

Building a Resilient Early Childhood Workforce: Lessons from CIRCLE Continuation Funding



Introduction

In response to the impact of COVID-19 on child care in Colorado, the state legislature passed a bill in 2021 to create four grant programs aimed at boosting early childhood care and education. One of these, the Community Innovation and Resilience for Care and Learning Equity (CIRCLE) Grant Program, was implemented by Early Milestones Colorado in partnership with the Colorado Department of Early Childhood (CDEC). The CIRCLE Grant Program used time-limited federal funds to invest nearly \$23 million in innovative, community-led projects to strengthen Colorado's early childhood ecosystem. In a year, CDEC and Early Milestones awarded 226 grants focused on addressing early childhood challenges in Colorado communities.

Of these projects, a large number focused on workforce challenges worsened by the pandemic. Workforce challenges persist in early childhood education due to low wages, high turnover rates, and limited professional development opportunities. The demanding nature of the job, coupled with often inadequate benefits and lack of career advancement, leads to burnout and staff shortages. Additionally, inconsistent funding and lack of policy support make it difficult for programs to attract and retain qualified educators, ultimately affecting the quality and stability of early childhood education.

The Buell Foundation has a longstanding history of supporting of early childhood workforce initiatives. As the CIRCLE grant came to a close, the Buell Foundation invited CIRCLE grantees with workforce-related projects to apply for a targeted round of grant funding focused on systems-level impact. A cohort of ten grantees was formed to continue evolving their CIRCLE-funded workforce projects, with support from Early Milestones to convene and support grantees. This report shares common themes that emerged from this cohort of projects, highlights of each project, and recommendations for next steps.



Themes

With an additional year of funding made possible from the Buell Foundation, several key themes emerged across grantee experiences.

Importance of Investing in Creativity

One of the most meaningful aspects of the CIRCLE grant program was the freedom it gave grantees to think creatively and try new approaches, even though the program had limitations due to federal guidelines. Grantees were able to design and test innovative strategies tailored to their community's needs. In some cases, this experimentation led to breakthrough ideas; in others, it revealed what didn't work, which was equally valuable for learning and long-term planning. This flexibility created space for innovation, encouraging grantees to adapt and evolve their efforts in real time. Continued funding from the Buell Foundation allowed them further to iterate on their efforts.

Importance of Investing in Relationships

Another year of investment allowed grantees to strengthen existing partnerships and build new ones, creating a more cohesive network of support. Grantees built on partnerships with other cohort grantees to expand recruitment efforts, support inclusive work environments, and conduct outreach on workforce recruitment and retainment to diverse populations. CIRCLE and Buell Foundation funding didn't just strengthen individual programs, it unlocked system-wide opportunities for collaboration, sustainability, and lasting impact.

The support of Early Milestones as an intermediary organization helped connect projects to others working in similar spaces across the state. Regular connection points created space for projects to share resources and exchange ideas and lessen the feeling of operating in isolation. Projects felt part of a broader and more strategic effort to drive change in Colorado's early childhood workforce landscape. Grantees expressed that the intentional space to connect with their peers is part of what made the CIRCLE and continued Buell Foundation experience so valuable.

Breaking Through Barriers Takes Time

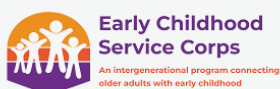
With time and continued funding, grantees were able to go beyond identifying the challenges facing their work and begin addressing them. For many, the first year of CIRCLE funding revealed critical roadblocks, whether structural, logistical, or relational. The extended timeline and additional funding from the Buell Foundation gave grantees a chance to troubleshoot, refine their approaches, and start implementing practical, scalable solutions. This momentum is difficult to achieve with short-term or one-off funding, highlighting the value of sustained investment.

The Urgency of This Work Continues to Grow

As families, children, and early childhood educators continue to face mounting stress, the urgency of strengthening workforce systems has only intensified. Grantees expressed concern that future opportunities for significant funding – like federal grants – may not be available for years to come, even as the needs continue to grow.

Grantees made significant strides in strengthening the early childhood workforce, piloting innovative approaches, deepening community partnerships, and addressing critical workforce challenges. The following highlights showcase their impactful work and the lessons learned along the way.

Buell Foundation CIRCLE Workforce Grantees Included:



PROJECT HIGHLIGHTS

CLEAR CREEK SCHOOLS
FOUNDATION

Clear Creek Schools Foundation's CIRCLE grant supported infrastructure building for a new child care facility, along with creating early childhood education (ECE) workforce pathways. CIRCLE support allowed Clear Creek Schools Foundation to leverage additional funding streams, including at the federal level. The Buell Foundation's continuation grant took its implementation plans to the next level and expanded their workforce pathway plans by supporting not only high school student learners but also community-based adult learners interested in ECE careers.

GEOGRAPHIC AREA:



Highlights & Lessons Learned

Having the right people in the right places is essential. For Clear Creek Schools Foundation, this meant finding the right partner to help create a value proposition report, highlighting the benefits and economic value of ECE certification for those entering the workforce. This also meant understanding the level of support and navigation individuals new to the field need to be successful. One participant from the initial pilot has since become director-certified and is now involved in community engagement for the upcoming child care facility. **CIRCLE and Buell Foundation funding allowed the Foundation valuable time to understand the issues at hand, experiment and investigate alternatives, pivot, and try again. Success is a process, not a one-time achievement.**

PROJECT HIGHLIGHTS

CLEAR CREEK SCHOOLS
FOUNDATION

CALL TO ACTION

INSIGHTS FOR LEGISLATORS

If there is one message we would share with Colorado’s legislators about the early childhood workforce, it is this: Rural communities like Clear Creek cannot solve the crisis of access and affordability without urgent and intentional investment in the people who provide care and education.

