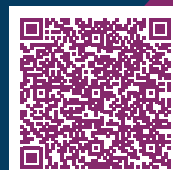




JULY 2026

Designing a Stronger Early Childhood Workforce Pipeline:

*Aligning Access, Pathways, and
Investment Across Colorado's
Education Systems*



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INTRODUCTION

A robust early childhood education (ECE) ecosystem is necessary for a thriving workforce: for families who need to be sure their young children are safe while they themselves go to work; for educators who need to earn a livable wage that allows them to thrive; and most importantly, for children, who need high-quality access to the earliest foundations of learning. Preparing and supporting the adults who teach young children is increasingly seen as a critical foundation to Colorado's education investments. Colorado has long been a pioneer in education innovation — our unique local control context incentivizes local solutions to local challenges and can be one of our state's greatest assets. When local lessons inform statewide approaches, policies and systems are stronger and more sustainable. Colorado's ECE system is no exception: it is characterized by strong local leadership, deep practitioner expertise, and recent policy and practice momentum that has broadened access statewide.

That said, the system remains fragmented, unevenly resourced, and financially unsustainable for both providers and educators. These pressures show up most clearly in rural communities, infant and toddler settings, and among multilingual and low-income educators, where affordability, navigation barriers, and limited advancement opportunities continue to constrain the pipeline.

At the same time, the ECE workforce ecosystem is primed for evolution. Bright spots across the state have demonstrated that when vision, effort, and resources align, quality educator pathways can emerge. With growing statewide momentum — including a focused Department of Early Childhood committed to alignment — the conditions for deeper integration are increasingly within reach.

The Buell Foundation partners with hundreds of organizations across Colorado to support early childhood. Through strategic philanthropy and intentional elevation of lessons learned, the Foundation serves as a catalyst for policies and practices that support strong outcomes for students, families, and communities in Colorado. In 2025, noting statewide momentum around alignment across PK-12, postsecondary education and training, and workforce efforts, the Buell Foundation partnered with Colorado Education Initiative (CEI) as Colorado's PK-12 intermediary to examine opportunities to support deeper integration across the ECE ecosystem.

This work builds upon and complements recent state-level and philanthropic investments in ECE workforce development — many of which focused on compensation, credentialing, and local implementation strategies. The issues named are not new, but with renewed momentum in ECE, the time is right to address a critical and underexplored area: the role of ECE career pathways in preparing future early childhood educators. By exploring both where these efforts exist and the conditions that enable or constrain them, this report offers actionable guidance for scaling and sustaining more integrated approaches.

Stakeholder Engagement and Approach

This report was informed by a mixed-method landscape analysis that integrated quantitative data with qualitative insights from across Colorado's ECE ecosystem. The approach was designed to understand system-wide priorities, policies, and points of alignment — and misalignment — across ECE, PK-12, postsecondary education, and workforce systems.

CEI conducted a comprehensive review of relevant state-level policies, data, and program documentation, including materials from the Colorado Community College System (CCCS), the Colorado Department of Education (CDE), and the Colorado Department of Early Childhood (CDEC). This analysis was complemented by targeted interviews with nearly 70 stakeholders representing a cross-section of the ECE ecosystem, including state agency and policy leaders, regional intermediaries, school district leaders, PK-12 and institution of higher education (IHE) program coordinators, ECE center directors and educators, and educators implementing ECE career pathways. Interviewees were intentionally identified through a structured stakeholder-mapping process, leveraging subject-matter experts and ecosystem leaders to ensure representation across roles and geographic regions of the state. A small steering committee of key field leaders also served as strategic thought partners, advising on research design, interviewee identification and outreach, and thematic sensemaking. The research and recommendations contained herein would not be complete without the dedicated time and expertise of the participants.

Together, these inputs were used to examine both the current landscape and the lived experience of navigating ECE educator pathways. The analysis was guided by three core questions:

- Where do ECE educator pathways exist across the state, and to what extent are they aligned with PK-12 educator pathways?
- What conditions define high-quality educator preparation, and what gaps limit alignment, progression, and persistence?
- Where are pathways being implemented effectively, and what promising practices related to PK-12 integration and system design can be elevated?

This approach enabled CEI to identify patterns across regions and systems, surface implementation realities, and highlight examples with relevance for state-level policy, investment, and system design.



REPORT OVERVIEW

This report establishes a comprehensive understanding of the current state of ECE career pathways, illuminates the opportunities and bright spots leading toward statewide innovation, and offers actionable recommendations to complement state-led efforts in ECE workforce development. Throughout this report, “pathway” refers to any intentionally designed sequence of coursework, credentials, and work-based learning experience that moves a learner toward a career in early childhood education, whether starting in high school, community college, or an employer setting. These recommendations aim to increase access to sustainable ECE careers; capitalize on the rich “blur space” between PK-12, postsecondary education and training, and the workforce; and leverage and align local investments to maximize impact.

This report intends to:

- **Map** where and how ECE training opportunities are occurring across Colorado and the extent to which they are integrated with K-12 career-connected learning pathways.
- **Assess** the strengths and challenges of existing ECE training structures, with a focus on access, quality, and alignment across systems.
- **Identify** and amplify promising practices, bright spots, and regional exemplars that demonstrate scalable or innovative approaches to ECE workforce development.
- **Recommend** opportunities for innovation, policy alignment, and strategic investment that strengthen ECE pathways statewide.

The report is organized around three core areas. Within each, it examines specific themes and captures the current state, key insights and tensions, and bright spots that demonstrate how local and regional success can scale into a more coordinated, coherent, and durable ECE workforce. These recommendations

aim to leverage regional innovations and build on promising practices to open doors for learners to pursue stable ECE careers, regardless of where they are located in the state.

- **Increasing the Pool:** Access is expanding, but pathway coherence and quality support systems are lagging; the ECE profession remains undervalued despite rising demand and expectations.
- **Blurring the Lines Across ECE, K-12, Postsecondary Education and Training, and Workforce:** Birth-20 alignment opportunities exist, but access and transferability remain fragmented.
- **Aligned Investments to Maximize Impact:** Financial structures discourage entry and advancement — especially in high-need roles; policy momentum is creating opportunity but also implementation friction; regional leadership plays a critical role in creating coherence within a complex system.

