-Building Strategies2
- Program Evaluation and Evidence Building 4**
 - Strategy 1: Update foundational resources for evaluation and evidence-informed design approach.4
 - Strategy 2: Guide year 2 of the process evaluation.5
 - Strategy 3: Lead evidence-informed design efforts to improve program implementation....8
 - Strategy 4: Engage an expert advisory group to inform evidence-building efforts.9
- Evidence-Based Decision Making Support 13**
 - Strategy 5: Improve program data to support evidence-based decision making.13
 - Strategy 6: Advance CDEC evidence-based decision making.14
 - Strategy 7: Support program communication and accountability efforts.14

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Introduction

In 2020, Colorado voters passed [Proposition EE](#) to fund access to preschool for all 4-year-olds and qualifying 3-year-olds in Colorado. [House Bill 22-1295](#) established the Colorado Universal Preschool Program (UPK) launched under the new Colorado Department of Early Childhood (CDEC), established under the same Bill. The program welcomed its first cohort of children in the fall of 2023.

UPK aims to build efficiencies within Colorado's existing preschool system so families can more easily access and enroll in a high-quality preschool provider that best meets their needs. Four key strategies support this aim:

1. **Communication:** Develop and activate a long-term communication strategy for families, Local Coordinating Organizations (LCOs), providers, and the general public about the program.
2. **Provider Enrollment:** Enroll a variety of licensed center-, school- and home-based providers while minimizing burden and barriers to provider participation.
3. **Funding and Child Enrollment:** Fund up to 15 hours/week of preschool for all children in their year before kindergarten or up to 30 hours/week for children with qualifying factors. Fund 3-year olds with qualifying factors for 10 hours/week. Maximize use of public preschool funding sources for children and seamlessly connect families to right-fit providers.
4. **Provision of Quality Preschool:** Set program Learning Goals and Quality Standards aligned to Learning Goals, monitor provider quality, and respond to providers' quality improvement needs to ensure all children are in high-quality programs that prepare them for kindergarten.

[House Bill 22-1295](#) requires continuous evaluation and improvement of UPK and public communication of evaluation results. Some strategies have been implemented and are ready for an evaluation of their implementation; others require evidence-informed design to guide implementation before they are ready to be evaluated. In October 2024, CDEC engaged the Colorado Evaluation and Action Lab (Colorado Lab) at the University of Denver to serve as the [Universal Preschool Evidence-Building Hub](#) (Hub). This Hub helps CDEC identify evaluation and program design needs, invest in the highest priority evaluation and evidence-informed design work, coordinate research and evaluation efforts, and turn findings into useful policy and practice.

Evidence-Building Approach

Colorado’s [Evidence-Based Decision Making](#) (EBDM) approach is critical to driving smart state investments, continuous quality improvement, innovation, and outcomes. [Senate Bill 21-284](#) defined what counts as “evidence” and explained how it should be used when making funding decisions. More recently, [House Bill 24-1428](#) updated these definitions and improved how EBDM is used in the state budget process.

EBDM understands that research is just one part of making good policy and budget decisions. It combines the best research, community needs and context, and the knowledge of decision-makers and system recipients to inform recommended policy and programmatic changes. The Hub uses this approach in all its work—providing evidence to support decisions and helping state and local partners use evidence to shape policies.



Figure 1. Evidence-Based Decision Making Approach

Evidence-Building Strategies

This annual report provides seven evidence-building strategies related to: 1) program evaluation and evidence building and 2) evidence-based decision making support. These strategies reflect the Hub’s priorities for the remainder of SFY26. Evidence-building strategy reports are updated and delivered annually in the fall. Annual reports summarizing progress and evidence to date are delivered each summer; the first report was submitted in June 2025.



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Program Evaluation and Evidence Building



Program Evaluation and Evidence Building

Summary of Evidence-Building Strategies:

1. Update foundational resources for evaluation and evidence-informed design approach.
2. Guide year 2 of the process evaluation.
3. Lead evidence-informed design efforts to improve program implementation.
4. Engage an expert advisory group to inform evidence-building efforts.

