

Ready, Set, Go!

Investing in Infants and Toddlers



Go: Quality Early Care and Learning

“Quality Early Care and Learning” is the final brief in the three-part series, *Ready, Set, Go: Investing in Infants and Toddlers*, published by the Colorado Children’s Campaign. The foundations for lifelong success start in the earliest stages of life, beginning with healthy parents and continuing through early childhood. These briefs are intended to help frame discussion around children from the prenatal stage to age 3 and the importance of health, education and family and community supports in helping them grow into healthy and strong individuals. Each brief includes recommendations for policy makers and leaders to help ensure Colorado kids get the best start in life.



Young children are learning from the moment they are born and they learn in partnership with their caregivers, whether at home, in child care or in school. The rapid physical and cognitive development that occurs in the earliest years of life speaks to the absolute necessity for high-quality health, nurturing and learning experiences during those years. Children who have a strong foundation for health and development as infants and toddlers are better equipped with the building blocks for long-term success and wellness in school and in life.

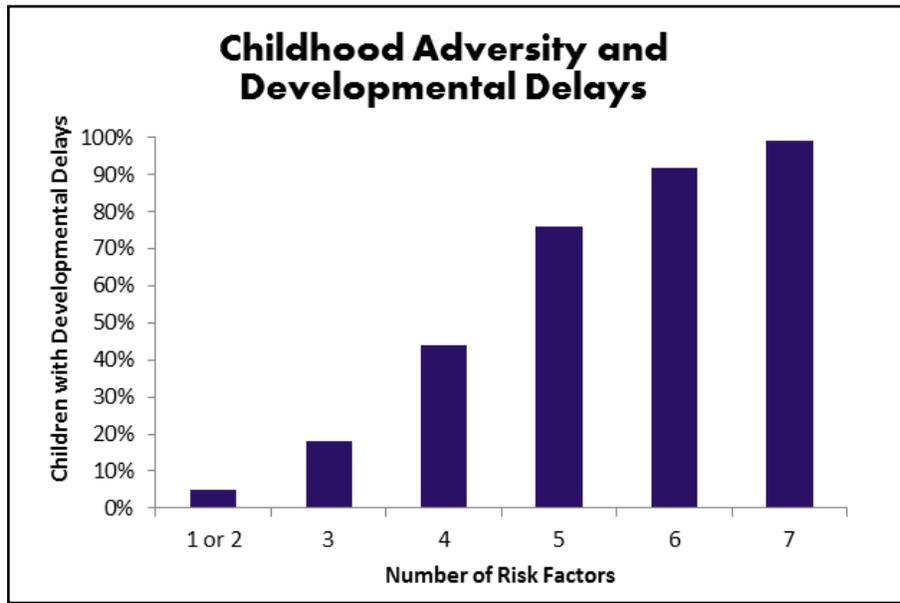
Families are the best supporters of strong developmental outcomes in children. It is vital to ensure they have the tools needed to provide their children with the best start in life. Research shows that strong relationships between children and their parents and other caregivers in the early years correlate with higher self-esteem, better performance in school and fewer negative outcomes such as depression or drug use in children and teenagers.¹ Sixty-three percent of Colorado children under age 6 live in homes where all available primary caregivers are in the workforce; access to high-quality child care to help children grow up healthy and strong is crucial.



Foundations for Learning

Quality early childhood experiences that incorporate learning-rich play time, strong and consistent relationships with adults and adequate nutrition and play are essential to strong brain development. The human brain is never a blank slate; every new skill a child acquires depends on healthy development from previous experiences. Children facing chronic adversity such as poverty, abuse and neglect can suffer from toxic stress, making them vulnerable to developmental delays that can lead to costly interventions like special education and remediation later in school (for more information on toxic stress, refer to brief one of this series, “Ready: Prenatal Health and Care”). Colorado has a growing number of children at risk of developing toxic stress. In 2011, 21 percent of all Colorado children under the age of 6 were living in poverty, a number that has grown by 136 percent since 2000.² Because children in poverty are more susceptible to toxic stress, they need the additional supports necessary to ensure strong physical and cognitive development.

