COUNCIL FOR A
STRONG AMERICA

REPORT

# Early Childhood Educators Set Colorado Kids on the Path to Success

## A highly-qualified, well-compensated teaching staff is key to quality early care and education



# Acknowledgements

**Council for a Strong America** is a national, bipartisan nonprofit that unites membership organizations, including law enforcement leaders, retired admirals and generals, and business executives, that promote solutions ensuring that our next generation of Americans will be successful, productive members of society.

*Supported by tax-deductible contributions from foundations, individuals, and corporations.*

**Author:**
Sandra Bishop, Ph.D., Chief Research Officer

**Contributor:**
Michael Cooke, State Director, Colorado

October 2023

©2023 Council for a Strong America. All Rights Reserved.



**< $17/hour**
**the average wage for CO child care teachers**

## Summary

Quality early care and education (ECE) can strengthen Colorado's current and future workforce, contribute to a strong state economy and public safety, and enhance national security. Increasing investments in Colorado's early education system will help it better meet the needs of children, families, and educators. When families cannot access or afford the child care they need, parents' work productivity falls, resulting in costs to parents, their employers, and taxpayers. Lack of access to preschool places children from families with low incomes at risk of starting school already behind their more advantaged peers. Inadequate compensation and subpar working conditions for educators results in high levels of turnover, impacting the quality of programs.

There are other consequences as well. Colorado jails are full of people convicted of serious and costly crimes. It doesn't have to be that way. Providing at-risk children with high-quality ECE opportunities can help reduce the human and fiscal costs of crime in the future by setting children up for success in school and beyond. Further, our national security relies on qualified young adults who are ready, willing, and able to serve in the U.S. military. However, educational deficits, health issues, and other problems (substance misuse and crime) prevent at least 70 percent of Colorado youth from qualifying for service (this latest state data is from 2017; the current level of ineligibility is likely higher).[1] Healthy early development sets the stage for children's future success. Without improvements to the ECE system, our nation risks having an even smaller military recruiting pool in the future.



Research shows that to have a real impact, ECE programs must be high quality, in order to help children develop the critical academic and social skills needed for success in school and life. **A fundamental feature of ECE quality is highly-qualified teachers who are well-trained both before and during their service and who need to be adequately compensated. Quite simply, to hire the best talent requires adequate investment.** Colorado policymakers must address the needs of the ECE workforce to ensure that families have the programs they need, parents can work, and children can be set on the path to success. In particular, Colorado's ECE workforce solutions must include meaningful preparation, ongoing professional development, and sufficient compensation. Action and innovation now can improve the experiences of Colorado children today and strengthen our state in the years to come.

## Most Colorado parents are in the workforce and need ECE

About two thirds (65 percent) of Colorado children under age 6 have all parents in the workforce.[2] Thus, many very young children are in child care or preschool while their parents are working to support their families. These ECE settings are a key environment for children, particularly given the importance of the early years for brain development.

## The ECE system is falling short

The current ECE system does not adequately meet the needs of many Colorado families, teachers, or employers.

**Access.** In 2023, 63 percent of Colorado children who are in the year before they are eligible for kindergarten are participating in the state's inaugural year Voluntary Universal Preschool Program (UPK).[3] While this program will address the shortage of child care slots for children in their pre-kindergarten year, there is still a great need for infants and toddlers who are not old enough to take advantage of the UPK program. Many Colorado families with young children report unmet child care needs; the most common barrier cited was the high cost of care.[4]

**Affordability.** Providing quality child care, particularly for infants and toddlers, requires significant resources, particularly staffing costs. The cost of infant care in a center in Colorado averages $19,573 per year, substantially more than the $12,103 cost for

> “The escalating costs and limited availability of child care present ongoing challenges for Coloradans in our communities. This crisis has far-reaching effects on families, caregivers, and employers. Prioritizing solutions to strengthen the workforce will be a crucial step in addressing this problem.”



