

# POLICY PATHWAYS

## The Status of Early Childhood Education in Colorado



A report based on participant feedback at *Policy Pathways: A Conversation with Legislators*, a special session held at the Rocky Mountain Early Childhood Conference- a program of Denver's Early Childhood Council, March 2025

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**Policy Pathways: A Conversation with Legislators**, a special session held at the 2025 Rocky Mountain Early Childhood Conference - a program of Denver's Early Childhood Council, brought together over 120 early learning professionals, advocates, and policymakers to discuss the current state of early childhood education (ECE) in Colorado. The conversation highlighted both pressing concerns and innovative solutions, with a focus on funding, workforce challenges, policy reforms, and community engagement.

### KEY CHALLENGES

Colorado's ECE system faces significant financial and structural hurdles. Participants raised concerns about Child Care Assistance Program (CCCAP) funding freezes, low Universal Pre-K (UPK) reimbursement rates, early intervention and special education cuts, and the impact of unfunded mandates. Child care costs remain prohibitively high, while workforce shortages, low wages, advocacy fatigue, and general uncertainty have led to a sense of instability. Many are concerned about the broader economic impacts, including reduced workforce participation and economic inequities.

### PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

- **Workforce Investments** - Amplified need for higher wages, expanded career pathways, mental health support
- **Funding Stability** - Reforming TABOR, expanding tax credits, increasing state and federal investments
- **Policy Reforms** - A more flexible CCCAP model, streamlined licensing, revisiting child-staff ratios
- **Equity & Inclusion** - Language accessibility, rural program support, special needs inclusion
- **Advocacy & Public Awareness** - Strengthening coalitions, engaging policymakers, using data-driven storytelling
- **Local Solutions** - Exploring public-private partnerships, state and local taxation models, flexible tuition options

### RECOGNIZING IMPACTFUL POLICY WINS

Despite the challenges, Colorado has made significant progress in early childhood policy. Tax credits, full-day kindergarten, and UPK have eased financial burdens for families. The creation of the Colorado Department of Early Childhood (CDEC), increased mental health funding, and bipartisan and voter support for Proposition EE have demonstrated the state's commitment to ECE. Listening sessions with State QRIS have provided hope to some participants and their communities. Employer-based child care investments are also gaining traction.

### FEDERAL AND LOCAL CONSIDERATIONS

At the federal level, concerns include potential cuts to Head Start and Early Intervention, defunding the Department of Education, fears of disruption to Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) funds, and uncertain CCCAP funding.

Locally, the rigidity of CCCAP, wage disparities, and rural funding gaps highlight the need for stronger community engagement and financial sustainability.

### THE PATH FORWARD

Colorado must focus on long-term, sustainable investments that prioritize affordability, workforce recognition and retention, and equitable access. By leveraging tax credits, innovative funding models, and collaborative policymaking, the state can build on its successes and ensure a stronger, more inclusive early childhood system for all families.

# POLICY PATHWAYS: TAKEAWAYS



In Colorado, ECE is comprised of a robust, collaborative ecosystem of partners, all working with the health and success of children in mind. Families, providers, and advocates are working continuously to build a system that ensures every child has access to high-quality early learning opportunities, but persistent challenges threaten progress.

## THE STRUGGLES: BARRIERS TO SUCCESS

Despite past wins, Colorado's ECE system is still grappling with major obstacles:

- Funding shortfalls are leading to child care program closures and gaps in services.
- CCCAP freezes leave families without critical subsidies, while low UPK reimbursement rates strain providers.
- Early Intervention and special education funding cuts hurt the children and families who need the most support.
- Workforce shortages continue; with low wages and a lack of career incentives and professional development opportunities, educators are being pushed out of the field.
- Rural communities face additional hurdles with fewer program options and limited partnership opportunities.

These issues aren't just financial, they are systemic. The true cost of care is falling on the shoulders of underpaid educators.