Important skills like impulse control, problem solving and the ability to focus are essential components of executive functioning—the foundation for school and work success throughout our lives. Executive functioning directs our many feelings and impulses like an air traffic controller safely directs planes at an airport.³ When young children experience toxic stress, the development of the important skills associated with executive functioning can be compromised. These skills are often difficult and costly to develop later in life. As shown in the chart below, as risk factors increase for young children, so too do their chances of experiencing developmental delays that can have long-lasting and detrimental effects.⁴ The good news is that meaningful, early interventions can help limit toxic stress and promote healthy brain development so that even children most at-risk can be successful in school and in life. For more information on toxic stress and early intervention, refer to brief two, “Set: Healthy Birth and Development”.



Source: Barth, et. al, as cited by Dr. Jack P. Shonkoff, Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University

Research shows that the skills needed for reading and writing begin in early infancy through language development. This development includes interactions as simple as children mimicking the sounds and faces of adults around them and recognizing attributes like learning the sound of their name.⁵ These types of interactions, along with being read, spoken and sung to by adults, are the first building blocks of literacy. During infancy and early childhood, a singular window of opportunity exists to develop a strong basis for language and literacy skills. After age 4, these skills are more difficult to develop. Infants and toddlers who do not attain a strong basis in literacy in their earliest years run a greater risk of academic challenges including the need for remediation and a higher risk of dropping out of school. They are also more likely to have difficulty interacting with peers and face other social interaction problems.⁶

The risk is greatest for children living in poverty. They hear an average of 8 million fewer words per year than their more affluent peers.⁷ The number of words a child hears in his or her first years of life is one of the most significant contributors to language skills and growth. Children in poverty also are less likely to have access to high-quality, age-appropriate learning materials, including books in the home. Equipping parents and caregivers, especially those of children most at-risk of developmental delays, with the tools and resources to promote early literacy at home and in other care settings will better ensure children develop the skills they need to enter school ready to learn.

Colorado has made important strides in reaching out to families and caregivers of young children regarding the early stages of development. Colorado’s Early Learning and Development Guidelines describe what children should know and be able to do at different ages. For example, between 4 months and 8 months old, a child should begin to communicate back and forth with caregivers by babbling when spoken to, and parents are encouraged to begin using signs and expressions so children continue to develop the ability to respond.⁸ These guidelines can help parents and other caregivers understand and support children in reaching key developmental milestones.

A variety of programs at the state and local level aim to make literacy tools more available for children and families. One example is Colorado READS, a statewide initiative focused on making books and other literacy resources available to the families of all Colorado children.⁹ In addition, in 2012 Colorado was awarded \$29.9 million in federal funds from the Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge Fund (Colorado received an additional \$15 million Early Learning Challenge Fund bonus in July of 2013). This grant includes support for strategic outreach to families and care providers to increase literacy and quality learning experiences for children, professional development for child care professionals and support in implementing a kindergarten readiness assessment system. There are also efforts to connect families to literacy materials through health care providers. One such program is Reach Out and Read, which trains doctors and nurses to have conversations with families of young children about the importance of literacy and to provide books.¹⁰

Policy Recommendations:

- Invest in research-based interventions for children most vulnerable to experiencing toxic stress and developmental delays.
 - o Ensure that the new Office of Early Childhood has a coordinated plan to address the physical, social-emotional and learning needs of vulnerable infants and toddlers, and that parents are able to easily access the services they need to support their children.
- Collaborate to provide developmentally appropriate tools and resources that promote brain and language development in all child care settings.
 - o Help communities develop outreach systems and resources to encourage developmentally appropriate and language-rich environments in the homes and other child care settings of Colorado children.
 - o Support and replicate programs like Colorado READS to make literacy materials more accessible to all Colorado families.