**Debbie Brown**
President
Colorado Business Roundtable

in-state public college tuition.[5] Infant care costs 16 percent of the median income of a married couple in Colorado, while “affordable” care is defined as costing no more than seven percent of family income.[6] Thus, child care is unaffordable for many families, especially those with low incomes. The Colorado Child Care Assistance Program for Families (CCCAP) helps families with low incomes who are working, looking for work or in school pay for child care.[7] Yet the program serves only 10 percent of eligible families, falling far short of the need.[8]

**Workforce.** Despite the high cost of care to families, child care educators are poorly compensated. In Colorado, the annual mean wage for child care teachers is $35,040, and for prekindergarten teachers is $40,680, compared to $58,940 for kindergarten teachers.[9] Low wages contribute to teacher turnover and staffing shortages,[10] further reducing availability of care, creating instability for child care programs, parents, and children, and impacting the quality of care.

Beyond the negative effects on children and families, child care challenges impact employers and inflict a huge economic toll. Our recent ReadyNation national study of working parents of children under age 3 found that, when families do not have the child care they need, parents’ work productivity falls, resulting in costs to parents, their employers, and taxpayers.[11] These child care challenges exact an annual cost of $122 billion in lost earnings, productivity, and revenue, nationwide. As this study focused just on infants and toddlers, it severely underestimated the economic impact of shortcomings in the overall ECE system.

## Research shows that high-quality ECE supports children’s development

Studies have shown the benefits of high-quality ECE. For example, a longitudinal study of more than 1,300 children found that children in higher-quality child care were better-prepared for school at age 4 than children in lower-quality child care. At age 15, they were still performing slightly above their peers and also experienced significantly lower levels of behavior problems.[12] By age 26, participants from families with low incomes who spent two or more years in high-quality child care were more likely to graduate from college and had higher salaries.[13]

Decades of research, across numerous states, show the short- and long-term benefits of high-quality preschool for children's development, particularly for children from families with low incomes.[14] Children who attend high-quality preschool are more likely to arrive at kindergarten ready to learn, with enhanced early math, language, and literacy skills.[15] They are also less likely to be held back in school or to need special education,[16] and more likely to be proficient in reading and math.[17] Preschool participants also have an increased probability of graduating from high school.[18] Students who participate in high-quality preschool are less likely to have behavioral infractions in elementary and middle school and to be suspended from high school, demonstrating the impact of ECE on behavior.[19]

A smaller, but significant, number of long-term studies directly examine the link between preschool participation and crime prevention. An MIT study of the Boston preschool program found that enrollees were less likely to have been incarcerated in a juvenile facility during high school, compared to non-enrollees.[20] Children not served by the Chicago Child-Parent Centers (CPC) early education program were 70 percent more likely to be arrested for a violent crime by age 18.[21] By age 24, the people served by the CPC were 20 percent less likely to have served time in jail or prison.[22]

In sum, ECE programs can set children on a path to successful adulthood. However, ECE must be high-quality in order to help children develop critical skills needed for success in school and life. **Among the most fundamental of these quality features are highly-qualified teachers.**

> "We need strategic investments in early childhood, including to strengthen the workforce, to ensure that our children are on a path to success and stay out of the criminal justice system."



**Bob Brammer**
Chief of Police
Durango Police Department

## Teachers are the foundation of high-quality early care and education

The heart of any ECE program is the relationship between the teacher and the children.[23] Research indicates that a well-qualified workforce is an essential, fundamental component of high-quality ECE. One study found that the teacher-child relationship was the aspect of preschool quality most closely linked to child learning outcomes.[24] Highly-qualified teachers engage in warm, nurturing interactions with the children to support their development in all areas. Excellent teachers also provide developmentally-appropriate instruction in key early literacy, math and other academic skills.[25] To offer this high-quality experience, early childhood educators must be well-trained, both before they start teaching and once they are on the job through ongoing



professional development.[26] Adequate compensation is key to attracting and retaining top talent.[27] Retaining teachers is particularly important for young children, since positive, stable relationships support healthy development.