Strategy 1: Update foundational resources for evaluation and evidence-informed design approach.

During the previous SFY, the Hub developed several foundational resources to guide UPK's evidence-building efforts. These include:

- An evidence-building approach that outlines phase one evaluation and evidence-informed design priorities, goals, expected outcomes, timeline, and budget for the program.
- [High-level](#) and detailed theories of change (ToCs) that capture the program's short-, medium-, and long-term outcomes, along with the key drivers and strategies to achieve them.
- A working implementation model that details activities and responsible parties for each strategy in the ToC, and assigns a level of priority.
- Initial indicators of success for CDEC's and UPK's accessibility outcome, along with a model process for continuing to develop additional indicators.
- A UPK outcomes map framework based on the UPK ToC.

These resources are based on two key inputs: 1) a thorough review of the program's founding documents and materials, which included feedback from families, providers, and community partners; and 2) direct input from the legislation's authors, state agency leaders, the Governor's Office, CDEC leadership, the UPK team, and implementation vendors. Together, these resources reflect Step 1 on the [Steps to Building Evidence](#).

SFY26 Strategy

During the current SFY, the Hub is working with Child Trends to produce recommendations for a framework of UPK components needed to promote children’s kindergarten readiness (see Strategy 3). The Hub is available to work with UPK and the larger CDEC leadership team to use this framework to update the program’s ToC. Updating UPK’s Theory of Change (ToC) shows how the program has changed over time. It captures new evidence, shifting conditions, and risks to long-term goals. It also identifies the resources needed to manage those risks and clearly connects key activities to desired outcomes. This helps the CDEC team plan more effectively for the future. An updated ToC can also help with communication efforts and to unify advocates around the resources needed to support program goals.

During SFY26, UPK’s ToC will also be used to complete a UPK outcomes map framework, documenting all of the inputs, short-term, intermediate, and longer-term outcome data needed to assess the effectiveness of the program. This outcomes map will also be used to guide a data support plan discussed in [Strategy 5](#).

Strategy 2: Guide year 2 of the process evaluation.

CDEC selected [Child Trends](#) as the UPK process evaluation vendor (with subcontracted support from Early Milestones Colorado and Early Years Forward). The Hub supported Child Trends in finalizing their phase one evaluation approach and evaluation questions (see Table 1), which is anticipated to run through December 2027. Beginning in February 2025, Child Trends successfully launched the process evaluation and produced preliminary findings in June 2025 focused on Area 1 (Building the Program Foundation) and Area 2 (Program Launch).

Table 1. Initial Universal Preschool Program Process Evaluation Questions

Area 1: Building the Program Foundation
1. Which governance, infrastructure, and funding strategies define the Universal Preschool Program?
Area 2: Program Launch
2. How do target audiences learn about the Universal Preschool Program?
3. What are the Universal Preschool Program’s application, matching, and enrollment processes? How do they prevent common barriers for families and providers?
4. What does Universal Preschool Program implementation look like at the learning setting level?

Area 3: Program Participation

5. What are the characteristics of Universal Preschool and non-Universal Preschool providers?
6. What are the characteristics of Universal Preschool and non-Universal Preschool teachers?
7. What are the characteristics of Universal Preschool and non-Universal Preschool children and families?
8. Are Universal Preschool families matched to their preferred setting? How well does their match align with their care preferences?

Area 4: Cross-cutting

9. What are the Universal Preschool Program's implementation successes? How are they maintained and leveraged?
10. What are the Universal Preschool Program's implementation challenges and barriers? How are they anticipated and addressed?
11. How is the Universal Preschool Program moving through the stages of implementation and positioned to meet future scale-up and sustainability goals?
12. What are the Universal Preschool Program's integrated data systems and improvement cycle processes for informing implementation?
13. How does the Universal Preschool Program welcome and engage stakeholders in decisions affecting implementation?
14. Is there variability in Universal Preschool Program implementation and participation for providers, staff, and children/families? Does it reflect inequities to be addressed?