The Importance of Quality Child Care

Strong relationships, appropriate group settings, emotional and mental health support, access to nutritious meals and physical activity are all elements of quality child care that go above and beyond the basic health and safety needs of children. High-quality early learning experiences are associated with increased academic performance in school and lifelong impacts like lower delinquency rates and lower teen pregnancy rates.¹¹ With a large number of parents and primary caregivers in the workforce, these high-quality learning experiences must be offered both in and outside of the home during a child's earliest years.

Continuity of care is very important. Research shows that children are more likely to play, explore and learn more effectively as well as exhibit better behavior when they have secure relationships with those who care for them.¹² Regardless of the caregiver or setting, when children transition between different types of care with various adults, multiple times within a day or week, their ability to form secure relationships with both their caregivers and their peers can be inhibited.¹³ Expanding access to quality child care options will strengthen and empower Colorado families by providing safe, stable, enriching and consistent environments for children while their parents are working or in school.



Early Childhood Councils

Early Childhood Councils play a significant role in building a comprehensive, quality early childhood system at the community level that meets the needs of Colorado families. Early Childhood Councils work collaboratively in their local communities to connect Colorado families with the resources they need for child care, health, parent and family supports and mental health services. There are currently 31 early childhood councils active in 56 of Colorado's 64 counties.¹⁴

Many states, including Colorado, have developed Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS)¹⁵, which improve quality in licensed child care through standards and ratings. Colorado's current QRIS system (also known as the Qualistar Rating System) is voluntary and rates 431 centers and preschools and 62 family homes, covering 3,660 Colorado infants and toddlers, or 14 percent of those in licensed child care.¹⁶ For a QRIS to be fully effective it should feature strong standards as well as enforcement of regulations to ensure quality in care; attributes that are often inconsistent with voluntary participation. Working toward requiring child care providers to adhere to strong licensing standards in addition to the Qualistar Rating System would make quality care more accessible to Colorado children. Recently, funds from Colorado's Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge Fund were dedicated to redesigning a new Tiered Quality Rating Improvement System (TQRIS) and promoting expanded participation of early learning and care programs. In addition, legislation passed in 2013 created a grant program that funds the expansion of quality components in child care settings in Colorado communities.

Head Start is a federal program that provides high-quality early childhood education to children ages 3 to 5. Early Head Start (EHS) emerged from this program as a way to comprehensively care for pregnant women and at-risk children under age 3. EHS includes center-based care, family home care and home visitation services including early childhood education, special education, parental engagement, social services and health. This comprehensive approach includes interventions beginning at the prenatal stage of life to address the entire spectrum of developmental needs of a child, supporting them so they enter school ready to learn along with their peers. For more information on home visitation and other early intervention programs, refer to brief two in this series, "Set: Healthy Birth and Development".

Children in Early Head Start programs experience significant and immediate gains in cognitive, social-emotional and health outcomes. In addition, EHS's strong partnership with families through home visiting has increased the quality and support of parenting skills for families. A 2010 study showed Early Head Start children, especially those with the biggest developmental needs, retained social-emotional and health gains. These are strong predictors of academic and lifetime success.¹⁷ Other research on the impact of Head Start has shown an increased likelihood of high school graduation and decreased need for special education and remediation later in schooling.

Enrollment in Colorado EHS programs has increased nearly 20 percent in the past decade; however, this increase in enrollment has not kept pace with the significant growth of young children living in poverty.¹⁸ The success of EHS argues for expanding access, strengthening quality components and replicating the comprehensive approach EHS brings to children and families in Colorado.



