



## Colorado Universal Preschool Program Evidence Building



Colorado law ([HB22-1295](#)) authorized the Colorado Department of Early Childhood (CDEC) to conduct an independent evaluation to inform continuous improvement of the [Colorado Universal Preschool Program](#) (UPK). [HB24-1428](#) requires the use of evidence for decision making for all programs, including UPK.

The Colorado Evaluation and Action Lab (Colorado Lab) serves as the [UPK Evidence-Building Hub](#) (the Hub), coordinating all evaluation and evidence-informed design activities for the program, including:

- **Process Evaluation:** Aligned with the [Steps to Building Evidence](#), evaluating what worked well in the initial implementation of UPK and what can be improved, applying learnings to further strengthen the program.
- **Quality Monitoring and Provider Support:** Building evidence to design and support the provision and measurement of quality care to facilitate children's readiness for kindergarten.
- **Blended and Braided Funding Model:** Building evidence to design a funding model to help families more easily maximize available preschool funding resources.
- **Data Capacity Building:** Executing a plan to improve CDEC's program data for reporting and evidence-building efforts.

**Note:** An evaluation of CDEC is also underway and is being conducted by Public Consulting Group. This is an evaluation of the *Department* itself; it is not part of the Colorado Lab's evidence building for CDEC *programs*, including UPK. You can learn more about the Department evaluation [here](#).

## August 2025 Update and Outlook

### Process Evaluation



#### Completed in State Fiscal Year 2025

In State Fiscal Year (SFY) 2025, the Hub facilitated contracting with [Child Trends](#), which will lead this evaluation with support from [Early Milestones Colorado](#) and [Early Years Forward](#). The evaluation team:

- Developed a detailed evaluation plan and conducted interviews, focus groups, and surveys with providers, Local Coordinating Organizations (LCOs), and state leaders.
- Obtained and began analyzing UPK administrative data.
- Began engagement with the UPK Evidence-Building Advisory Group, families, LCOs, and providers.



#### What We're Learning

Early themes from initial quantitative and qualitative analysis show:

- Preliminary analyses indicate that over a quarter of UPK applicants went through the matching process while the remaining families went through other pathways (i.e., pre-registration, direct enrollment, or Individualized Education Program process).
- The pre-registration group was notably more advantaged (e.g., higher income and less involvement in the child welfare system) than the direct enrollment group across all demographic and qualifying factors.

- There is an overall recognition that the program has accomplished a lot in a short period of time, particularly in the context of a new state department and the COVID-19 pandemic. Accomplishments included increased enrollment of 4-year-old children and subsidized tuition for participating families.
- There is a need for stronger, more direct, and concise communications from CDEC to target audiences, particularly for detailed program policies and procedures and clear roles and responsibilities (i.e., there is confusion about CDEC versus LCO responsibilities).

### Planned for State Fiscal Year 2026

Child Trends will:

- Finalize year 1 (SYF25) findings to include in CDEC's legislatively required January 2026 State Measurement for Accountable, Responsive, and Transparent Government (SMART) Act report.
- Continue annual data collection and analysis to answer evaluation questions, adding focus groups with families (in English, Spanish, and Arabic) and possibly early care and education (ECE) staff, depending on funding.
- Hold engagement sessions with providers, LCOs, and families about evaluation findings.

## Quality Monitoring and Provider Support



### Completed in State Fiscal Year 2025

The Hub engaged three partners—Dr. Sam Meisels, [Butler Institute for Families](#), and Child Trends—to design UPK program features to help move it from a funding stream to a cohesive high-quality program. The partners:

- Drafted UPK Learning Goals for Children (i.e., what children need to know and be able to do as they enter kindergarten).
- Conducted a literature review of pre-K evaluation reports from other states to identify evidence linking quality standards to Colorado's UPK Learning Goals for Children.
- Reviewed and compared UPK Quality Standards to existing quality monitoring efforts in Colorado, and made recommendations for how to successfully embed UPK quality monitoring in these existing efforts.

### What We're Learning

A review of pre-K evaluations found no consistent patterns in the type or number of quality standards associated with improved outcomes related to Colorado UPK's Learning Goals for Children. However, higher dosage (e.g., 2 years or full-day attendance) may support stronger learning gains. Research also suggests better outcomes with specific quality standards like higher teacher-child interaction scores and smaller class sizes.



### Planned for State Fiscal Year 2026

Child Trends and the Hub will:

- Review documentation, conduct interviews, and analyze administrative data to understand how existing quality monitoring systems, policies, and practices might be leveraged for UPK.
- Develop recommendations for infrastructure needed to support high-quality UPK programming that is well-positioned to meet UPK's learning goals for children.

## Blended and Braided Funding Model



### Completed in State Fiscal Year 2025

The Hub supported contracting with the [Public Consulting Group](#)—together with support from the [National Institute for Early Education Research](#) and [Center for Early Learning Funding Equity](#)—to begin the design of a research-based preschool funding model for Colorado. This team:

- Conducted a preliminary policy analysis of ECE funding sources available in Colorado.

- Developed a plan for conducting a landscape analysis of other states with successful blended and braided funding models that could guide Colorado's model.
- Developed a plan for producing case studies of how preschool providers in Colorado currently manage multiple funding streams and considerations for Colorado's model.

## What We're Learning

The policy analysis highlighted challenges specific to coordinating federal "education" funding with UPK dollars. The policy analysis also documented variability in school districts' decision making regarding if and how to use federal funding. This points to the need for consensus building among the Governor, the Commissioner of Education, and individual school districts.

## Data Capacity Building



### Completed in State Fiscal Year 2025

The Hub:

- Created a UPK Data Support Plan to document all program reporting expectations, what existing data can be used, and how to improve systems to address data gaps.
- Developed an outcomes framework and draft indicators to track priority UPK outcomes.

### Planned for State Fiscal Year 2026

The Hub will carry out key parts of the Data Support Plan and continue populating the outcomes framework.

## Hub Strategic Support



### Completed in State Fiscal Year 2025

The Hub:

- Brought together an advisory group of national experts to inform evidence-building efforts.
- Provided evidence for the SFY25 SMART Act report to meet legislative requirements and support program accountability.
- Drafted a communications plan and worked with partner groups to share updates and future plans for building evidence.

### Planned for State Fiscal Year 2026

The Hub will regularly engage the UPK evidence-building advisory group, submit evidence-building content to the annual SMART Act report, and continue communicating updates and findings with partner groups.



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