The ongoing efforts highlighted in this report and its recommendations matter for multiple Colorado stakeholders. **For students and adults** interested in pursuing ECE educator careers, they create earlier, more coherent pathways into meaningful professions that foster belonging, economic mobility, and purpose. **For families**, they expand access to high-quality early learning experiences during the critically important developmental years from birth to age 5 while strengthening the workforce pipeline that supports child development. For communities, they build local capacity for stable, well-prepared ECE professionals and address chronic workforce shortages and turnover. **For school districts**, they strengthen career-connected learning opportunities and align educator pathway efforts to support ECE-12 alignment, shared credentials, concurrent enrollment, and “grow your own” teacher pipelines. **For industry and for Colorado as a whole**, they support a foundational sector that enables family employment and contributes to a thriving, educated economy.



INCREASING THE POOL

Access is Expanding, but Pathway Coherence and Quality Support Systems are Lagging

Colorado's openness to multiple entry routes into ECE is a core strength of its workforce system. Concurrent enrollment, the state's ECE Professional Development Information System (PDIS), apprenticeships, stackable credentials, alternative licensure, and credit-for-prior-learning together create a wide range of access points that meet different learners where they are. While not every pathway is available for every participant, these routes serve high school students, paraprofessionals, career changers, and incumbent early childhood professionals — reflecting both regional context and statewide workforce needs.

Based on ecosystem mapping, CEI mapped four primary structural models through which access to early childhood educator preparation currently occurs in Colorado. Each model reflects differences in governance, delivery mechanisms, and entry points into the ECE workforce pipeline:

» **Traditional Postsecondary Credentialing Pathways:**

These pathways consist of standalone ECE programs offered directly through two- and four-year IHEs. They provide structured academic routes toward credentials or degrees aligned with formal licensure or qualification requirements.

- » **Dual Enrollment-Enabled Pathways:** These collaborative models allow high school students to access ECE coursework or credential opportunities through partnerships between K-12 districts and IHEs. They leverage concurrent enrollment infrastructure to introduce educator identity, professional expectations, and postsecondary credit attainment while students remain in high school, creating early entry points into the workforce pipeline and strengthening PK-12 and higher education alignment.

- » **Regional Shared Delivery Models:** These collaborative structures enable multiple districts or partners to jointly provide coursework or credential pathways by sharing instructors, enrollment, or program infrastructure. They often emerge in response to cost pressures, enrollment thresholds, and instructor qualification requirements that make independent program delivery difficult.

- » **Work-Based and Employer-Mediated Pathways:** These pathways embed educator preparation within employment settings, allowing participants to earn credentials while working. Examples include district-led grow-your-own models, apprenticeships, and employer-supported advancement programs for paraprofessionals or assistants.

Across these models, many of the most promising designs share a common feature: they embed training in the workplace itself, reducing the cost of classroom-based preparation and making the return on investment clearer for both educators and employers.

Cross-System Credentialing

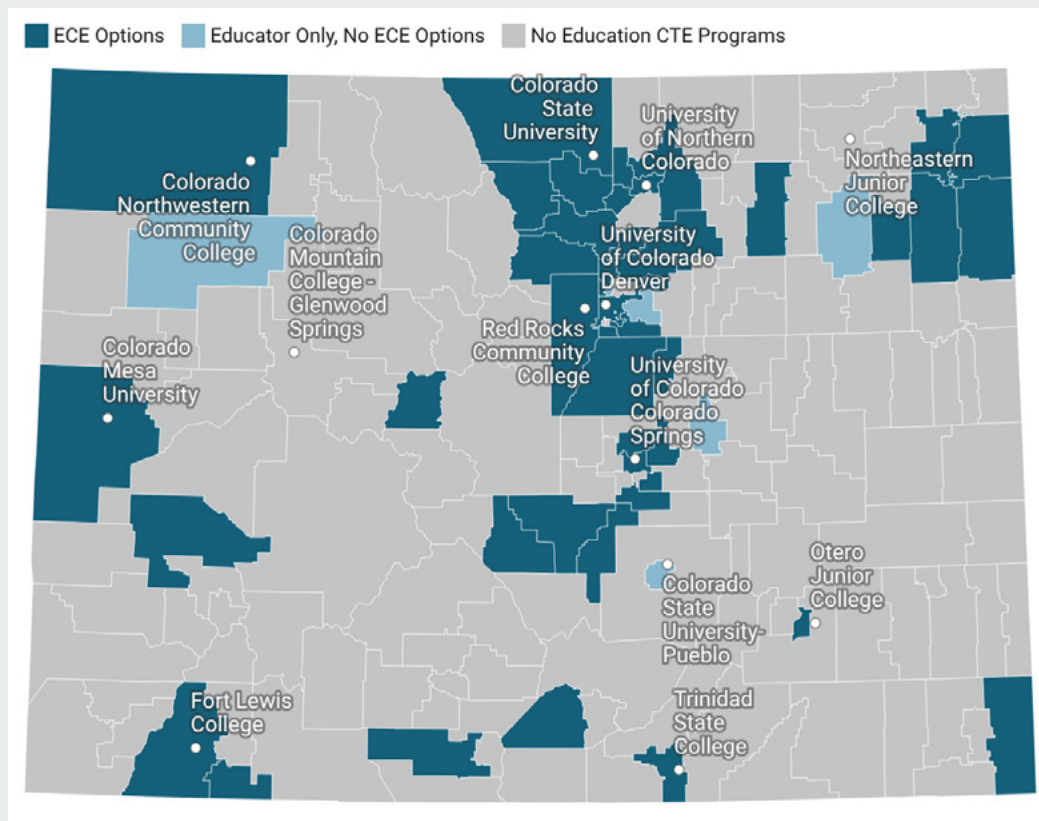
PDIS serves as Colorado's central hub for tracking ECE professional credentials, coursework, and training completion. While not a program in itself, PDIS intersects with all access models and plays an influential role in shaping consistency and visibility across the workforce. Stakeholders frequently cite its value in establishing shared standards while also noting limitations related to usability, rigor, and alignment with higher education credit systems. PDIS provides visibility across pathways but does not directly enable coordinated progression between PK-12 education, postsecondary systems, and licensure.

While Colorado has invested heavily in expanding entry points into the early childhood workforce, the system has not yet been designed to support coherent progression, quality, and mobility at scale.

Mapping the Landscape

To understand where early childhood educator pathway infrastructure currently exists or could be expanded, CEI developed a statewide map using a layered, inclusive methodology. While a comprehensive inventory of CTE and IHE programs exists, school districts may also be implementing curriculum or providing meaningful work-based learning experiences that are not captured through formal CTE structures. For this reason, rather than representing a comprehensive inventory of active programs, the map reflects where structures for educator pathways appear to be present across systems.