Preliminary Findings from SFY25

Early findings from the process evaluation indicated that a sizeable share of families used each of the three primary application pathways (pre-registration, matching, and direct enrollment¹), and about 13% enrolled through the IEP process. This indicates that the addition of a pre-registration pathway responded to a need among families. However, more financially stable families used the pre-registration pathway and less financially stable families applied through direct enrollment, highlighting a need to further delve into these findings and understand whether these application pathways are related to different opportunities to enroll with providers. This knowledge will help determine if additional modifications are needed to balance enrollment opportunities across all families to ensure equitability in access to providers.

¹ Pre-registration occurs before the matching process window and is used by families previously enrolled in the provider, with siblings enrolled in the provider, or for staff's children. Matching occurs during a designated time in which families enroll through Bridgecare and are then matched to a provider. Direct enrollment occurs after the matching window closes and families enroll directly with a UPK provider.

SFY26 Strategy

During the current fiscal year, the Hub will continue to support Child Trends with troubleshooting challenges and ensuring that the process evaluation focus remains relevant and actionable. SFY26 process evaluation activities include:

- Analyzing and triangulating year 1 (SFY25) administrative, survey, and focus group data to answer priority evaluation questions through fall 2025. In response to CDEC and partner groups, the Hub supported Child Trends to prioritize the intersection between application pathways and enrollment among families.
- Preparing up-to-date findings as of October 2025 for CDEC's legislatively required January 2026 State Measurement for Accountable, Responsive, and Transparent Government (SMART) Act report.
- Updating the SFY26 evaluation plan to reflect CDEC and partner priorities.
- Executing an engagement strategy for Provider/LCO and Family Engagement Teams.
- Obtaining, reviewing, and analyzing refreshed and new administrative data sets related to identified priority areas.
- Updating and creating new primary data collection tools (i.e., surveys and focus group protocols).
- Conducting sampling, recruitment, and administration of surveys and focus groups. Surveys will be administered to providers and LCOs. Up to nine focus groups will be conducted with three of four of the following groups: providers, LCOs, families, early care and education (ECE) staff. Family and ECE staff protocols will also be translated into Spanish and Arabic.
- Beginning to analyze year 2 (SFY26) data and preparing an interim memo with early themes in June 2026.

The Hub is also conducting independent work that directly contributes to the goals of the process evaluation. In early SFY26, the Hub received approval for its [Linked Information Network of Colorado \(LINC\)](#) project request from all 11 data partners.² In the remainder of SFY26, the LINC team will prepare the integrated data set, and the Hub will analyze the data. The goals for this analytic work are to:

- Improve UPK referral pathways by examining access and enrollment to the program among eligible families with 4-year-olds who have engaged other state and local systems, some who have accessed UPK and some who have not.
- Improve UPK access and enrollment among children with qualifying factors by understanding whether children who meet qualifying criteria are accessing UPK at all,

² Data partners include UPK, Colorado Child Care Assistance Program, Early Intervention, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, Child Welfare, and the four regional Homelessness Management Information System organizations.

and whether they are applying for, receiving, and using additional hours of preschool coverage.

The Hub is also responding to a need identified by UPK partners to increase family voice in the evaluation where feasible. The Hub is working with the UPK product team to identify opportunities for data collection among families. Lastly, the Hub will review deliverables to ensure that they meet the needs of UPK, including legislative requirements, and support Child Trends in planning for year 3 (SFY27) process evaluation activities.

Strategy 3: Lead evidence-informed design efforts to improve program implementation.