*"It feels as though the system is putting the economy and family needs on the backs of the very caring, passionate individuals who will not let our children lose."*

– Policy Pathways Participant



*"We need policies that protect families' ability to take time off work so teachers can have time off to reduce burnout and turnover."*

– Policy Pathways Participant



# THE IDEAS: WHAT CAN BE DONE?

*“Children don’t live their lives in silos. If we can widen our lens of care, concerns, advocate, and think outside the box of resources beyond CDEC perhaps solutions might spark & grow.”*  
– Policy Pathways Participant

To create a stronger, more sustainable ECE system, participants offered the following recommendations.

## • **Funding Stability:**

- Expand tax credits and offer a sliding-scale UPK model for those who don’t need full funding to release funds for those who do.
- Reform TABOR to allow for greater state investment in early childhood programs.
- Increase funding for Head Start and Early Intervention services.
- Investigate how subsidies and tax breaks for corporations and wealthy Coloradans are reducing funding for ECE and families in need.
- Replicate Denver Preschool Program (DPP) in other counties through city/county taxation.
- Encourage public-private partnerships to support local funding solutions.

## • **Workforce Investments:**

- Increase salaries and benefits for early educators.
- Provide more apprenticeships, mentorships, and career pathways.
- Improve mental health resources for teachers.
- Reform PDIS credentialing to provide truly qualified teachers and directors by placing more value on ECE-specific training.
- Continue investments in family child care homes and small programs.

## • **Policy & Program Improvements:**

- Redesign CCCAP to be more flexible and equitable.
- Streamline licensing and quality rating systems to reduce administrative burdens.
- Re-evaluate child-staff ratios to ensure a balance between quality and accessibility.

## • **Equity & Inclusion:**

- Provide language justice with interpreters and translated materials.
- Increase support for children with special needs and diverse learning styles.
- Develop long term strategy to expand access for infants and toddlers.
- Ensure rural communities receive equitable access to funding and program development.

## • **Stronger Advocacy & Awareness:**

- Use data-driven storytelling to showcase the impact of ECE.
- Engage business leaders and policymakers in early childhood discussions.
- Make advocacy accessible/build advocates: create simple messages and education for providers, families, and communities.
- Encourage decision-makers to visit child care centers before implementing new policies.



*“Please consider visiting child care centers before adding regulations.”*  
– Policy Pathways Participant



## THE WINS: WHAT'S WORKING?

*"Kids are learning, growing, and happy." – Policy Pathways Participant*

Despite the challenges, there have been major policy victories:

- **Financial Relief for Families & Providers:**
  - Tax credits like the ECE Tax Credit, Child Care Tax Credit, and Family Affordability Tax Credit have made a difference.
  - Full-day kindergarten and UPK expansion have given more families access to early learning.
- **Increased Investment & Support:**
  - The creation of CDEC was a bipartisan win for ECE.
  - Proposition EE and stimulus funding helped stabilize programs.
  - Mental health resources for ECE providers have expanded.
- **Flexibility & Innovation:**
  - UPK's mixed delivery system offers families more choice.
  - Employer-based child care programs are growing.
  - Rural communities are exploring new models to sustain local programs.



*"Families are feeling supported." – Policy Pathways Participant*

## THE ROAD AHEAD: WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Colorado must prioritize sustainable investments in ECE by:

- Strengthening workforce supports to make child care a respected, well-paid career.
- Expanding funding sources to avoid reliance on temporary fixes.
- Ensuring flexibility in policies to meet the diverse needs of families and providers.
- Elevating community voices so policies reflect real-world experiences.

ECE is more than just child care, it's the foundation of a strong economy, a thriving workforce, and a brighter future for every child. Colorado has made progress, but sustained investment and bold policy decisions will determine how well that progress continues.



What would YOU add to the Colorado early childhood policy conversation?

If you would like to send comments, stay in touch, and learn about future Policy Pathways conversations, contact [info@denverearlychildhood.org](mailto:info@denverearlychildhood.org).