Data sources included statewide CTE pathway approvals, two-year college programs of study and articulation agreements, district-level course offerings and support programs, and regional insight from CEI's career-connected learning team. This map highlights where targeted investment could move opportunity from theory into practice.



Educator CTE Programs Across Colorado

This map shows where CTE-approved early childhood educator pathways currently exist across Colorado. It does not capture every concurrent enrollment agreement between school districts and IHEs, only those connected to an active, approved CTE program. Where a district doesn't appear, a pathway may still exist; it may simply not yet be formalized through CTE approval.

1. This map only reflects CTE-approved programs that have been updated in the Active CTE Program database and is not an exhaustive list of all potential opportunities. Pending programs and concurrent enrollment agreements that are not part of a CTE-approved pathway may not be listed. 2. Some IHEs may be hidden due to geographical overlap (e.g., Aims and UNC). Four-year IHEs are prioritized when this occurs since two-year partners are in district descriptions. A full list of IHEs is included in CEI's report. 3. IHEs are those that have ECE programs 4. Implementation and program depth vary by district and region.

Source: [Colorado Community College System \(CCCS\) Active CTE Program Directory](#); [CEI Internal Records](#) Created with [Datawrapper](#)



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Fragmentation, Mobility Barriers, and Emerging Risks

The expansion of entry points into Colorado's early childhood workforce — without shared structures for alignment and progression — has contributed to fragmentation. While PDIS documents coursework and credentials, there is no consistent transfer or articulation across IHEs and licensure systems; oversight is divided across agencies with differing standards; and special education service delivery diverges between ECE and K-12 settings. Together, these misalignments create a system that is accessible at entry but difficult to navigate over time.

As individuals move through the system, they often encounter stalls, gaps, and barriers when attempting to advance across career pathways. These navigation challenges introduce attrition points, particularly for individuals balancing work, family responsibilities, and education while seeking upward mobility. While asynchronous trainings tracked through PDIS and online options have expanded access — especially in rural areas — preparation experiences vary widely, and higher education capacity remains uneven across the state. In some rural regions, a single faculty member may serve students across hundreds of miles, limiting opportunities for sustained mentorship and supervised practicum experiences.

Work experience requirements and the Child Development Associate (CDA) are useful case studies in where the system breaks down. Work experience requirements create an additional barrier for high school students pursuing entry-level certifications. The 2,000 hours sometimes required for assistant teacher certifications are difficult to accumulate alongside a full course load — a structural mismatch between credential design and realities of high school participation. The CDA reflects meaningful learning, yet educators who hold it frequently have to prove mastery all over again to access college credit. The result is duplicated effort that discourages the people that the system most needs to retain. Clearer equivalency agreements between the CDA, PDIS levels, and college credit requirements could reduce that burden without compromising quality.

Colorado's guaranteed transfer framework exists as a structural tool for reducing credit loss between community colleges and four-year institutions. But its application to ECE-specific pathways remains uneven, with students losing ground when they transition between institutions. Closing that gap requires active coordination between institutions on ECE-specific agreements. Navigation challenges are compounded by the need to engage with multiple systems operating at different levels of the ecosystem. Colorado Shines oversees the Quality Rating and Improvement System, Child Care Licensing oversees licensing and compliance, and PDIS tracks individual educator qualifications and professional learning. Although both are housed at CDEC, these systems are still working toward full alignment and integration, resulting in the need for educators and administrators to translate between individual-level credentials and program-level requirements — often without clear guidance. **TEACH Colorado** plays a critical navigation role supporting teachers entering the profession, but structural fragmentation is not a challenge that one organization can resolve independently.

Bright Spots in Expanding and Supporting Access

While fragmentation and mobility barriers persist, examples from across Colorado demonstrate that these challenges are not inevitable — and that intentional design can strengthen both access and progression across pathways.

Particularly noteworthy are several robust K-12 career pathway models that intentionally build early childhood educator pipelines beginning in high school. Among the strongest is **St. Vrain Valley School District's Pathways to Teaching (P-TEACH) model**, a whole-system grow-your-own (GYO) approach that introduces students to educator pathways through concurrent enrollment, applied learning, and supported partnership experiences. Its intentional focus on ECE pathways positions students not only for entry into the field but also for sustained credential progression over time. The model has since been adapted in multiple districts — including **Adams 12 Five Star Schools**, **Weld Re-3J**, and **Estes Park School District** — demonstrating its viability across diverse community contexts.

Poudre School District offers another example of a comprehensive ECE educator pathway in K-12, showcasing what is possible through close partnerships across K-12 and IHE providers. Through the district's concurrent enrollment partnership with **Front Range Community College (FRCC)**, students can earn up to 12 college credits in early childhood coursework, along with both an ECE Assistant Certificate and an ECE Lead Teacher Certificate, prior to high school graduation. Partnerships with local private childcare providers further embed work-based learning into the pathway, accelerating entry into the profession while strengthening local workforce supply.

Mentorship and navigation support also emerged as some of the most consistently valued elements across Colorado's ECE workforce ecosystem. Across regions, stakeholders emphasized that coursework alone is insufficient; relational coaching, credential guidance, and structured practicum support are critical to skill development and persistence. The **Early Childhood Council Leadership Alliance (ECCLA)** and Colorado's regional Early Childhood Councils play a key role in this infrastructure by often providing career coaches and navigators who help educators understand credential requirements, access financial support, and move more seamlessly across pathways, regardless of entry point. However, access to dedicated navigation support varies by region, as not all local Early Childhood Councils have the resources to employ full-time career navigators.

Several IHEs are also formalizing mentorship within preparation models. At **Red Rocks Community College (RRCC)** and **Arapahoe Community College (ACC)**, on-campus childcare centers function as learning labs where compensated "Skills Guides" serve as mentor-teachers, coaching practicum students in real-world settings. ACC further integrates credit-bearing coursework with CDA, EQIT, and Pyramid Model training, allowing educators to translate prior professional learning into higher education credits and reduce duplication. Emerging efforts, including scholarship models tied to mentorship at **Northeastern Junior College**, signal a shift toward embedding mentorship as a formal component of workforce infrastructure rather than relying on informal or voluntary support.