Colorado's UPK ToC has four main strategies to ensure children are ready for kindergarten: 1) creating a long-term communication plan to raise awareness among families, providers, and the public; 2) enrolling a diverse mix of providers to meet family needs; 3) setting and assessing quality standards while helping providers improve their instructional practices; and 4) making preschool more affordable to increase participation in high-quality programs. Due to the rapid rollout of UPK, CDEC has focused on launching communication efforts, enrolling providers and children, and funding preschool hours. One of the Hub's strategic priorities is to partner with CDEC to develop resources that support the evidence-based design of UPK strategies still in progress. To date, the focus has been on developing resources to inform a provider quality monitoring and improvement strategy and a blending and braiding preschool funding strategy.

- **Supporting Early Learning Strategy.** As a foundational step, the Hub helped CDEC define UPK's Learning Goals for Children, worked with Child Trends to review the research linking [UPK Quality Standards](#) with the Learning Goals, and made recommendations for UPK's quality monitoring approach.
- **Blending and Braiding Preschool Funding.** The Hub supported CDEC's selected vendor to produce a preliminary policy analysis and a fiscal map of early childhood funding sources in Colorado. The vendor also created plans to analyze how other states manage preschool funding and produce case studies on how Colorado providers currently navigate multiple funding streams.

SFY26 Evolving Priorities and Hub Flexibility

The Hub recognizes that UPK has both ongoing evidence-informed design needs and external pressures that require flexibility in support. For example, CDEC is re-evaluating its current quality monitoring approach to maximize resources. As discovery has evolved, CDEC has identified a new priority: developing an evidence-informed approach to using formative child assessments in UPK, which the Hub may need to prioritize.

The Hub was designed to adapt to evolving program needs and is prepared to support CDEC's emerging priorities in SFY26. Its expert network is available for technical assistance, and Child Trends can adjust its scope related to supporting early learning to meet UPK's needs. In

collaboration with UPK and CDEC leadership, emerging priorities have been identified to guide this work. The Hub will continue working with CDEC to refine evidence-building and technical assistance needs. It recommends that Child Trends focus on analyzing current child assessment use among UPK providers and developing assessment literacy resources.

Supporting Early Learning Strategy

- Learning Goals and Resource Bank:
 - Support UPK leadership in socializing, refining, branding, and communicating the Learning Goals for Children.
 - Collaborate with CDEC to develop a plan for creating Professional Development Information System (PDIS) trainings based on the Learning Goals.
- Quality Standards and Monitoring:
 - Serve as implementation science advisors for CDEC as they revise UPK Quality Standards and monitoring systems.
- Formative Child Assessments:
 - Develop an assessment literacy brief for key partners.
 - Facilitate meetings with CDEC to build consensus on goals and uses of formative child assessments.
 - Analyze initial provider reporting data on use of child assessments and design protocols for more in-depth data collection on how UPK providers use child assessments, their barriers to implementation, and implementation support needs.
 - Crosswalk learning domains measured in commonly used formative child assessments with UPK Learning Goals for Children and create a landscape of commonly used child assessments, detailing their psychometric properties, training needs, infrastructure requirements, time burden, and costs.
 - Partner with CDEC to develop strategies for supporting educators in using formative child assessments to inform instruction.

Blending and Braiding Preschool Funding

- Serve as implementation science advisors to CDEC and early childhood advocacy partners as they design a coordinated, evidence-informed preschool funding model.

Strategy 4: Engage an expert advisory group to inform evidence-building efforts.

During SFY25, the Hub brought together national advisors with expertise in different areas of UPK's ToC to help guide evaluation and evidence-informed design efforts. UPK Evidence-Building Advisory Group members include:

- **Charlotte Brantley**, nationally recognized expert in early childhood policy and practice, most recently served as President and CEO of Clayton Early Learning. She currently serves on the Boards of the Colorado Children's Campaign and Rocky Mountain Prep Prek-12 Charter Schools and has held various leadership appointments within government, higher education, and non-profits. Charlotte has expertise in public policy regarding the administration of complex programs at the local, state, and national levels: She led the federal Child Care Bureau during a portion of the Clinton Administration and the Texas State Office of Child Care for a decade.
- **Dr. Linda Espinosa**, Professor Emeritus of Early Childhood Education at the University of Missouri, Columbia, has served as the Co-Director of the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER), Vice President at Bright Horizons Family Solutions, and a school administrator for 15 years in San Francisco, San Jose, and Redwood City. Her recent research and policy work have focused on effective curriculum and assessment practices for young multilingual learners. She was a contributing author to the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2017) *Promoting the Educational Success of Children Learning English* and Co-chair for the *A New Vision for High Quality Preschool Curriculum* report (2024). Dr. Espinosa has also contributed to the California Early Learning Foundations (2024) and Desired Results Development Profile (2024) revisions.
- **Demetria Joyce** is the Director of Early Childhood Strategy Implementation at the Bainum Family Foundation where she leads initiatives aimed at enhancing the accessibility, quality, and affordability of early childhood services. Previously, Demetria served as Director of Early Childhood Policy Fellowship at Bank Street College of Education where she managed the Learning Starts at Birth team's Early Childhood Policy Fellowship. Before Bank Street, Demetria worked as a Senior Policy Analyst at the University of Wisconsin where she supported a portfolio of state agencies in developing policy, resources, and services to promote equitable learning opportunities for young children. Previously, she served as the instructional manager and Pre-K Consultant at the Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning.
- **Dr. Tammy Mann** has worked on issues aimed at improving outcomes for children and youth at the local, state, and national level for over 30 years. She is involved in several systems change efforts designed to improve school readiness among young children. In 2018, she was appointed to the Virginia State Board of Education as it transitioned its birth-to-five programs to the Department of Education. She serves on the Board of Kids First Years, a local nonprofit engaged in access and quality systems change work in ECE. She is also member of a Technical Advisory Committee, convened by the Gates Foundation, to scale implementation recommendations advanced in *A New Vision for High Quality Pre-K Curriculum*, recently released by the National Academies.
- **Dr. Samuel Meisels**, Founding Executive Director Emeritus of the University of Nebraska's Buffett Early Childhood Institute, previously served as President of Erikson Institute. Prior to Erikson, he spent 21 years at the University of Michigan, where he is now professor and research scientist emeritus. His research focuses on the

development of alternative assessment strategies for young children, the impact of standardized tests on children, and developmental screening in early childhood. Dr. Meisels has published over 200, including the Work Sampling System. Dr. Meisels serves as ZERO TO THREE Board Member Emeritus, Advisor to the National Head Start Bureau, Member of the National Academy of Science's Committee on Early Childhood Pedagogy, and Senior Investigator for the National Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten Cohort.

SFY26 Strategy

During the current fiscal year, the advisory group already convened to:

- Review and discuss the Kidsights survey findings with the University of Nebraska research team and met with UPK leadership to discuss study design and potential implications of study.
- Begin discussions about best practices in implementing formative child assessments within state pre-K systems.

For the remainder of SFY26, each advisory member has committed 2 hours of advisory to the Hub or UPK team every other month. We anticipate that their time will be used to provide feedback on process evaluation reports, future directions for the evaluation, and materials developed by the Hub or Child Trends to support assessment literacy. The Hub will facilitate advisory group efforts throughout SFY26 and plan for engagement during SFY27.



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Evidence-Based Decision Making Support



Evidence-Based Decision Making Support

Summary of Evidence-Building Strategies:

5. Improve program data to support evidence-based decision making.
6. Advance CDEC evidence-based decision making.
7. Support program communication and accountability efforts.

Strategy 5: Improve program data to support evidence-based decision making.

As UPK matures, its data systems must continue to evolve to meet legislative reporting requirements, evidence-building needs, and additional demands from key partner groups seeking program updates. The Hub is well-positioned to support CDEC with its data needs: Hub leadership has provided data strategy expertise to the state of Colorado for many years, including the formation and launch of [LINC](#), service as an Early Childhood Leadership Commissioner leading the Data Subcommittee, service as a Governing Board member for the State Longitudinal Data System, and development of a [Data and Technology Strategy](#) for CDEC.

