

Early Childhood Stimulus Evaluation: *Spotlight on Family Strengthening*

Background

Between 2021 and 2022, the Colorado Department of Early Childhood (CDEC) received over \$700 million in federal and state stimulus funding to strengthen and expand the early childhood (EC) sector in Colorado. CDEC is distributing stimulus funds between February 2022 and September 2024 based on feedback from over 2,300 child care providers, families, and other stakeholders.

CDEC is dedicated to evaluating the stimulus-funded activities to ensure the goals of the funds were met and to identify opportunities for ongoing learning, scalability, and sustainability. CDEC partnered with the Colorado Evaluation and Action Lab (Colorado Lab) at the University of Denver to facilitate this complex work as the EC Evaluation Hub. The Colorado Lab is contracting with evaluation partners, as appropriate, to conduct high-quality evaluations of prioritized stimulus activities.

Aligned Evaluation Activities

Together with CDEC and EC experts, the Colorado Lab prioritized 18 activities - comprising about 90% of stimulus funds - that have significant potential for meaningful and actionable evaluation. The Colorado Lab is also coordinating with evaluation teams funded outside of the EC Evaluation Hub to ensure any evaluation findings related to stimulus-funded activities are aligned with Hub deliverables and communications to CDEC. The Colorado Lab is leading evaluations of the following stimulus-funded activities outside of the Hub:

- **Early Childhood Mental Health (ECMH) Consultation**
- **Early Literacy & Family Engagement: Imagination Library**

While these activities have varying aims and implementation models, they generally support family strengthening for families with children 5 and under. There are distinct evaluation efforts for each activity and generally include:

- Understanding program implementation, including reach, access, and participation.
- Measuring fidelity of implementation and outcomes (e.g., referral connection rates, child well-being changes, kindergarten readiness) to assess program impact.
- Unearthing challenges, success factors, and lessons learned to inform future investments in policy and practice.

These evaluations rely primarily on administrative data alongside narrative-based data from stakeholders to make meaning of findings and develop actionable recommendations.

Evaluation Teams

The Colorado Lab is leading the evaluation work for ECMH Consultation and Early Literacy & Family Engagement: Imagination Library activities, which have implementation and evaluation timelines beyond stimulus funding. To ensure alignment, briefs will be developed at key points of the stimulus-funding timeline to present available evaluation findings together with other EC Evaluation Hub findings.