Spotlight on P-TEACH: GROWING EDUCATORS FROM WITHIN

School districts are increasingly responsible not just for K-12 educator pipelines, but for early childhood pipelines as well. P-TEACH is one of the strongest examples of a model designed to serve both. Facing chronic educator shortages, districts across Colorado, like St. Vrain Valley School District ("St. Vrain"), are building their own teacher pipelines through P-TEACH. What makes the model distinctive is who it reaches: high school students earning concurrent enrollment credits, college students in paid apprenticeships, and paraprofessionals already working in district classrooms, all pursuing credentials through the same pipeline. The cohort structure creates peer learning across career stages rather than a single-track program. The "GYO" nature allows school districts to focus on their local needs.

In the past three years, P-TEACH has expanded to four additional Colorado school districts (Adams 12, Cañon City, Estes Park, and Weld Re-3J), building a growing network of GYO advocates and practitioners across Colorado. The "earn and learn" model removes the financial barriers that most often push prospective educators out before they start, and the results are concrete. After eight years of investment, St. Vrain has sustained 100% vacancy fulfillment, supported by salary parity between Pre-K and K-12 educators that makes early childhood a more financially viable career. Adams 12 is using P-TEACH to meet their goal that preschool classroom teachers reach certified status by 2028-29.

In a field often marked by unclear pathways and mixed signals about career viability, P-TEACH helps provide direction — 94% of P-TEACH participants report a clearer sense of their career path. P-TEACH demonstrates that when designed intentionally, the same pipeline infrastructure serves both ECE and K-12 educator pathways, strengthening the full PK-12 continuum from the ground up.



The ECE Profession Remains Undervalued Despite Rising Market Demand and Expectations

As the state continues to broaden entry points to ECE career pathways, recruitment and retention remain constrained by public perception and professional identity. ECE is often viewed as “just” childcare, a narrative that undermines professional status, depresses wages, and contributes to attrition. Professional identity forms early: high school counselors, seeking to support students toward higher-wage careers, may unintentionally advise students away from ECE pathways. Community narratives influence whether young people see ECE as a viable, respected professional with opportunities for advancement and purpose. While interest in ECE pathways is growing based on interest gathered at recruitment events, high school internship and elective participation, and IHE course enrollment, sustaining participation and progression depends on intentional efforts to elevate the profession alongside pathway expansion. Recent policy and agency shifts may create an opportune moment for coordinated statewide messaging that positions ECE as foundational to Colorado’s future.

Bright Spots in Elevating Professional Identity

Several initiatives demonstrate the importance of professional identity development and narrative reframing in strengthening recruitment and retention. Higher education programs at **ACC** and **RRCC** intentionally incorporate professional identity and policy literacy to help students see themselves as educators and advocates rather than childcare workers. Conferences such as **University of Northern Colorado’s Future Teacher Conference** and **University of Colorado Colorado Springs’ Future Educator Conference** serve as early exposure points that build enthusiasm, elevate the status of the profession, and clarify career pathways.

Regional and cross-sector efforts further illustrate how reframing early childhood as essential community infrastructure — rather than supplemental care — can shift perceptions of value and investment. **Executives Partnering to Invest in Children (EPIC)**, for example, advances a narrative that positions childcare as a core economic development strategy, reinforcing the professional and civic value of the ECE workforce. In **Eagle County**, local government has paired this narrative shift with tangible policy supports, including housing stipends and subsidized housing partnerships that treat ECE educators as critical community participants and improve retention for those returning to the field.

Other initiatives highlight the role of early messaging and community engagement in shaping long-term workforce stability. **Joint Initiatives** — the Early Childhood Council serving Colorado Springs and El Paso County regions — emphasizes exposure beginning as early as middle school, introducing students to ECE educator roles, advancement options, and the purpose-driven nature of the profession to align intrinsic interest with viable career pathways. The **Early Childhood Service Corps (ECSC)** complements these efforts by training retirees to serve in centers, not only providing teacher respite — and therefore supporting retention — but reinforcing the idea that ECE classrooms are professional environments worthy of sustained adult support and community investment. Together, these examples suggest that strengthening the workforce pipeline requires not only expanding access and compensation but also actively reshaping how the profession is understood, supported, and communicated across systems.

BLURRING THE LINES

Alignment Opportunities Across ECE, K-12, Postsecondary Education and Training, and Workforce

Increasing intersections across ECE, K-12, and postsecondary education and training — often described as “the Big Blur” — create meaningful opportunities to design a more seamless birth–20 workforce pipeline. Within this broader alignment, there is growing recognition of the importance of a distinct PK-3 blur that honors the unique developmental and instructional needs of children from birth through age eight while strengthening continuity for educators.

This blurring is already taking shape in Colorado through compensation strategies that pursue PK/K-12 wage parity, shared professional learning, dual licensure innovations, merged department structures, intentional PK-3 instructional alignment, district-led Universal Preschool (UPK) coordination and expansion, and concurrent enrollment/career and technical education (CTE) higher education ladders. The most promising models that integrate PK programs into the K-12 frame preserve ECE’s distinct expertise, pedagogy, and workforce needs, rather than folding early childhood entirely into K-12 frameworks.

While some school districts have leveraged Colorado’s increasing focus on career-connected learning opportunities to make ECE pathways more accessible for students, these efforts face implementation constraints. In many regions, identifying and retaining qualified CTE instructors with ECE expertise remains a barrier, limiting the scalability of these pathways.

Bright Spots in Cross-System Alignment

While implementation constraints remain, several initiatives demonstrate how intentional alignment across early childhood, school districts, and higher education systems can strengthen coherence across the ECE educator continuum.

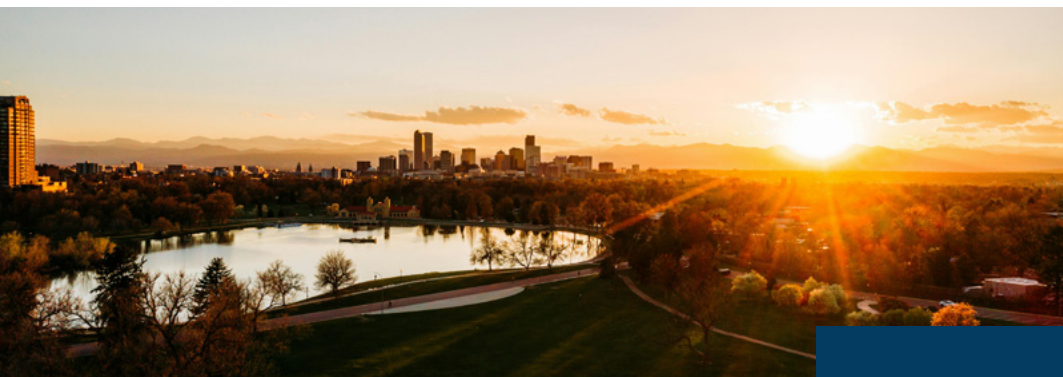
RRCC’s dual-licensure Bachelor of Applied Science, which connects early childhood and elementary education, represents one example of this alignment, integrating preparation across historically separate systems. Similarly, district-run infant and toddler classrooms embedded within school systems — including **Cañon City**, **St. Vrain**, and **Durango** — demonstrate how districts are expanding their role in early childhood delivery while creating training environments that support workforce development.