The workforce challenge isn’t only a shortage of providers. It’s a gap across the entire pipeline—from substitutes to career changers to high school graduates considering the profession. Families wait months for openings. Providers burn out or leave because compensation and benefits lag the responsibility of the work. Yet this work is foundational to family stability and Colorado’s economy.

We ask Colorado’s decision makers to act on three truths:

1. Wages must rise. Continue to strengthen proven tools: Extend and enhance the refundable Early Childhood Educator Income Tax Credit beyond 2025 and pair it with targeted wage supplements tied to credentials and quality so retention improves without pushing costs onto families.
2. Training must be accessible and paid. Scale apprenticeships and stackable credentials through Colorado Shines PDIS and higher-ed partners; fund paid release time and mentor stipends so small providers can participate; expand TEACH scholarships and rural delivery so geography doesn’t gatekeep the profession.
3. Partnerships must be valued and flexible. Maintain strong, flexible CDEC funding to local collaborations that align workforce, quality, and family access. Preserve and simplify contribution incentives that help rural communities leverage philanthropy

INSIGHTS FOR FUNDERS

Our request is straightforward: Continue to see yourselves as partners in system-building. Public dollars are essential, but they are often rigid and slow to adapt. Philanthropy provides the agility to pilot ideas, document what works, what didn’t, and give communities like ours the room to innovate.

The early childhood workforce crisis is solvable. With philanthropic partnership, we can make early childhood education a profession that people choose and stay in—because they are supported, respected, and paid fairly for the essential work they do.

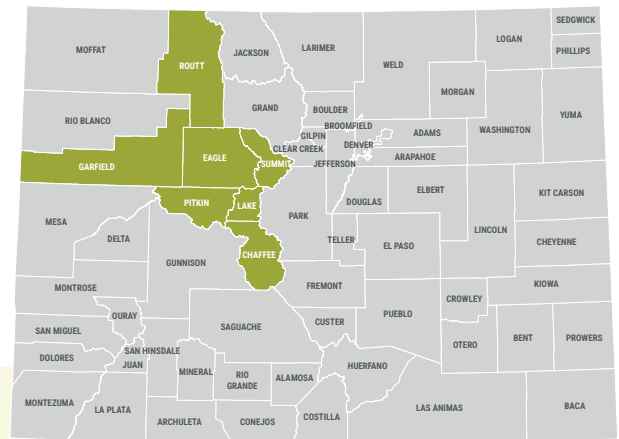
PROJECT HIGHLIGHTS

COLORADO MOUNTAIN
COLLEGE

With its CIRCLE grant, Colorado Mountain College (CMC) piloted workplace-based learning through the recruitment of substitutes to care for children at licensed child care centers while ECE educators earned credits towards Teacher, Assistant Teacher, and Director certificates at work. Additionally, CMC developed dual-language curriculum for a Director certificate track. In the work funded by Buell Foundation, CMC redesigned their systems supporting ECE programs in collaboration with child care centers and ECE students.



GEOGRAPHIC AREA:



Highlights & Lessons Learned

CMC used CIRCLE and Buell Foundation funding to strengthen its dual language supports through a scaffolded, student-centered approach that goes beyond offering Spanish-language classes. By designing targeted resources and instructional strategies, CMC ensured students received the support they needed to succeed. A key part of this success was compensating teachers for their professional development time by allowing them to complete training during the work day—boosting engagement and showing respect for their time and expertise. **Equitable, intentional support—including recognition of educators’ needs—enhances both teaching quality and student success, and is essential to building scalable, inclusive models for dual language learning.**

PROJECT HIGHLIGHTS

**COLORADO MOUNTAIN
COLLEGE**



CALL TO ACTION

We identified a significant need for policy advocacy around language justice—ensuring that bilingual and multilingual ECE professionals have access to training, materials, and assessments in their preferred languages. Current systems often assume English proficiency and fail to recognize the value and contributions of bilingual staff. Advocacy is needed to require and fund translation, interpretation, and multilingual language program development across institutions and credentialing bodies.

ECE professionals face major barriers in accessing professional development due to time constraints and low wages. There is a pressing need to advocate for state and local policies that incentivize paid, workplace-based learning models—such as apprenticeships—that allow individuals to earn credentials while maintaining employment.

Many bilingual ECE professionals bring years of informal learning and community-based experience that are not currently recognized in credentialing pathways. We identified the need for policy changes that validate and credit experiential knowledge, such as prior learning assessments, micro-credentialing, and flexible pathways to certification.

..... **INSIGHTS FOR LEGISLATORS**

The early childhood workforce is the foundation of our state's educational and economic future—and yet, it is one of the most under-supported, underpaid, and overlooked segments of our labor force. If we want high-quality, accessible early childhood education for all families—especially in rural, remote, and multilingual communities—we must invest in and redesign the systems that support ECE workers.

..... **INSIGHTS FOR FUNDERS**

Continued investment is essential to:

- Expand financial aid and flexible funding that makes education truly accessible for working adults.
- Support apprenticeship development so students can earn while they learn, reducing the financial burden and increasing industry alignment.