Policy Recommendations:

- Strengthen quality requirements in licensed and license-exempt child care settings.
 - o Embed more elements of quality standards in child care licensing including, but not limited to: age-appropriate learning materials, language-rich environments, physical activity and nutrition, health and wellness including mental health competencies, and communication with families.
 - o Integrate quality elements as part of training and professional development for child care professionals including, but not limited to: age-appropriate learning materials, language-rich environments, physical activity and nutrition, health and wellness including mental health competencies, and communication with families.
 - o Expand capacity of and continue to embed quality components in home visiting and early childhood care programs like Early Head Start.
- Build state and local support for strengthening quality in early childhood settings.
 - o Support local Early Childhood Councils in their efforts to build capacity, quality and access in community early childhood systems.

Types of Child Care in Colorado

Licensed Child Care: providers have taken required steps to become licensed by the State of Colorado.

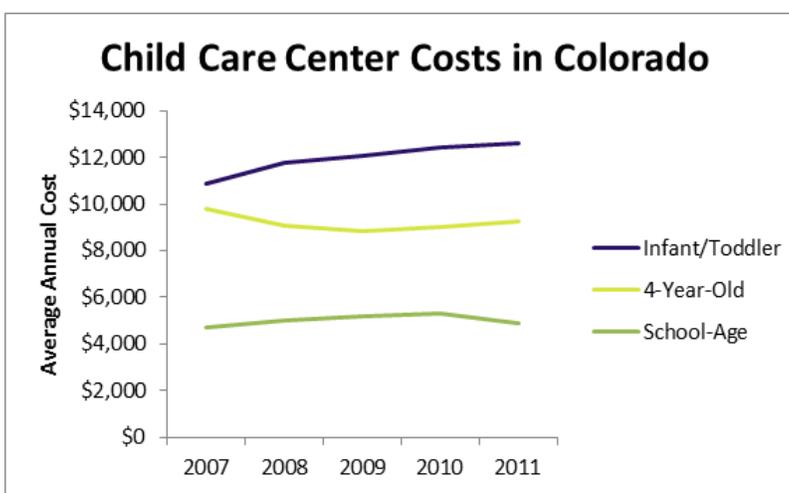
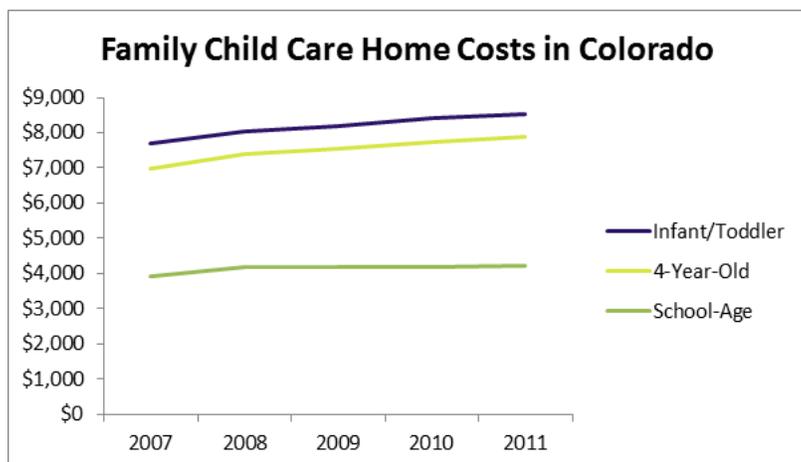
- Child Care Centers: Licensed care provided in a non-residential setting for less than a 24-hour period.
- Family Care Homes: Licensed care provided in the home of the child care provided for less than a 24-hour period.
- Community or school-based settings.

Non-licensed Child Care: informal child care that may include caregivers other than a child's parents or primary caregivers including family members, friends, neighbors, babysitters or nannies; also includes other short-term care in facilities like a gym or ski resort.