Spotlight on Red Rocks Community College:

BUILDING A P-3 EDUCATOR PREPARATION CONTINUUM

Red Rocks Community College (RRCC) made a structural bet: it merged its ECE and K-12 Teacher Preparation departments into a single discipline. That reorganization enabled the launch of a Bachelor of Applied Science in Elementary Education with ECE licensure, a degree that directly addresses the READ Act and Science of Reading requirements while grounding literacy instruction in developmentally appropriate practice. High school partners can earn transferable credits, and the on-campus childcare center functions as a hands-on coaching lab rather than a side amenity.

The integration matters because it signals something to students: early childhood is not a lesser track. By housing ECE and elementary preparation under one roof, RRCC is building a P-3 continuum that prepares educators to move fluidly across the full early learning span, which is exactly what Colorado’s mixed-delivery system needs.



Several of the PK-12 pathway partnerships referenced earlier, including those connected to the P-TEACH model, further illustrate how coordinated collaboration across school districts and IHEs can reduce fragmentation. The partnership between **FRCC** and **Northglenn High School (Adams 12)**, as well as FRCC's collaboration with **Weld Re-3J**, demonstrates how shared program design enables students to complete college coursework while participating in structured, cohort-based high school experiences. By integrating concurrent enrollment, PDIS-aligned training, and work-based learning, these partnerships position students to attain Level 3 credentials prior to graduation and normalize early childhood as a viable professional pathway within the broader educator pipeline. At **University of Colorado Denver**, transfer agreements and the NextGen pathway similarly support earn-and-learn advancement for paraprofessionals and working adults, strengthening continuity across postsecondary systems.

When the distinct nature of ECE is recognized and elevated — and when durable partnerships exist across PK-12 systems, ECE providers, IHEs, and coordinating entities — the regional impact for workforce and student experience amplifies significantly. In these contexts, alignment supports smoother transitions for educators, greater workforce stability, and improved experiences for children and families, particularly in complex or high-need settings.



ALIGNING INVESTMENTS TO MAXIMIZE IMPACT

Financial Structures Discourage Entry and Advancement, Especially in High-Need Roles

Financial barriers remain a primary constraint on entry, persistence, and advancement in the ECE workforce. When educators shoulder the entire cost of preparing for and remaining in the profession, the supply of qualified educators risks instability, limiting access to high-quality early learning. Given the central role early childhood education plays in supporting children's development and enabling family employment, preparing and sustaining ECE workforce functions is a critical public good and requires sustained public investment.

ECE career pathways are generally associated with low wage outcomes, which limits access to traditional financial aid and reduces the perceived return on investment. Federal aid eligibility rules, which include earnings-based thresholds tied to loan access, create structural disincentives, particularly for students in certificate and short-term programs where ECE credentials are most commonly earned. These dynamics will likely intensify under new federal requirements that condition some programs' eligibility for federal aid on whether graduates earn more than the statewide median wage for high school graduates. Students who are furthest from opportunity often experience the greatest financial barriers, yet they are also among those frequently recruited to these pathways. These dynamics are especially concerning given the growing demand for a diverse, multilingual workforce and the additional barriers faced by multilingual learners, including language access, technology requirements that assume reliable broadband and device access, and provider-level practices that can inadvertently discourage advancement.

These pressures are visible in enrollment patterns. CCCS representatives reported a significant reduction in enrollment when two previously free foundational ECE courses — ECE 101 and ECE 103 — transitioned to paid offerings. Even when tuition support is available, leaders at IHEs report significant attrition as students begin to understand wage trajectories associated with ECE roles. For those who do complete a degree or credential, advancement does not always result in improved financial sustainability. Many encounter the “benefits cliff,” where modest wage increases trigger the loss of public financial assistance, creating a further disincentive to professional growth.

Financial misalignment is particularly acute in high-need roles such as early childhood special educators and special service providers. Demand for inclusive, trauma-informed, and multilingual support continues to outpace supply, resulting in service delays and increased burnout among existing staff. While these roles have become focus points for innovation and cross-system collaboration, compensation remains misaligned with their complexity and impact. Some IHEs and school districts are integrating special education endorsements and culturally responsive practices into degree pathways, while pilots embed trauma-informed approaches into ECE preparation. Grow-your-own strategies and targeted apprenticeships show promise in building local capacity. However, many supports remain grant-dependent rather than system-funded, limiting sustainability. Aligning credentialing incentives, compensation structures, and retention support is critical for these high-impact roles to function as viable long-term career options.



Spotlight on Joint Initiatives for Youth and Families:

ADDRESSING THE WHOLE EDUCATOR

Joint Initiatives takes a notably broader view of workforce stability: you can't retain educators if they can't afford to live where they work. Joint Initiatives has negotiated with housing developers to secure subsidized units on the ground floors of new apartment buildings specifically for ECE staff, a direct response to the wage-to-cost-of-living gap that drives turnover in the field. This kind of cross-sector partnership reframes workforce development as a community infrastructure issue, not just a training problem.

Joint Initiatives also runs IMBED, a mental health pathway that places trauma-informed specialists directly in learning environments. Designed to interrupt the preschool-to-K12 behavioral pipeline, IMBED supports both children and the educators working with them, reducing burnout and building the kind of staff capacity that classroom training alone can't provide. Together, these initiatives reflect a workforce model built around what educators actually need to stay in the field.

Bright Spots in Financial Alignment

Public investment is also taking shape at the ballot box. In 2025, seven Colorado counties — Eagle, Garfield, Gilpin, Hinsdale, Larimer, Ouray, and Pitkin — passed local funding measures dedicated to childcare and early childhood programs, signaling growing public recognition that ECE is a shared community responsibility, not just a private family concern.

