



INVESTING IN THE FUTURE MEANS PRIORITIZING FAMILIES WITH YOUNG CHILDREN: SETTING A POLICY AGENDA THAT PUTS CHILDREN FIRST TO MOVE COLORADO FORWARD

Bill Jaeger, Colorado Children's Campaign

Colorado can and should be among the best places in the nation to raise a child. Instead, we are among the states with the largest gaps in academic performance between children of color and their peers and between children from less-resourced families and their more affluent counterparts. On measures of child health, obesity, and families' ability to afford child care, we are about average. And in direct correlation to our state's inequality of opportunity, we allocate significantly fewer dollars to programs supporting children's healthy development and education than most states in the US.

Failure to invest in our young children and their families means children under age six are most likely to live in poverty, we have more than 9,000 eligible four-year-olds who lack access to the Colorado Preschool Program or Head Start, and fewer than 11 percent of children who fail initial screening receive social-emotional or mental health services.

To transform these outcomes, we need to transform our priorities. Early childhood represents the time in a child's life, and in the stage of a family's development, when we lay the foundation for what is to come. If we want communities throughout Colorado to be places where every person can succeed, then we have to work toward communities and a Colorado where every child is healthy, valued, and thriving.

Among the most significant barriers to realizing this goal are public perception and prioritization. Too many view early care and learning and child development as not essential to a pipeline of education opportunities and future measures of health and well-being when, in fact, we know the exact opposite to be true.

So at the Colorado Children's Campaign — a nonpartisan research, policy, and advocacy organization that improves child well-being in health, education, and early childhood — we are working to change that narrative and set medium- and long-term early childhood policy goals for Colorado. We took important first steps to change things for the better this year.

The 2018 legislative session was a big one for early childhood, ushering in more than a dozen pieces of legislation receiving bipartisan support and significant investments to make this stage of development a priority. Wins included policy initiatives to make child care more affordable, expanded access to preschool and full-day kindergarten,

improved coordination of services for children with developmental delays, and investments to support the training, education, and certification of the early care and education workforce. We also saw budget investments to expand access to an evidence-based parenting and teacher training program to advance early childhood social and emotional development and behavioral health in addition to dramatic increases to improve access to quality early care and education through the Colorado Child Care Assistance Program.

Alongside these policy successes, the Children's Campaign, in partnership with Clayton Early Learning, produced an extensive report, *Early Childhood Policy Strategies for Colorado*, that captures a comprehensive set of medium- and long-term policy strategies to holistically address young children's early care, learning, and healthy development in the context of their families. Developed through a process that included broad community feedback and in partnership with a cross-sector advisory board of 36 members representing communities across the state, this report will help state leaders prioritize issues most in need of advancement and help stakeholders advance a shared policy agenda in support of young children and their families. It represents the first time a comprehensive set of medium- and long-term policy strategies across the full spectrum of issues around early care has been compiled in one place in Colorado. It was encouraging to see our state's early childhood advisory board, the Early Childhood Leadership Commission, use the report to help shape its roadmap of priorities for current and incoming policymakers. And we have seen evidence of the report increasing cohesion among a diversity of voices and interests to help place a set of significant policy changes atop the state's agenda for children and families.

With respect to public perception, we have started to see momentum in the business community around the value of child care both as a work support and long-term strategy to address talent gaps. We also see philanthropic leaders in the health sector and health care professionals embracing early care and education to proactively address health needs. The basic premise of "if we raise healthier, better educated children, we will have healthier adults and a less costly health care system" is resonating with Colorado's policymakers. As one example, the Colorado's Cost Commission on Affordable Health Care issued recommendations focused on increasing access to quality early care and education and improving state systems for screening, referral, and care coordination for children facing development delays or early adversity. Continuing to shift attention to early care and education as a viable strategy to address issues including family economic security, health care costs, and community economic development will move Colorado toward a health and human services sector that fully embraces a 2Gen approach.



Bill Jaeger
Vice President of Early Childhood and Policy Initiatives
Colorado Children's Campaign

Bill Jaeger serves as the vice president of early childhood initiatives at the Colorado Children's Campaign, leading efforts to advance child care, early learning, and mental health policy efforts to support Colorado's youngest children. The Campaign is a non-profit, non-partisan research, policy, and advocacy organization committed to ensuring every chance for every child.