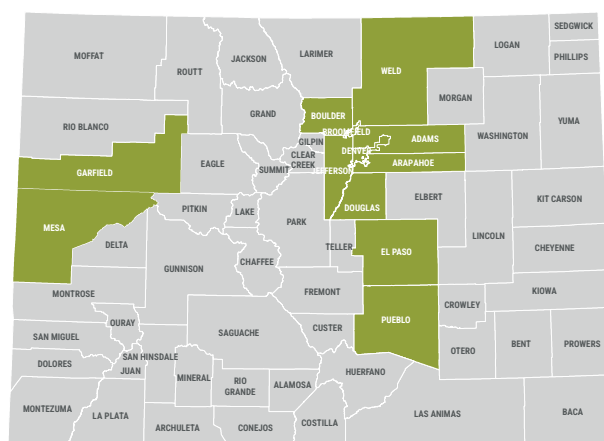
***Investing in early childhood professionals
is investing in the future of Colorado.***

PROJECT HIGHLIGHTS

COLORADO STATEWIDE
PARENT COALITION

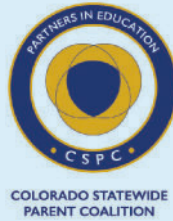
With its CIRCLE grant, Colorado Statewide Parent Coalition (CSPC) supported graduates of its Providers Advancing School Outcomes (PASO) program with individualized assistance to continue their professional development through licensing or achieving qualified-exempt status. PASO is a training program that gives Spanish-speaking and English-speaking Friend Family Neighbor (FFN) in-home child care providers of color the skills and knowledge to deliver high-quality child care. In the work funded by the Buell Foundation, CSPC took a systems-level approach to eliminating barriers for FFN providers through strategic communication and engagement with state systems.

GEOGRAPHIC AREA:



Highlights & Lessons Learned

A key highlight from the grant program is a husband-and-wife team of FFN providers who successfully opened a center and are now working on feasibility studies to expand the model and create more centers, creating more access for child care in Colorado. Through its work with CIRCLE, CSPC identified both barriers and potential solutions to help FFN providers achieve licensing or qualified-exempt status. With continued funding from the Buell Foundation, they were able to apply these insights at a systems level, collaborating with state departments to further integrate FFN providers into the broader child care framework. **This experience underscores the importance of investing in grassroots solutions and leveraging local success stories to drive broader policy change.**

PROJECT HIGHLIGHTS**COLORADO STATEWIDE
PARENT COALITION****CALL TO ACTION****..... LESSONS FOR ADVOCACY**

We continue to face the challenges of the child care sector operating as a business model with very little investment from the federal and state governments. We will continue to advocate for more investment in professional development for child care workers including FFN child care providers, in particular making the FFN grant program permanent. We must reform TABOR to ensure that our state can budget responsibly and invest in our most urgent needs. Family, Friend and Neighbor providers struggle with the cost for upgrades to a home to be able to become a licensed provider. Without access to the emerging and expanding grants, many providers were unable to invest the necessary funds to meet the standards set by CDEC. There is a need for state or philanthropic funding to fill this gap.

..... INSIGHTS FOR FUNDERS

Everything is so uncertain and right now we need more flexible investment from our funders so we can continue to do the work and also be responsive to dramatic changes in our communities.

PROJECT HIGHLIGHTS

DENVER'S EARLY
CHILDHOOD COUNCIL

With its original grant, Denver's Early Childhood Council (DECC) expanded the work of its business services team. The work centered on pre-licensing curriculum design, training, consultation, and creation of a toolkit, with a long-term goal to increase the number of child care slots available in Denver. Pre-licensing support is especially impactful for women, many of whom are minorities, by providing resources to start their own businesses while pursuing their passion for helping children. With the Buell Foundation's support, DECC built on the lessons learned during CIRCLE to improve systems building efforts and share tools with additional partners.

GEOGRAPHIC AREA:



Highlights & Lessons Learned

Through this funding, DECC developed valuable tools that strengthen and sustain early childhood workforce supports. ECE educators statewide can use the career navigation toolset to understand how to navigate the Professional Development Information System (PDIS), and how to progress through the levels of development for the field. Additionally, DECC fills an important gap in the system with their pre-licensing work, guiding individuals through the steps to start an early childhood business and addressing their individual needs. **Through CIRCLE and Buell Foundation's funding, DECC specialized in both career navigation and pre-licensing supports, filling essential and niche system gaps that previously went unaddressed.**

PROJECT HIGHLIGHTS

DENVER'S EARLY
CHILDHOOD COUNCIL

CALL TO ACTION

..... LESSONS FOR ADVOCACY

We have realized through this work that there is substantial need across the state for both pre-licensing and career navigation supports. We continue to work diligently to advocate for additional clarity and simplicity of the ECE system in Colorado, as well as identifying language justice and equitable access to resources.

..... INSIGHTS FOR LEGISLATORS

We need more ECE college level scholarships. There are currently unsubstantial scholarships for ECE coursework. We want to let legislators know it is imperative they legislate funding to bring back the stipend-based "free" ECE 1011 and 1031 at a very minimum. We need well-qualified teachers and educators and simply cannot ask our under-compensated workforce to pay for college tuition themselves.