Cost of Child Care

High-quality, affordable child care is essential for Colorado working families. The availability of consistent child care contributes to decreased employee turnover, tardiness and absenteeism, and boosts morale and performance in the workplace.¹⁹ Safe and stable child care settings provide children with consistent care and enable parents to pursue employment. Yet the high cost of child care and the lack of capacity in Colorado create barriers for working parents. In fact, Colorado consistently ranks as one of the most expensive states for child care. In 2012, Child Care Aware of America ranked Colorado as one of the top ten least affordable states for child care.²⁰



In 2011, the average annual cost of full-time infant or toddler care was \$12,621 in a licensed child care center and \$8,518 in a family child care home.²¹ As a result, the average Colorado family could spend almost 25 percent of their annual income to send just one infant or toddler to a child care center.²² Child care costs for families with multiple young children or headed by a single parent can exceed half of the families' annual income.

A host of factors contribute to the high cost of child care, including personnel, facility and food costs.²³ Since many child care centers and family homes function independently and rely on tuition as their primary source of income, economies of scale can be difficult to achieve, contributing to the high cost of care. To address the issue of economies of scale in child care, innovative programs like the Alliance Venture Fund created by Early Learning Ventures establish collaborative partnerships in communities that enable providers to share services like tuition collection, purchasing of goods and services and professional development.²⁴ Programs like this one help establish lasting partnerships in communities that position child care facilities to function more efficiently and provide affordable, high-quality child care for children in their communities.

Policy Recommendations:

- Strengthen efforts to support child care providers in managing the costs of providing quality care for the children of Colorado.
 - Continue efforts to examine the origins of the high cost of providing quality child care in Colorado.
 - Strengthen and replicate successful efforts like the Alliance Venture Fund to encourage collaboration and building economies of scale among child care providers.
- Invest in policies and programs that make quality child care more affordable for Colorado families.
 - Increase spots in the Colorado Child Care Assistance Program (CCCAP) to narrow the gap between the number of children eligible for support and the number of children served.
 - Support counties in increasing reimbursement rates to providers who contract with CCCAP to ensure more providers can accept low-income children receiving child care subsidies.
 - Support policies that encourage greater uniformity across counties in determining eligibility levels for CCCAP.
 - Encourage providers contracting with counties that serve children through the CCCAP program to meet quality standards as measured by Colorado's Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS).

Access to Child Care

Colorado's licensed child care centers, family care homes and preschools only have capacity to serve approximately 43 percent of the young children who need care at some point during the day.²⁵ The majority of licensed child care in Colorado is for children between the age of 2 and 5, with a limited number of licensed spaces available for infants and toddlers. A comprehensive review of the number of licensed child care spaces for infants and toddlers is difficult to assemble due to disparate definitions of age categories of young children between center-based care and family home-based care. For example, spaces for infants are not distinguished from spaces for toddlers in family care homes, but are in child care centers. Both child care centers and family homes identify older toddlers (2-year olds) with children ages 3 through 5 without disaggregating the data by age. Clarifying the definitions of age groups in child care settings would help identify where Colorado's infants and toddlers are being cared for and also generate meaningful data to inform and move state policy.

The current number of licensed spaces for infants in child care centers is 6,480 with an additional 12,554 spaces for children ages 1 to 2. An additional 6,278 spaces in family child care homes serve children ages 2 and under. Eighteen counties in Colorado do not have any licensed infant care spaces in child care centers, 12 counties do not have any licensed infant care spaces in family care homes, and four counties (Baca, Jackson, Kiowa and Mineral) have no infant care in either licensed family care homes or child care centers.

Policy Recommendations:

- Build capacity for infant and toddler care in licensed settings to begin closing the gap between existing capacity and families' need for consistent and quality care.
 - Gather age-specific (infants, 1-year olds, 2-year olds, etc.) data across child care programs to generate specific and meaningful data on center- and home-based child care capacity to inform policy decisions.