## Key elements of a highly-qualified early care and education workforce

***Education:*** The level of education required for ECE teachers has been a matter of long-standing debate. Much research, including a comprehensive review of 48 studies by the Campbell Collaboration, has found that higher teacher education levels have a strong relationship to higher quality in ECE.[28]

***Professional development:*** Studies show that effective professional development is:

- Classroom-focused: related to what teachers are actually teaching;
- Active: allows for hands-on practice of skills;
- Collaborative: with modeling and/or coaching of skills and feedback provided.[29]

However, providers face barriers to participating in professional development, including long work hours and low compensation.[30] Further, investments in professional development can be lost when teachers leave their jobs, often due to inadequate compensation.[31]

***Compensation:*** Adequate compensation is required to attract and retain a high-quality ECE workforce;[32] but as mentioned above, child care educators are poorly-paid. Early childhood educators have a poverty rate nearly eight times higher than K-8 teachers, leading many to rely on public assistance to meet the needs of their own families.[33] Low compensation is a major factor in ECE teachers leaving the field.[34]

A recent natural experiment demonstrated the importance of compensation for child care teacher retention, finding that increasing pay by $1,500 over an eight-month period cut turnover in half, from 30 to 15 percent.[35]

## The path forward for Colorado

Bolstering the early childhood workforce is an essential aspect of increasing ECE

supply and children's access. Colorado policymakers must address each of the key elements of ECE workforce quality in a comprehensive strategy, because the elements are interrelated. For example, if compensation remains low, teachers will have neither the means nor the incentive to pursue intensive professional development. Similarly, the type and amount of professional development required will vary depending on the level and quality of teacher pre-service education.

Colorado has such a comprehensive approach, the Teacher Education and Compensation Helps (T.E.A.C.H.) Early Childhood Scholarship Program.[36] T.E.A.C.H. provides scholarships to two- and four-year degree programs in early childhood education. Upon completion, participants receive a raise or bonus from their employers. Policymakers must continue to invest in T.E.A.C.H and additional strategies to ensure that all early educators receive the training, support, and professional compensation they need to provide high-quality early learning experiences for children.

> "Our children deserve the opportunity to be successful in any career they choose, including the military. Investments in early childhood, including the workforce, can produce the strong leaders we need."



**Brigadier General James M. Johnston**
USAF, Retired

## Conclusion

High-quality ECE is a powerful means of supporting children's development while their parents work. However, this potential will only be fully realized when children can attend quality programs with a highly-qualified ECE workforce with meaningful education, ongoing professional development, and sufficient compensation. Support for high-quality ECE is an investment in our future public safety, national security, and economic well-being.

## Endnotes


**1** Department of Defense. (2017, November). Qualified Military Available (QMA). Data acquired from the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness.The Department of Defense released updated eligibility data in 2022 indicating that nationwide, the percentage of youth ineligible for military service has increased since 2017. State-level data have not yet been released, but it is expected that the percentage of youth ineligible has increased in Colorado and other states.

**2** KIDSCOUNT (2021). https://datacenter.kidscount.org/

**3** Data from the Colorado Department of Early Childhood, September 2023.

**4** Colorado Health Institute (2022, November). Colorado Is facing a child care crisis. https://www.coloradohealthinstitute.org/sites/default/files/file_attachments/CHAS%20Brief%20Child%20Care%20web.pdf

**5** Child Care Aware (2022). Child care affordability in Colorado. https://info.childcareaware.org/hubfs/2022%20Price%20of%20Care%20State%20Fact%20Sheets/Colorado%202022%20-Price%20Fact%20Sheet.pdf

**6** Bipartisan Policy Center (2020, August 31). Demystifying child care affordability. https://bipartisanpolicy.org/blog/demystifying-child-care-affordability/