..... INSIGHTS FOR FUNDERS

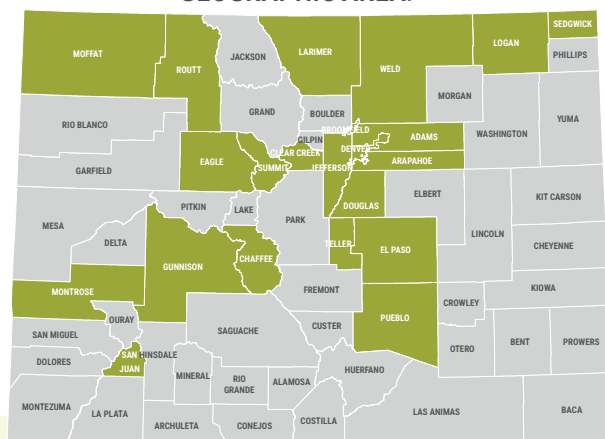
Early childhood care and education is one of the most important supports of our economy as well as the future of our society. In order to provide high-quality care, educators must be well trained and educated. ECE is a challenging field that continues to be under-recognized and underappreciated. We need to continue to find supports for increased compensation and benefits so we can retain our workforce.

PROJECT HIGHLIGHTS

EARLY CHILDHOOD
SERVICE CORPSEarly Childhood
Service CorpsAn intergenerational program connecting
older adults with early childhood

Early Childhood Service Corps' CIRCLE grant focused on addressing issues of recruitment and retention in the early childhood workforce by generating a new pathway of older adults to work in supportive roles in early childhood settings. This approach recruits diverse, skilled individuals to work in ECE programs and impacts retention through improving working conditions for supported classrooms. With continuation of funding from the Buell Foundation, ECSC built capacity to meet growing demand and expanded partnerships at the local and state levels.

GEOGRAPHIC AREA:



Highlights & Lessons Learned

CIRCLE and Buell Foundation funding has been the catalyst for Early Childhood Service Corps to scale its program, creating a model with the potential for nationwide replication. The additional capacity has enabled the organization to build a more supportive and sustainable infrastructure. Early Childhood Service Corps has been able to get footholds in other funding sources, exploring state and federal funding streams, and strengthen their evaluation process. Connections made through CIRCLE and from the Buell team have also led to new partnerships with fellow grantees and communities across Colorado seeking their services. **Beyond expansion, Early Childhood Service Corps is reshaping how child care sites approach substitute care—demonstrating its value as an asset that enhances the site community.**

PROJECT HIGHLIGHTS

EARLY CHILDHOOD
SERVICE CORPS

**Early Childhood
Service Corps**

An intergenerational program connecting
older adults with early childhood

CALL TO ACTION

..... INSIGHTS FOR LEGISLATORS

Recognize older adults as a vital and valuable resource in addressing workforce needs.

Pre-school children partnered with older adults in the classroom show better social-emotional outcomes and more positive outlook on aging. Joe Barela, of the Colorado Department of Labor and Employment, has made clear that more employers need to offer job training and reskilling to their older workers, saying: “As we look to the future of work, mature workers are critical to the success of so many industries that drive our economies. There’s a tremendous opportunity in making people realize the value experienced workers bring to the table. It’s in all of our best interests to move to more age-friendly workplaces.” (Generations United).

..... INSIGHTS FOR FUNDERS

As of 2024, Colorado ranks as the 8th most expensive state for infant care and 11th for the overall cost of raising a child. For an average Colorado family, child care costs consume 38% of their annual income for just one infant and a 4-year-old. These numbers are far beyond the recommended affordability threshold of 7% set by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

According to the 2024 Early Childhood Business Council Family Friendly City Summit Final Report: “Leading researchers, economists, and academicians agree there is one specific economic development strategy that will, by itself, do more than any other strategy to optimize future economic growth in the United States. THE STRATEGY? HIGH-QUALITY EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION.” Yet many foundations only fund K-12 education. This needs to change!

PROJECT HIGHLIGHTS

EMPOWERING
COMMUNITIES GLOBALLY

During the CIRCLE grant period, Empowering Communities Globally (ECG) expanded training and supports for its home visiting program, which serves refugee and immigrant women in the Denver metro area. Home visitors provide information on child development, health and wellbeing, and resources to families in its communities. ECG's home visitors provide a safe, culturally informed space for families to engage with the early childhood system in Colorado. Additional funding from the Buell Foundation enabled ECG staff to grow its home visiting program and dedicate staff time to push for better state resources and system changes that meet the cultural and language needs of diverse communities.

GEOGRAPHIC AREA:



Highlights & Lessons Learned

Through CIRCLE and Buell Foundation support, ECG's home visitors have expanded their roles beyond traditional support to include observing, coaching, and training—emerging as leaders in the early childhood field. Buell's support has enabled ECG staff to participate actively in state efforts on system transformation. For example, the executive director now serves as a co-chair of equity for the Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems Working Group. ECG is further amplifying impact by supporting women from their programs to participate at state-level tables, elevating their voices and building leadership skills. This capacity-building has allowed ECG to deepen existing relationships, form new partnerships, and collaborate more intentionally with other cohort grantees. **Investing in leadership development at every level—from staff to program participants—creates powerful ripple effects, enabling deeper systems change, stronger partnerships, and a more inclusive early childhood ecosystem.**

PROJECT HIGHLIGHTS

EMPOWERING
COMMUNITIES GLOBALLY

CALL TO ACTION

..... LESSONS FROM THE GRANT

The demand for culturally and linguistically responsive early childhood support far exceeds current capacity. The need is particularly acute in newcomer communities, where families often lack access to early childhood services in their primary language.