Family, Friend and Neighbor Care

A great deal of child care falls into the category of Family, Friend and Neighbor care (FFN) in which children are cared for in non-licensed settings by relatives, friends and/or neighbors. FFN care plays a large role across all family types, regardless of geographic, social and economic demographics, and affects children in all communities across Colorado. Children may be in FFN care for several days a week for many hours per day. Or, they may be in FFN care just a few hours a day or week in addition to licensed care while their parents or other primary caregivers are at work. As stated above, the current capacity of licensed settings in Colorado is sufficient to care for 43 percent of the total number of Colorado children under age 6 in need of care. Many of the remaining 57 percent likely receive FFN care at some point, although the total number cannot be determined with precision. The impact of FFN providers on the early development of the children for which they care is significant. For this reason it is critical that FFN caregivers are supported and provided with the resources needed to offer children high-quality nurturing and learning experiences.

A number of programs provide training and resources to FFN caregivers in Colorado. Providers Advancing School Outcomes (PASO) programs exist in several counties throughout Colorado to provide assistance, resources and training for Latino FFN providers and families. Additionally, the Clayton Early Learning Play and Learn Project trains FFN caregivers and stay-at-home parents. Similar programs in communities throughout Colorado support FFN providers. However, many of these programs have limited capacity and resources, and little systematic outreach or capacity exists to support the large and indeterminate numbers of FFN providers in Colorado. More resources are needed to extend proven supports (including training and information) to FFN caregivers that help them provide enriching, safe and stimulating environments for the children in their care.²⁶



Policy Recommendations:

- Expand outreach to Colorado families and Family, Friend and Neighbor care providers to stress the importance of quality early nurturing and learning and share support services available to them.
 - o Build collaboration between invested organizations, state agencies and Early Childhood Councils to identify FFN caregivers in their community and offer them access to the same trainings and supports offered to licensed providers in their community.
 - o Include FFN providers in strategic outreach associated with the Colorado Early Learning and Development Guidelines and literacy programs like Colorado READS.
 - o Provide information on local and state opportunities for FFN providers using multilingual platforms.

Child Care Licensing

Licensing of child care facilities has been shown to positively affect the quality of care and development of children in out-of-home care environments.²⁷ Colorado has been working since the early 2000s to improve the health, safety and quality standards for licensed child care centers and family child care homes. Efforts included the piloting of licensing standards in a small number of communities and a Licensing Model Work Group that met and evaluated the pilot process. The work group made recommendations in 2006 that led to revisions of the family child care home rules, which were recently adopted. These rules strengthened quality standards in licensing for family homes and are serving as a basis for revisions to the existing child care center rules.

General child care licensing standards govern the health, safety and well-being of children in Colorado child care facilities. These rules help ensure a safe environment is provided for children, but would better guarantee a nurturing child care environment as well if they included more quality components. Colorado does not require licensed staff in centers or homes to meet minimum education requirements such as a Bachelor's degree, but does require staff to complete a minimum number of early childhood education college courses from a regionally accredited college or university and 24 months of experience caring for four or more children under 6 years of age.²⁸ Colorado also requires extensive background checks for providers that include child abuse and sex offender registries. While improving quality components in licensing is vital, these efforts would also increase the cost of providing child care, which is already a burden to providers.

In both child care centers and family child care homes, licensing inspections are currently expected to happen once every two years. In contrast, Child Care Aware of America (CCAA) recommends at least four inspections per year.²⁹ The average caseload for licensing staff in Colorado is currently 140 programs for each staff member.³⁰ The extremely large caseload of programs for licensing staff creates a significant barrier to consistent inspections and potentially compromises the health and safety of children in child care. Consistent licensing inspections enforce provider adherence to licensing standards and better ensure the health and safety of the children in their care.

Current requirements for group size and staff-to-child ratios for infants and toddlers in child care centers include a maximum group size of 10 and a staff-to-child ratio of no more than one adult to every five children. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) promotes a national benchmark for quality and safety in child care. It recommends group sizes of no more than eight for infants and no more than 12 for toddlers with ratios depending on group size, but no more than one staff member for every four children for both infants and toddlers.³¹

Colorado ranks 35th nationally in CCAA's 2013 ranking of state child care center regulation and oversight. However, Colorado child care rules and regulations are currently being amended and could incorporate higher standards for nutrition, physical activity and other quality components. Continuing to strengthen child care licensing rules in Colorado will enhance the quality of care as well as promote the health and safety of these settings.