**7** https://cdec.colorado.gov/colorado-child-care-assistance-program-for-families

**8** Data obtained from CCCAP, September 26, 2023

**9** Bureau of Labor Statistics (2023) May 2022 state occupational employment and wage estimates Colorado. https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes_co.htm

**10** McLean, C., & Craven, M. (2021, June 6). Why did the child care teacher cross the road? To get to higher pay. The Hill. https://thehill.com/opinion/finance/557045-why-did-the-child-care-teacher-cross-the-road-to-get-to-higher-pay

**11** ReadyNation (2023, February). $122 billion: The growing, annual cost of the infant-toddler child care crisis. https://www.strongnation.org/articles/2038-122-billion-the-growing-annual-cost-of-the-infant-toddler-child-care-crisis

**12** Vandell, D. L., Belsky, J., Burchinal, M., et al. (2010). Do effects of early child care extend to age 15 years? Results from the NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development. Child Development. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-8624.2010.01431.x

**13** Bustamante, A. S., Dearing, E., Zachrisson, H. D., & Vandell, D. L. (2021, October 18). Adult outcomes of sustained high-quality early child care and education: Do they vary by family income? Child Development. https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.13696

**14** Brookings and the Duke Center for Child and Family Policy (2017). The current state of scientific knowledge on pre-kindergarten effects. https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/duke_prekstudy_final_4-4-17_hires.pdf

**15** Ansari, A., Pianta, R. C., Whittaker, J. V., et al.. (2020). Persistence and convergence: The end of kindergarten outcomes of pre-K graduates and their nonattending peers. Developmental Psychology. https://doi.org/10.1037/dev0001115 ; Peisner-Feinberg, E., Soliday Hong, S., Yazejian, N., et al. (2020, December). Kindergarten impacts of the Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts Program. https://ed.unc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/PAPKC-Impact-Study-ExSum_Final.pdf ; National Head Start Association (2021). The Head Start advantage. https://nhsa.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/HSA-School-Readiness.pdf ; Weiland, C., & Yoshikawa, H. (2013). Impacts of a prekindergarten program on children's mathematics, language, literacy, executive function and emotional skills. Child Development. https://srcd.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/cdev.12099

**16** Barnett, W. S., & Jung, K. (2021). Effects of New Jersey's Abbott preschool program on children's achievement, grade retention, and special education through tenth grade. Early Childhood Research Quarterly. https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0885200621000478 ; Jung, K., Barnett, W. S., Hustedt, J. T., Francis, J. (2013, May). Longitudinal effects of the Arkansas Better Chance Program. http://nieer.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Arkansas20Longitudinal20Report20May2013n.pdf ; Philips, D., Gormley, W., & Anderson, S. (2017). The effects of Tulsa's CAP Head Start program on middle-school academic outcomes and progress. Developmental Psychology. https://psycnet.apa.org/doiLanding?doi=10.1037%2Fdev0000151

**17** Han, J., & Neuharth-Pritchett, S. (2021). Predicting students' mathematics achievement through elementary and middle school: The contribution of state-funded prekindergarten program participation. Child & Youth Care Forum. DOI: 10.1007/s10566-020-09595-w ; Philips, D., Gormley, W., & Anderson, S. (2017). The effects of Tulsa's CAP Head Start program on middle-school academic outcomes and progress. Developmental Psychology. https://psycnet.apa.org/doiLanding?doi=10.1037%2Fdev0000151 ; Preskitt J., Johnson H., Becker D., et al. (2018) Proficiency in reading and math: First Class Pre-K benefits persist in elementary and middle school. https://doi.org/10.1186/s40723-020-00073-3

**18** Bauer, L., & Schanzenbach, D. W., (2016, August 19). The long-term impact of the Head Start Program. http://www.hamiltonproject.org/papers/the_long_term_impacts_of_head_start ; Reynolds, A. J., Temple, J. A., Robertson, D. L., & Mann, E. A. (2001, May 9). Long-term effects of an early childhood intervention on educational achievement and juvenile arrest. Journal of the American Medical Association. https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/193816

