

## Jaeger Testimony to the Joint Budget Committee regarding the 2019-20 State Budget

February 4, 2019

Thank you Mr. Chair and members of the committee for taking testimony on the state budget. My name is Bill Jaeger and I am the Vice President for Early Childhood and Policy Initiatives at the Colorado Children's Campaign and we wanted to highlight 1) our support for seeing full-day kindergarten fully funded this year and 2) the importance of achieving full funding via the school finance formula rather than a separate funding or grant mechanism outside the formula.

Fully funding full-day kindergarten was a commitment made years ago that has never been fulfilled. Advocates for children and families have been working for decades to improve access to early learning. The fact that there is a window that could make this a reality and that you could be the legislators, along with your colleagues in the General Assembly, that make this finally happen for young children and their families in Colorado is a tremendously exciting prospect. The investment allows for numerous benefits:

1. **Better prepared children.** The research on full-day kindergarten and its benefits are robust and linked strongly to math and literacy skills and overall academic growth. In addition, full-day kindergarten helps educators identify children with developmental delays and special learning needs earlier and support them with appropriate interventions.
2. **Help for family budgets.** Many parents, even those with low incomes in many communities, must pay tuition to access a full-day experience. With tuition reaching more than \$4,500 per school year in some communities, this cost is either prohibitive or represents a strain on family budgets that full funding could alleviate.
3. **Help for school budgets.** Many school districts, especially in rural areas, are already absorbing the cost of providing full-day kindergarten. Ensuring adequate state investment will alleviate pressure on many school district budgets to invest in local priorities, such as teacher pay, smaller class sizes, and other support services.
4. **Expanded early learning.** Fully funding full-day kindergarten frees up more than 5,000 early learning slots currently used to support full-day kindergarten access for at-risk children. Only 24 percent of 4-year-olds in Colorado have access to state-funded preschool and there are several thousand children on our state preschool waitlist. Fully investing in full-day kindergarten allows us to open up preschool access for children facing the most barriers to learning to help ensure that they arrive in kindergarten ready to thrive.

The benefits of the policy are clear. In executing it, however, we ask that you pursue the solution in a way that places kindergarten as the foundation of our educational system. Doing so requires placing full funding within the school finance formula. Funding outside the formula has several drawbacks:

- 1) It makes the investment in full-day kindergarten more susceptible to future cuts than other approaches. Like building a house, kindergarten is the foundation for children's future academic success. Making this foundation the area we would treat differently and as less of a priority in future years jeopardizes one of the areas we should actually be prioritizing first.
- 2) Funding full-day kindergarten outside the formula to make it easier to cut in future years if there is an economic downturn disregards the implementation challenges of placing uncertainty around this funding. Local communities will be implementing full-day kindergarten and, if a future legislature finds it easier to cut full-day kindergarten if it is outside the formula, this will make implementation difficult for local communities. In many ways, such a future cut would tell local communities where they must cut.
- A more prudent approach that honors the work local communities will do as they move toward implementation is to recognize that full-day kindergarten should be treated as any other grade by funding inside the formula. In the event of future year cuts to education, the cuts should be within the formula, allowing local communities to determine where best to prioritize resources rather than have the state dictate where cuts should occur by cutting some fund for full-day kindergarten that sits outside the formula.