There is still a significant need for refugee and immigrant voices in leadership roles across higher education, the Colorado Department of Early Childhood, and foundations to ensure that decisions reflect the diverse communities they impact. These voices are also underrepresented in data collection and analysis, which can lead to gaps in understanding community needs and priorities.

..... INSIGHTS FOR FUNDERS

One of the most urgent and often overlooked challenges in Colorado's early childhood system is ensuring that newcomer families, immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, can access culturally and linguistically responsive child care. For many families, the concept of formal child care is entirely new. Without support, they may face overwhelming barriers to understanding their options, rights, and pathways as families seeking care and as potential members of the early childhood workforce. Recognize and develop the caregiving talent already present in Colorado's fastest-growing communities.

..... INSIGHTS FOR LEGISLATORS

Colorado is overlooking a powerful source of early childhood workforce talent because of systemic barriers faced by newcomer families. Immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers make up one of the fastest-growing populations in Colorado, and their children are a significant part of the fastest-growing young child population in the state, yet the families often remain disconnected from Colorado's early child development and care systems. They are disconnected as consumers of quality care and as potential caregivers and educators, one of our most needed jobs in the state.

Without child care, parents/families, especially women, cannot work, train, or participate in community life. And the state misses out on diverse, bilingual, culturally rooted talent that could strengthen and expand our strained early childhood workforce.

Fund child care access as a workforce enabler, investing in ways to support newcomer families to enter the workforce must include quality child care, which is preceded by home visiting, so families have information and understanding. This is overlooked in case management upon arrival of newcomers to Colorado.

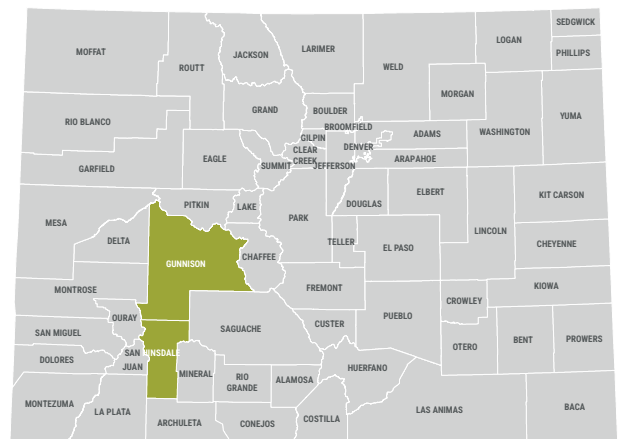
Recognize and develop the caregiving talent already present in Colorado's fastest-growing communities

PROJECT HIGHLIGHTS

GUNNISON HINSDALE
EARLY CHILDHOOD
COUNCIL

Using CIRCLE funds, Gunnison Hinsdale Early Childhood Council piloted multiple workforce support strategies across its counties. These included paid sick leave; recruitment and retention stipends; coaching and business practice training; and community-supported agriculture share boxes for early childhood providers. With the exclusion of the food support program, Buell Foundation continuation funding enabled the council to continue pursuing these efforts. This provided more valuable evidence to strengthen the case for using local lodging tax dollars to support early childhood initiatives.

GEOGRAPHIC AREA:



Highlights & Lessons Learned

Through CIRCLE and Buell Foundation funding, the Council has been able to track and showcase the progress and impact of early childhood support initiatives over time with the goal of presenting this data to county commissioners. These efforts help to open doors to new, previously untapped funding sources—such as local marketing district funds—for the early childhood community. The supports have contributed to reduced staff turnover, improved retention, and increased feelings of value and appreciation among early childhood educators. This work has also sparked greater community engagement, bringing early childhood issues into broader conversations about community growth.

Consistent investment in early childhood workforce supports not only strengthens the workforce but also builds broader community awareness and unlocks new funding opportunities for an underrecognized field.

PROJECT HIGHLIGHTS

GUNNISON HINSDALE
EARLY CHILDHOOD
COUNCIL

CALL TO ACTION

INSIGHTS FOR LEGISLATORS

In the rural resort communities that we serve the cost of living has skyrocketed since 2020. Many of the early childhood programs in our area have been on the brink of closure. This is not due to a lack of need for child care, as all of the licensed child care programs in our community have extensive waiting lists. The issue is due to high turnover rates experienced by all the licensed care centers as well as difficulties they face on a daily basis recruiting individuals interested in the field. For years, teachers have cited low wages and limited benefits as the main reasons why they choose to leave the field.

In our communities, this issue grew as the cost of living continued to rise. Licensed programs have the spaces they need to provide care but are often forced to close classrooms due to the lack of a qualified workforce. We have several infant/toddler spaces that could be opened to expand access within currently licensed centers, but we do not have the staff needed to open those classrooms. It is the council's firm belief that addressing compensation and affordable benefits options for the early childhood workforce would help attract and retain skilled educators, ensuring a more stable and experienced workforce. Benefits packages should be comparable to those offered in other professions requiring similar levels of education and training. This includes health insurance, retirement plans, paid time off, and other relevant benefits.