In SFY25, the Hub prepared a Data Support Plan³ to address data needs for UPK process evaluation and evidence-informed design work and provide broader expertise on CDEC's data system development to meet evidence-building needs.

SFY26 Strategy

The Hub launched the data support work in September 2025 after CDEC hired a new Director of Data, Strategy, and Impact in August 2025 who is responsible for leading CDEC's approach to data and evaluation. With this collaboration in place, the Hub will continue executing on priorities within the plan in SFY26, including:

- Document all UPK external reporting requirements, research inquiries, and operational reporting and the necessary data to fulfill these expectations.
- Create an inventory of data sources to support UPK evidence-building needs.

The pace of execution on these data support activities will align with the capacity of the Division of Data, Strategy, and Impact to engage as needed to move the work forward. The Hub will revisit and adjust timelines as needed to accommodate the demands of the Division.

³ Revised September 2025.

Strategy 6: Advance CDEC evidence-based decision making.

The Hub's role goes beyond generating research evidence. It works closely with CDEC to ensure that evidence informs real decisions. In SFY25, the Hub met weekly with UPK leadership to share updates on progress and key findings, and to stay informed about the program's current needs.

These regular check-ins allowed the Hub to provide timely, relevant evidence to support and strengthen UPK leadership's decisions. Examples include:

- Providing evidence about the importance of UPK programs for parental employment stability and earnings, particularly with more hours of coverage, for the UPK team to include in its budget request.
- Strengthening internal CDEC memos on UPK's anticipated approach to quality work with the best available evidence.

SFY26 Strategy

In SFY26, the Hub will continue regular meetings with UPK leadership and the Director of the Division of Early Learning and Workforce to identify new ways to use evidence in support of the program. The Hub will also invite the CDEC Executive Team to all planned presentations of its evidence-building work. This will help ensure division-wide awareness and identify opportunities to align efforts across CDEC.

Strategy 7: Support program communication and accountability efforts.

[House Bill 22-1295](#) holds UPK accountable for continuous evaluation and improvement and public communication of evaluation results. To help CDEC meet these goals, the Hub created and launched a communications plan and roadmap in SFY25. These tools help the Hub share progress and findings from its evidence-building work with key CDEC internal and external partners—such as other CDEC divisions, the Governor's Office, Early Childhood Leadership Commission, funders, and advocates—who can use the information to support continuous improvement.

SFY26 Strategy

In SFY26, the Hub will work with CDEC to carry out the communications plan and find new, strategic ways to share evidence with key partners. Example Hub communication efforts include:

- Preparing a comprehensive summary of all ongoing evidence-building efforts and findings to date in November to support dual Joint Budget Committee and SMART Act purposes.

- Providing bi-weekly updates for UPK to include in meetings with the Governor’s Office and CDEC’s Executive Brief.
- Preparing customized slides on the Hub’s work for UPK leadership to present to all LCOs.
- Organizing preview sessions with the Colorado Early Childhood Data Advocacy Group to highlight key findings from the UPK process evaluation to inform messaging about the program.

This communications strategy is especially important because the evaluation identified communication as a key area for improvement in UPK. The Hub is committed to helping CDEC demonstrate this improvement by sharing timely, accurate information about UPK’s evidence-building work.

Conclusion

The Hub’s evidence-building strategy supports UPK’s commitment to continuous improvement, accountability, and transparency. Across SFY25 and into SFY26, the Hub has played a central role in helping CDEC design a solid foundation for evaluation, generate actionable insights, improve communication, and build data infrastructure that supports decision making. These efforts are aligned with legislative requirements and informed by meaningful engagement with families, providers, policymakers, and national experts.

As UPK continues to evolve in a dynamic policy environment, the Hub will remain a key partner in strengthening the program through responsive evaluation, strategic learning, and evidence-informed design. Together with CDEC and its partners, the Hub will ensure that data and evidence are not only generated, but also used, to drive meaningful improvements in early childhood outcomes across Colorado.