Some communities are demonstrating how aligned investments can shift workforce dynamics. Full salary schedule alignment between licensed ECE and K-12 teachers remains uncommon in school districts statewide, yet where implemented, it represents a high-leverage strategy for elevating professional status, reducing turnover, and reinforcing PK-3 coherence. Other models have focused on reducing financial barriers to postsecondary access. Initiatives such as **Career Advance** and subsidized coursework, like ECE 101 and ECE 103, helped offset tuition costs in high-demand fields. The **TEACH Early Childhood Scholarship**, which has drawn over \$3 million in state investment over the past five years, represents one of the most significant of these efforts. While some Early Childhood Councils have stepped in to partially continue this financial assistance through scholarships, these investments warrant reconsideration and potential expansion to ensure broader accessibility and sustained impact.

School districts are increasingly acting as financial anchors for their own workforce, including ECE educators. **Adams 12** provides "starter funds" to cover tuition and books and provide Chromebooks for classified staff pursuing teaching certifications. They offer ECE and ECSE credentials with opportunities to earn special education endorsements. In **Eagle County**, housing stipends further reduce cost-of-living pressures that disproportionately affect ECE educators, positioning compensation supports as part of a broader workforce stabilization strategy.

Targeted investments are also emerging to address high-demand and shortage areas within the ECE workforce. The **Inclusive Mental Health and Behavioral Education Development (IMBED) program at UCCS** prepares trauma-informed specialists to provide in-home support for families navigating behavioral challenges. **CSU** offers specialized certificates in early childhood mental health and leverages its Lab School to train students in play and occupational therapy, expanding access to critical therapeutic roles. Institutions are also addressing linguistic

access gaps: **FRCC** offers Colorado's only fully Spanish-language Early Childhood Director certificate, expanding advancement opportunities for Spanish-speaking professionals, while **ACC** has developed mentorship pipelines supporting multilingual learners in the ECE pathway, with former mentees transitioning into mentor roles — critical supports in an ecosystem where ECE directors are disproportionately white-identifying. Together, these models illustrate how financial support, credential design, and targeted program development can be strategically aligned to strengthen high-need segments of the workforce rather than applying uniform investments across roles.

These examples underscore a central lesson: advancing credential expectations without addressing compensation risks accelerating attrition, while wage-focused pilots that lack aligned training and advancement structures fail to produce durable workforce pipelines.

Policy Momentum is Creating Opportunity — and Implementation Friction

Recent policy developments have created unprecedented momentum for early childhood systems alignment in Colorado. The formation of the CDEC in 2021 under HB21-1304 established a dedicated state agency charged with increasing access to high-quality early learning, supporting the ECE workforce, and assisting families.

When CDEC was formed, the legislation identified multiple agencies with whom collaboration would be necessary, and the Early Childhood Leadership Commission (ECLC) played a key role in this collaboration. As a convener of statewide stakeholders and experts hosting members of key state agencies involved in early childhood support, ECLC supported the transition process.

Given the overlapping functions across agencies, multiple entities continue to play a role in ECE programming and workforce systems: CDE (responsible for K-12 educator licensure, rules, and regulations), the Colorado Department of Human Services (CDHS, responsible for licensing childcare centers); and the Colorado Department of Higher Education (CDHE, supporting and governing rules applicable to institutions of higher education).

Efforts to align these agencies and empower CDEC to be the primary resource for ECE program implementation remain underway, at times creating uncertainty about when the guidance of each agency should apply. While CDE is charged with K-12 issues, CDEC was established to capture the unique context and needs of ECE programs. School districts often still look to CDE for support regarding their embedded ECE programs.

The 2023 launch of UPK, authorized under HB22-1295, represents a major policy achievement, providing at least 15 hours per week of free preschool for four-year-olds. UPK has increased affordability and elevated attention to quality and access, while also surfacing system-level tensions. Demand for ECE seats has increased without a corresponding increase in educators or providers and has highlighted differences between school district and private provider models.

Private provider instability stems from several intersecting pressures: district-run programs that offer higher wages and more predictable schedules, home-based providers who often work alone without benefits of backup support, and a mixed-delivery market where preschool revenue helps cover the high cost of infant and toddler care. When any one of the pressures grows, the effect on local childcare supply can be significant.

The simultaneous evolution of credential expectations beginning in December 2021 and again in 2023, together with shifting agency structures and program expansion, has created confusion around oversight and transferability between CDEC and CDE. Prior to UPK, districts funded early childhood programs directly from their general fund. UPK created a separate ECE funding line item, which can be easily misinterpreted as new or additional resources for districts. In practice, this shift reflects reallocation and restructuring rather than a net increase. Despite these challenges, UPK's broader effects are largely positive: increasing family access and strengthening K-12 engagement in early learning as districts transition to operate as PK-12 systems.

Beyond early-childhood specific policy shifts, broader postsecondary and workforce reforms create opportunities to leverage the space between high school, postsecondary education, and employment. For the first time, Colorado's high school accountability system, funding formulas, and data structures are aligned to incentivize pathways that deliver "The Big Three": college credit, industry-recognized credentials, and work-based learning experiences. Specifically, HB24-1364 established a statewide longitudinal data system to improve cross-agency data sharing; HB25-1278 updated state and district accountability frameworks to reflect career-connected learning; and SB25-315 created funding mechanisms that reimburse districts for Big Three outcomes as students achieve them. Together with the 2025 recommendation to form a new Department of Higher Education and Workforce overseeing postsecondary and workforce alignment, these policies create a significant opportunity to scale promising practices and strengthen system coherence for all workforce pathways, including those in early childhood.

Bright Spots in Policy Implementation

Several communities are demonstrating how policy implementation can mitigate confusion and strengthen regional coherence. For example, when local Early Childhood Councils also serve as the coordinating organizations for UPK administration — as is true in most but not all regions — it reduces silos and improves communication between school districts and community providers, building shared commitments and regional coherence.

At the district level, some communities are modeling how ECE expansion can occur without destabilizing existing providers. In many regions, district growth has focused primarily on serving three- and four-year-olds — an understandable response to UPK funding structures — but one that can unintentionally affect the mixed-delivery market. Preschool classrooms often function as financial stabilizers within community-based centers, cross-subsidizing the higher-cost infant and toddler programs. When districts expand primarily at the preschool level, some private providers experience enrollment declines that threaten the viability of their infant and toddler slots, in some cases leading to program closures and reduced supply for the youngest children.