INSIGHTS FOR FUNDERS

When the pandemic began in 2020 the reality of limited child care became very apparent, as doctors, nurses, plow truck drivers, and public health officials struggled to find care for their young children. The council experienced a surge in the number of calls we received on a daily basis with City and County officials eager to figure out ways to get child care programs up and running again. Since then, the interest in early childhood has waned slightly and unfortunately not as much progress has been made to increase the compensation and benefits offered to this critical workforce. One thing that I would like funders to understand is that the needs of our State's early childhood system still remain. Families continue to struggle to cover the cost of care, and teachers who LOVE the work they do continue to question if they can stay in the field.

PROJECT HIGHLIGHTS

JOINT INITIATIVES



Through its CIRCLE project, Joint Initiatives (JI) focused on recruiting more individuals to the early childhood workforce, with an emphasis on reaching young people earlier in their career journey. With the additional funding from the Buell Foundation, JI expanded career navigation supports, strengthened partnerships with Pikes Peak region school districts, created marketing content showcasing the impact of early childhood careers, and improved data collection to inform workforce development efforts.

GEOGRAPHIC AREA:



Highlights & Lessons Learned

JI successfully launched a new system to share information about staff openings across child care centers in El Paso County, significantly enhancing their career navigation process. Reaching this level of effective matchmaking took time, relationship-building, and trust. So far, over 30 high school students have met with JI's partner recruiter who also visits early childhood center classrooms to identify potential placements for students. While the program took time to establish, it's already showing results—one high school student has secured a position in a nearby early childhood program that aligns with both her college schedule and commute. **This experience shows that building a sustainable and effective talent pipeline requires patience, consistent effort, and community trust – but the impact on students' career pathways can be immediate and meaningful.**

PROJECT HIGHLIGHTS

JOINT INITIATIVES



CALL TO ACTION

..... LESSONS FOR ADVOCACY

A critical advocacy need has emerged: securing sustained and expanded funding to support dedicated roles that bridge ECE, high schools, and higher education systems. Individuals entering or advancing within ECE frequently face a range of barriers, from navigating complex certification pathways to balancing work, education, and caregiving responsibilities. These individuals benefit greatly from comprehensive, sustained support to remain engaged and successfully progress in their careers.

..... INSIGHTS FOR FUNDERS

Building a robust ECE workforce requires more than information—it requires relationships, consistency, and long-term commitment. Establishing meaningful partnerships with schools takes time and trust, both of which are cultivated through repeated in-person engagement. When our team visits classrooms, participates in career fairs, and sits down with students and educators, we do more than share information—we build pathways. Students begin to see ECE as not just an option, but as an attainable, fulfilling career.

..... INSIGHTS FOR LEGISLATORS

Sustained, targeted funding is essential to recruiting, developing, and retaining a strong ECE workforce. The most pressing challenge we face is not only filling vacant positions but creating visible, supported career pathways that encourage individuals to see ECE as a valued, long-term profession.

Over the past year, we connected with more than 2,500 high school students across 12 school districts. What we discovered was both revealing and concerning: Many students had little to no awareness of ECE career opportunities. Most were unaware they could earn college credit in ECE while still in high school, gain paid work experience in quality early learning programs, or pursue varied roles within the field. Compounding this, many school advisors and counselors lacked up-to-date information about these pathways.

If Colorado is serious about addressing workforce shortages in ECE, funding for dedicated recruitment and career navigation roles is critical.

These investments are not just about recruitment; they are about long-term retention. When students and emerging professionals are given clear information, individualized guidance, and meaningful opportunities to explore the field, they are more likely to stay.

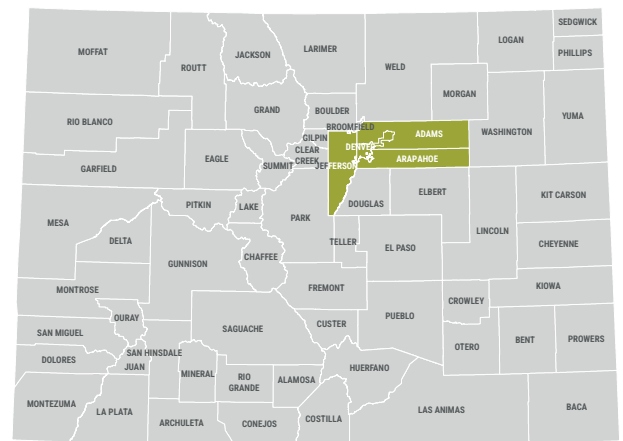
We urge Colorado lawmakers to prioritize funding for workforce development strategies that start early, build momentum, and offer ongoing support. The future of our early childhood system depends on the people we inspire and invest in today.

PROJECT HIGHLIGHTS

MILE HIGH
EARLY LEARNING

With its CIRCLE grant, Mile High Early Learning (MHEL) created a certificate program for its Inclusive Practices in Early Childhood (IPEC) credential training program. With shorter, more accessible training, MHEL aimed to equip the workforce with what they need to help all children in MHEL classrooms, including those with challenging behaviors and special needs. With the additional year of funding from Buell Foundation, MHEL continued to evolve its workforce development program: translating CDA and IPEC programs into Arabic, and Spanish and Arabic, respectively; providing paid internships for CDA program participants; and placing new recruits into teacher positions paying a living wage.