Colorado's family child care home rules and regulations were recently rewritten to include more quality measures. Due in part to this activity, Colorado was ranked 9th in the nation by CCAA for regulation and oversight of state small family child care homes in 2013.³² Many states have not adopted any regulation and oversight of family child care homes. Colorado's family child care home rules include strong health and safety standards, requirements for communication with parents and small group size and staff-to-child ratios. Yet, while the licensing standards include experience caring for young children on the part of providers in family home settings, they do not include minimum education requirements.³³

Policy Recommendations:

- Continue investments in strengthening licensing requirements to reach national standards and support licensed providers in implementing revised requirements.
 - Increase the frequency of inspections of both family child care homes and child care centers to annual visits in order to approach the national recommendation of at least quarterly inspections.
 - Strengthen staff requirements for licensing, including child care training and education.
 - Allocate sufficient funding to help providers make quality improvements in their programs in order to meet licensing standards.
- Continue to connect quality child care elements to training for child care personnel and in licensing standards.
- Partner with exempt child care providers to ensure the health and safety needs of children are being met and that young children have access to enriching environments and play time.



Putting children on a path to success starts long before they are born. When women are healthy and supported before and during pregnancy and after birth, their children get a head start on life-long health and wellness. Building enriching, quality environments for infants and toddlers yields strong long-term academic results and decreases the likelihood of toxic stress and developmental delays in at-risk children. Stable, safe and nurturing child care options enable parents to pursue employment and build strong families.

When children get a strong start in life, the returns extend far beyond their own academic and life success. Investments in children between birth and age 3 achieve some of the best financial and social returns: healthier, happier children; a more educated population; a more productive workforce *today*; a more competitive workforce *tomorrow*; and a stronger and more stable Colorado economy.

Recent Policy Successes:

- House Bill 08-1265 (Todd/Shaffer)—**Increasing Eligibility Guidelines for the Colorado Child Care Assistance Program:** Allowed children to participate in the program for at least six months if a county lowered eligibility rates.
- House Bill 09-1343 (Massey/Williams)—**Early Childhood & School Readiness Legislative Commission Act:** Established a three-year Early Childhood and School Readiness Legislative Commission composed of 10 legislators charged with improving state policies on early childhood and school readiness.
- Senate Bill 10-195 (Newell/Solano)—**Early Childhood Leadership Commission:** Established an Early Childhood Leadership Commission to advance a comprehensive service system for children from birth to age 8 in the areas of early learning, family support and parent education, health and mental health.
- Senate Bill 12-022 (Williams/Massey)—**Maintaining Child Care Assistance for Working Families:** Created a pilot program allowing 10 counties to extend CCCAP assistance for two years after the parents exceed the eligibility limit, while gradually increasing the parent's share of child care costs until they can handle the full cost of care.
- House Bill 13-1007 (Peniston/Hudak)—**Reauthorization of the Early Childhood & School Readiness Commission:** Renewed and extended the Early Childhood and School Readiness Commission through 2018 (see House Bill 09-1343 above).
- House Bill 13-1117 (Hamner/Hodge/Kerr)—**Alignment of Early Childhood Programs:** Aligned early childhood services by moving numerous programs serving young children from multiple state agencies to the Colorado Department of Human Services, allowing the state to streamline enrollment processes and program administration.
- House Bill 13-1291 (Duran)—**Infant and Toddler Quality and Access Grant Program:** Created a grant program to expand the quality and availability of child care for infants and toddlers in low-income families.

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Select photos in this brief are of children at work and play at Clayton Early Learning in Denver, taken by the Colorado Children's Campaign.

End Notes

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