Against this backdrop, **Cañon City, St. Vrain, and Durango** have opened or are in the process of opening infant and toddler classrooms embedded within district-run early childhood centers that also include apprenticeship opportunities. These models illustrate how districts can expand supply in ways that complement, rather than displace, community providers, while also creating authentic workforce training environments. By investing across the full birth–8 continuum, these approaches mitigate unintended disruptions and reinforce regional stability.

Regional Leadership Plays a Critical Role in a Complex System

As state policy structures evolve, regional leadership has become increasingly important for effective implementation and accountability. Because agencies continue to operate with separate accountability systems, credentialing expectations, and quality measures, regional intermediaries must help translate state policy into local action. Organizations such as the ECCLA, BOCES structures, Children First, Joint Initiatives in El Paso County, and EPIC connect districts, providers, higher education institutions, and employers. Where these intermediaries are well-resourced, they provide navigation, licensing support, director coaching, and wraparound services that make pathways feasible.

Examples from Pueblo and El Paso County demonstrate how regional leadership can incubate innovation, build cross-sector coalitions, and advance workforce-supportive policy. At the same time, capacity remains uneven. Rural IHEs and Early Childhood Councils are often stretched thin, and collaboration varies widely by geography. In some regions, districts lead implementation; in others, private providers and community partners carry primary responsibility. The bright spots suggest that scalability depends on predictable funding, shared outcomes, and intentional partnership across systems. ECCLA, in particular, is positioned to function as statewide connective tissue, elevating regional practices and insights that are often invisible to PK-12 and postsecondary systems alone.

Bright Spots in Regional Infrastructure

Scaling promising practices statewide will likely depend less on isolated program replication and more on the strength of Colorado's regional infrastructure. Across interviews, a consistent theme emerged: regional intermediaries serve as the connective tissue between state policy and local implementation. **ECCLA** and its network of regional Early Childhood Councils — including **Joint Initiatives in El Paso County**, **ECHO and Family Center Early Childhood Council in Fremont**, and **Children First in Pueblo** — alongside **BOCES structures and cross-sector employer coalitions such as EPIC**, illustrate how coordination across governance, education, and business sectors translates policy momentum into operational coherence. Where ECCLA and the statewide network of Early Childhood Councils, community colleges, employer coalitions, and district partnerships are well-resourced and embedded, they provide career navigation, licensing support, director coaching, workforce convening, and wraparound services that make educator pathways feasible rather than theoretical. **Teach Colorado** similarly plays a statewide coordinating role, providing scholarship navigation and career coaching that helps educators, especially those in rural areas navigating complex credentialing requirements, find and persist through pathways that would otherwise remain invisible.

In southeastern Colorado, the partnership between Children First, the regional Early Childhood Council, and Pueblo Community College represents a structurally embedded collaboration: Children First operates within the community college, creating shared infrastructure for training, credentialing, and outreach across 11 rural counties. This integrated model has functioned as an incubator site for piloting new initiatives and aligns closely with UPK local coordination efforts. In El Paso County, Joint Initiatives demonstrates how strong regional leadership can extend beyond program coordination to civic and business engagement, convening cross-sector workforce task forces and advancing initiatives that position early childhood as core community infrastructure. Fremont County's ECHO and Family Center Early Childhood Council illustrates how smaller rural communities can consolidate childcare, health, mental health, and home visiting supports under one umbrella. The dual role of its leader — serving both as Early Childhood Council director and a school district employee — further facilitates coordination between the Early Childhood Council and Cañon City Schools, reducing friction across systems.

At the postsecondary level, the **Early Childhood Higher Education Partnership (ECHEP)**, a consortium of 22 institutions, provides a unified voice for institutions of higher education. Through collaboration on credit for prior learning, Pyramid Model integration, and pathway alignment, ECHEP demonstrates how collective action among IHEs can reduce inconsistency and improve portability for students across regions.



Spotlight on Pueblo's Children First:

REGIONAL ANCHOR FOR RURAL, SOUTHERN COLORADO

Embedded within Pueblo Community College, Children First serves as a training and coordination hub for an 11-county region stretching over 7,000 square miles — one of the most expansive ECE service areas in the state. The college's institutional stability gives the Early Childhood Council the fiscal footing to reach deeply rural communities that a standalone nonprofit rarely could. For educators in remote Southern Colorado, Children First is often the only accessible on-ramp to professional development and credentialing.

What sets Pueblo apart is that its training meets educators where they are. Workshops on Narcan administration, CPR, and LEGO-based de-escalation reflect the real conditions of classrooms hit hard by the opioid crisis and high-trauma environments. This isn't professional development for its own sake but a direct response to the socioeconomic realities facing educators and the children they serve.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Colorado's strengths — local innovation, policy momentum, and committed leaders — create the conditions to stabilize and scale a coherent ECE workforce if state and regional actors align around a focused implementation agenda. The recommendations below prioritize expanding the workforce pipeline; integrating into K-12, postsecondary, and workforce efforts; and aligning regional and state investments. They are designed to support these goals at a scalable and sustainable system level rather than on a discrete project basis.

Increasing the Pool

Prioritize and scale Grow Your Own (GYO) and earn-and-learn programs with compensation alignment

1. Expand P-TEACH replication and registered teaching apprenticeships across the state, capitalizing on the existing model designed to pair paid apprenticeships, district parity pilots, concurrent enrollment opportunities, and career navigation to engage high school students and adult paraprofessionals in ECE educator careers. Tailor expansion efforts to meet local needs and focus especially on rural, first-generation, and underrepresented learners to ensure that aspiring ECE educators have a clear, supported path into the profession and opportunities for long-term advancement. Models like these — where more of the credential is earned on the job — reduce classroom costs and clarify ROI for districts and employers.
2. Support a statewide learning cohort for already-established GYO models to support quality and sustainability. Target funding to school districts demonstrating partnership with local IHEs and regional Early Childhood Councils and require evaluation metrics on retention, advancement, and diversity. Encourage pathways that include paid practicum, commitments to serve locally for defined periods, and wage progression tied to credential milestones.

Invest in a statewide narrative campaign tied to professional elevation and policy change

3. Fund a coordinated, research-informed messaging strategy that elevates ECE as foundational to Colorado's talent and economic future, centers educator identity, and pairs public-facing storytelling with advocacy for compensation reform. Build state and regional campaigns that surface bright spots statewide.