GEOGRAPHIC AREA:



Highlights & Lessons Learned

Through CIRCLE and Buell Foundation funding, MHEL has continued to build the early childhood workforce. Both MHEL staff and community members have been able to either begin their journey in the early childhood field or expand on their experience. With the translation of materials, MHEL will be able to offer content to a wider audience and continue to expand the workforce. They have seen an increase in the percentage of Spanish-speaking participants in the CDA program successfully completing the coursework and hope to see that increase for the Arabic-speaking population as well.

Investing in accessible, multilingual resources is key to growing and diversifying the early childhood workforce—ensuring more individuals, regardless of language background, can successfully enter and stay in the field.

PROJECT HIGHLIGHTS

MILE HIGH
EARLY LEARNING

CALL TO ACTION

LESSONS FOR ADVOCACY

Investing in accessible, multilingual resources is key to growing and diversifying the early childhood workforce—ensuring more individuals, regardless of language background, can successfully enter and stay in the field.

Funding cuts at the federal and state levels are detrimental to growing and sustaining the early childhood workforce.

The Colorado Child Care Assistance Program (CCCAP) that provides child care subsidies to working families and are administered through Denver metro county human services departments, have instituted enrollment freezes and working families not yet enrolled can no longer access child care subsidies. Additionally, with state-funded preschool, more 4-year-olds are attending public school, so MHEL is serving more 3-year-olds, and they are not eligible to receive funding available through Universal Preschool. The impact of limited access to quality early care and education is profound. Children are more likely to experience developmental delays, and require special needs services, and are less likely to graduate without access to high quality early care and education. Families may have to decline or make changes in work or may need to rely on less-than-optimal care for their children. Due to the freeze on CCCAP, we have had to delay the opening and will only be able to open three of our six classrooms.

INSIGHTS FOR FUNDERS

Federal and state funding cuts will make it even more difficult to attract and retain early childhood professionals because providers will not be able to pay sufficient wages.

PROJECT HIGHLIGHTS

RESILIENT FUTURES



Resilient Futures' CIRCLE grant provided developmentally focused, trauma-informed equity practices; professional development; and consultation to paraprofessionals working in early childhood. With the work funded by the Buell Foundation, Resilient Futures supported four Colorado community colleges in delivering foundational training on trauma-informed, equity-centered practices, and expanded capacity for those efforts with a train-the-trainer program for 15 participants.

GEOGRAPHIC AREA:



Highlights & Lessons Learned

The work that Resilient Futures did shifted educators' understanding of socio-emotional learning practices from a concept to implementation of strategies. In the current uncertain national context, there has been an increase in trauma related activities with decreased attendance and increased dysregulation for young children. Resilient Futures' training has given educators skills and strategies they can choose from to support children and the workforce in confronting these challenges. **Equipping educators with practical, trauma-informed strategies transforms socio-emotional learning from theory into action—empowering them to better support children and themselves in the face of growing challenges.**

PROJECT HIGHLIGHTS

RESILIENT FUTURES



CALL TO ACTION

..... LESSONS FROM THE GRANT

One of the clearest lessons from this work is that early childhood educators want and need deeper support to understand trauma and stress and how it shows up for infants, toddlers, young children, families, and for themselves. Across the community colleges we partnered with, early childhood students, faculty, and classroom educators were navigating the real impacts of stress in their roles. Many families are experiencing poverty, housing instability, racism, immigration stress, and community violence. At the same time, educators themselves are managing burnout, low wages, heavy workloads, and emotional exhaustion.

Our training helped educators move from understanding trauma as a concept to using concrete strategies in their classrooms. Educators practiced ways to build stronger relationships with children, support emotional regulation, and create learning environments where children feel safe, connected, and ready to learn.

The Train-the-Trainer model was especially powerful. When educators are supported to lead this work with their peers, it strengthens local leadership and helps these practices spread across programs.

..... INSIGHTS FOR LEGISLATORS

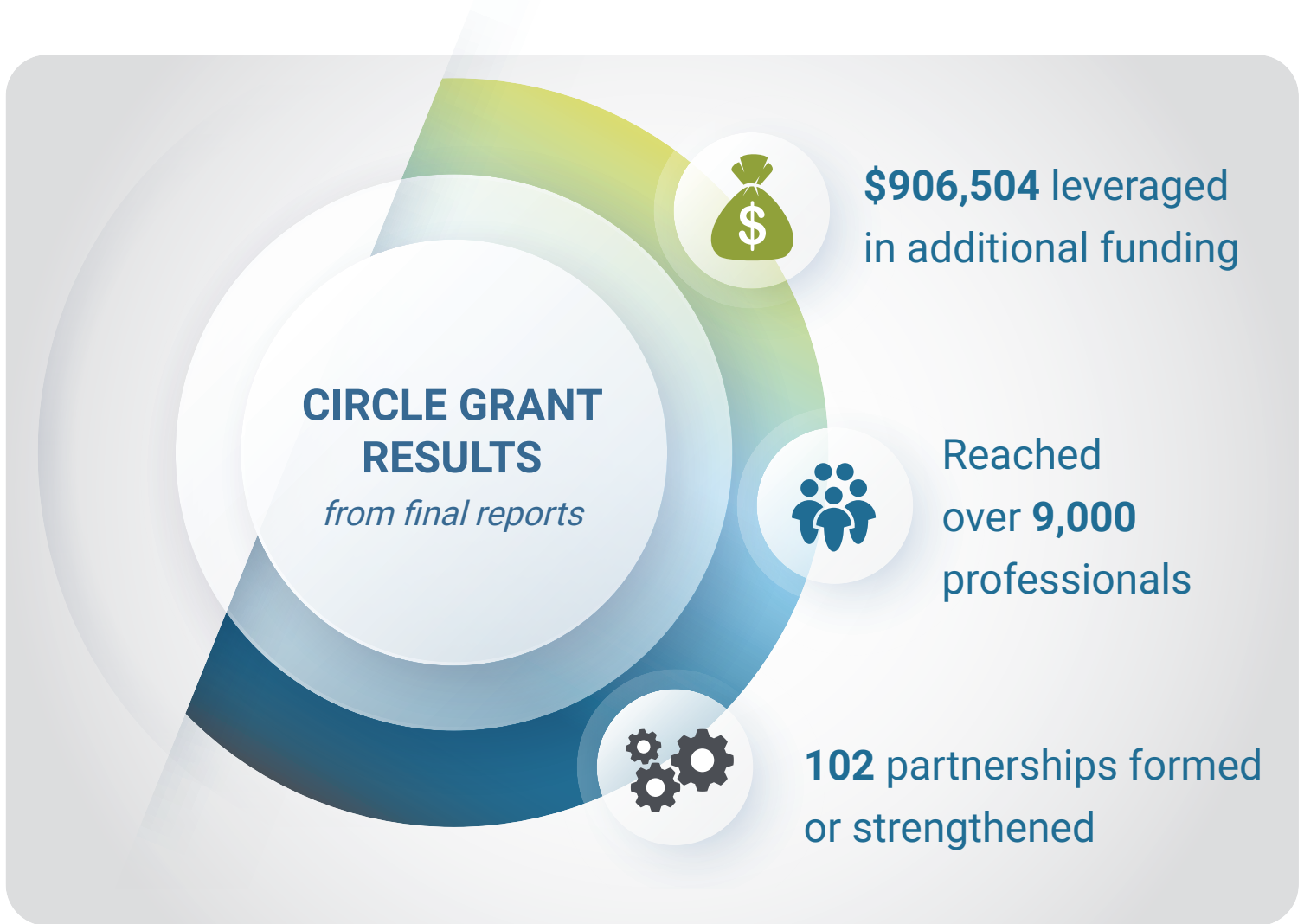
Colorado's early childhood workforce is under enormous pressure. Our work with community college ECE programs shows that trauma-informed, equity-centered training helps future educators understand how stress, racism, poverty, and family instability affect children's learning and behavior. When educators have these tools, they are better prepared to support children, build stronger relationships with families, and stay in the field longer.

Educators and faculty need affordable, accessible ongoing professional learning and clear guidance on how to integrate trauma-informed practices into coursework and early childhood programs. Investing in workforce development within community college ECE programs is an important step toward preparing and sustaining educators who can meet the realities children and families are facing today.

..... INSIGHTS FOR FUNDERS

Short-term funding and training alone cannot sustain this work. Because of busy schedules and demanding workloads, it is often difficult for early childhood educators to access ongoing professional development.

Philanthropic investment can help build the infrastructure needed for this work to last, including implementation guides, peer learning networks, and continued access to professional learning. When we invest in the preparation and wellbeing of early childhood educators, we strengthen the systems that support children and families across Colorado.



It takes a village! The work accomplished through these grants and by these grantees is only possible through partnerships and sustained funding. The outcomes and lessons learned were made possible through leveraged funding that aligned to meet community needs. The following are businesses, foundations and government partners who contributed to these grantees work:

Federal Stimulus Funding
Colorado Department of Early Childhood
Denver Preschool Program
Colorado Gives Foundation
Kenneth King Foundation
City of Gunnison
Gunnison County Local Marketing District

Freeport McMoRan
Colorado Health Foundation
City of Empire
Clear Creek County
El Paso County
Douglas County Commissioners
and more!

Next Steps Forward

The support from the Buell Foundation allowed grantees to engage more deeply, expand their impact, and connect with state-level systems in ways that would not have been possible otherwise. While the initial CIRCLE grant program was launched in response to pandemic-related disruptions, the underlying issues have not disappeared. Strategic, sustained investment is necessary to address workforce challenges that are urgent, complex, and ongoing.

Building on the lessons learned from CIRCLE and Buell's continuation funding, the following recommendations aim to sustain momentum and impact.

Deepen Leadership Development at All Levels

It is essential to continue building leadership pathways within the early childhood workforce, including for home visitors and early childhood educators, particularly those from underrepresented backgrounds. Creating more opportunities for individuals who are directly impacted by early childhood systems to participate in decision-making spaces will lead to more inclusive, informed, and effective solutions.

Build Evidence to Influence Policy and Funding

Collecting and sharing data that demonstrates the impact of investments in early childhood workforce supports—such as reduced turnover, improved retention, and increased community engagement—is critical to sustaining momentum. This evidence can be a powerful tool to advocate for continued investment at both the local and state levels, including support for future ballot initiatives and other funding opportunities.

Invest in Relationship-Building and Creativity

Persistent underfunding—especially around workforce compensation—remains a major challenge in the early childhood sector. Creating funding opportunities that prioritize flexibility for grantees and space for creativity is one path forward. In addition, maintaining and expanding opportunities for peer-to-peer connection is essential. Relationships help spread innovation, foster collaboration, and ensure that promising ideas and practices are shared across the field.