Blurring the Lines Across ECE, K-12, Postsecondary Education and Training, and Workforce

Establish a PK-3 competency and credential equivalency framework

4. Convene a cross-agency working table or a subcommittee of the ECLC, that includes CDE, CDEC, CDHE, CDHS, IHEs, school districts, and representatives from regional Early Childhood Councils to map existing credentials and establish shared PK-3 competencies and subsequent equivalency agreements that allow transfer of coursework and experience. Leverage momentum around K-12's Big Three to pilot concurrent enrollment and shared-faculty models with clear equivalencies so that state PDIS and community college coursework count toward licensure without duplication. Connect this work to the development of the statewide longitudinal data system.

Stabilize and resource regional hubs as implementation engines

5. Create a regional hub stabilization model funded to underwrite core functions: career navigation, director coaching, licensing and waiver assistance, coordination, and cross-sector convening. Fund multi-county pilots that embed hub staff in community colleges or Early Childhood Councils and evaluate the impact on regional supply, provider stability, and equity of access.

Fund relational, practice-based quality improvements

6. Invest in professional coaching, cohort-based practicum experiences, reflective supervision, and host-teacher mentorship programs. Incentivize in-person and hybrid models in rural regions and underwrite faculty capacity at rural IHEs to reduce geographic disparities in practicum and coaching quality.
7. Build networked learning opportunities to provide professional and leadership development opportunities to regional leaders and stakeholders. Regions attending leadership development events in teams — designed to include local Early Childhood Council leadership, K-12, IHE, and industry representatives — will build community across the state and leverage shared time to identify and solve common challenges and inform broader strategy.

Aligned Investments to Maximize Impact

Design compensation and financing pilots that separate educator pay from tuition-dependent program models

8. Launch a learning community of wage-parity and wage-supplement pilots that test school district pay alignment, public tuition models for credentialing, and targeted stipends for Special Education and mental health roles. Pair pilots with analysis of benefits-cliff effects to inform scalable funding recommendations and legislation.

Build Special Education and early childhood mental health pipelines with aligned incentives

9. Support high-school-to-community-college pathways, scholarships, and apprenticeship models that bundle credentialing with retention commitments for Special Education and mental-health-focused early childhood roles. Align wage scales and offer incentive stacks for geographically hard-to-serve areas.

Advance data and evaluation supports for workforce decision-making

10. Leverage recent investments to improve evaluation metrics and practices to develop shared workforce indicators and a public dashboard that tracks supply, retention, credential movement, vacancy rates, and regional access. Use data to target investments, measure pilot effectiveness, and inform policy choices.



CONCLUSION

As Colorado proves time and again, its commitment to students and families through alignment and innovation remains unmatched. For the first time, the foundational elements of ecosystem infrastructure exist to build a strong frame for statewide system support. This effort will require strong regional collaboration, blurred structures, a compelling narrative, and sustained local investment of time and resources to build on proven practices within the ECE ecosystem.

The impact of initiatives like district wage parity models, P-TEACH and P-TAP (Paraprofessional to Teacher Apprenticeship Pathway) adaptations, community college incubators, and strong regional Early Childhood Councils demonstrate the path from isolated bright spot to system-level impact. If state and local leaders commit resources and governance to this approach, Colorado can stabilize and catalyze the workforce that provides the earliest and most consequential learning experiences for children — and ensure that policy gains translate into durable, equitable workforce systems. When we treat ECE workforce development as core public infrastructure — supported through sustained and integrated public investments — we send the clear message that the development and support of Colorado’s youngest children; families, teachers, and systems; and the economic vitality of our state are non-negotiable. Our youngest children, Colorado’s families, and our shared future are worth investing in — fully, sustainably, and now.





APPENDIX

Organizations Represented:

Statewide Ecosystem

- Children’s Campaign
- Colorado Community College System
- Colorado Department of Early Childhood (including ECLC)
- Colorado Department of Education
- Colorado Department of Higher Education
- Colorado Statewide Parent Coalition
- Early Childhood Council Leadership Alliance
- Early Childhood Education Partnership
- Early Childhood Service Corps
- Early Milestones
- EPIC — Executives Partnering to Invest in Children
- Governor’s Office
- Mile High Early Learning
- TEACH Colorado
- Teach Plus

Regional Councils & Workforce

- Adams County ECC
- Alliance for Kids
- Arapahoe ECC
- Archuleta County ECC
- Boulder County ECC
- Colorado Association of Family Child Care
- Connections 4 Kids
- Custer County ECC
- Denver Area ECC
- High Plains Library District
- Joint Initiatives (El Paso County)
- Pueblo ECC
- Routt County ECC
- UC Health — Yampa Valley Medical Center
- Weld County ECC

Higher Education Institutions

- Aims Community College
- Arapahoe Community College
- Colorado Mountain College
- Colorado Mountain University
- Colorado State University
- Community College of Denver
- Fort Lewis College
- Front Range Community College
- Metropolitan State University
- Northeastern Junior College
- Pikes Peak State College
- Pueblo Community College
- Red Rocks Community College
- Trinidad State University
- University of Colorado, Colorado Springs
- University of Colorado Denver
- University of Northern Colorado

K-12 District Pathways & Providers

- Adams 12 Five Star Schools
- Alamosa Re-11J
- Cañon City Schools
- Denver Public Schools
- Durango School District
- Eagle County Re-50J
- Estes Park School District
- Fremont Re-2
- Greeley-Evans District 6
- Haxtun Re-2J
- Littleton Public Schools
- Mesa D51
- Northeast BOCES
- Poudre School District
- Routt Re-3
- St. Vrain Valley School District
- Weld Re-1
- Weld Re-3J
- Weld Re-4
- Widefield District 3



About Buell Foundation

Founded in 1962, the Buell Foundation was born out of the philanthropic interests of Temple Buell, a noted 20th century architect who designed more than 300 buildings in Colorado and the surrounding region. The Buell Foundation partners with communities across Colorado and is currently focused on grantmaking that supports positive early childhood education and development. Over its history, the Buell Foundation has awarded more than \$200 million in grants and has typically contributed more than 60% of those funds to rural and under-resourced communities.

buellfoundation.org



About Colorado Education Initiative

Colorado Education Initiative's (CEI) mission is to champion, empower, and ignite Colorado leaders to deliver on the promise of public education to develop thriving young people and flourishing communities. CEI plays three core roles: implementation expert, strategic partner, and statewide convener. Since 2007, CEI has partnered with educators and community members in more than 150 urban, suburban, and rural school districts to shift practices in high-impact areas and currently works with 100. As Colorado's PK-12 statewide intermediary, CEI bridges policy and practice, sparks collaboration across communities, and strengthens the relationships that make lasting, local change possible.

coloradoedinitiative.org