**19** Adams, J., Becker, D., Ernest, J., et. al. (2019, July) Disciplinary infractions in Alabama public schools. http://children.alabama.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2019/07/7_Discipline_7-2019.pdf ; Gray-Lobe, G., Pathak, P., & Walters, C. (2021, May). The long-term effects of universal preschool in Boston. https://blueprintcdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Blueprint-Labs-Discussion-Paper-2021.4-Gray-Lobe-Pathak-and-Walters.pdf

**20** Gray-Lobe, G., Pathak, P., & Walters, C. (2021, May). The long-term effects of universal preschool in Boston. https://blueprintcdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Blueprint-Labs-Discussion-Paper-2021.4-Gray-Lobe-Pathak-and-Walters.pdf

**21** Reynolds, A. J., Temple, J. A., Robertson, D. L., & Mann, E. A. (2001, May 9). Long-term effects of an early childhood intervention on educational achievement and juvenile arrest: A 15-year follow-up of low-income children in public schools. Journal of the American Medical Association. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/11343481

**22** Reynolds, A. J., & Ou, S., (2011). Paths of effects from preschool to adult well-being: A confirmatory analysis of the Child-Parent Center Program. Child Development, 82, 555-582. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3793348/

**23** Sabol, T. J., Soliday Hong, S. L., Pianta, R. C., & Burchinal, M. R. (2013, 23 August). Can rating pre-K programs predict children's learning? SCIENCE. https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.1233517 ; Yoshikawa, H., Weiland, C., Brooks-Gunn, J., Burchinal, M. R., et al. Investing in our future: The evidence base on preschool education. http://www.srcd.org/sites/default/files/documents/washington/mb_2013_10_16_investing_in_children.pdf

**24** Sabol, T. J., Hong, S. L. S., Pianta, R. C., & Burchinal, M. R. (2013). Can rating pre-K programs predict children's learning? Science, 341(6148), 845–846. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1233517

**25** Burchinal, M. (2017). Measuring early care and education quality. Child Development Perspectives. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/cdep.12260

**26** Connors-Tadros, L. & Daily, S. (2018, April). Strategies to improve Instructional practice in early childhood settings https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED586370

**27** Child Trends (2018, April). High-quality preschool can support healthy development and learning. https://www.childtrends.org/publications/high-quality-preschool-can-support-healthy-development-and-learning

**28** Manning, M., Garvis, S., Fleming, C., & Wong, G. T. W. (2017, January). The relationship between teacher qualification and the quality of the early childhood education and care environment. https://www.campbellcollaboration.org/better-evidence/teacher-qualification-and-quality-of-early-childhood-care-and-learning.html

**29** Connors-Tadros, L. & Daily, S. (2018, April). Strategies to improve Instructional practice in early childhood settings https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED586370

**30** Committee for Economic Development (2020, October). Pathways to high-quality child care. https://www.ced.org/reports/early-learning/pathways-to-high-quality-child-care

**31** Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (2020, February 11). What's causing the shortage of qualified early care and education teachers? There's a hole in the bucket. https://cscce.berkeley.edu/hole-in-the-bucket/ ; McLean, C., & Craven, M. (2021, June 6). Why did the child care teacher cross the road? To get to higher pay. The Hill. https://thehill.com/opinion/finance/557045-why-did-the-child-care-teacher-cross-the-road-to-get-to-higher-pay

**32** NAEYC (2021, June). Compensation matters most. https://www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/globally-shared/downloads/PDFs/resources/blog/compensation_matters_most.pdf ; U. S. Department of Health and Human Services; U. S. Department of Education. (2016, June). High-quality early learning settings depend on a high-quality workforce. Low compensation undermines quality. https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/ecd/ece_low_compensation_undermines_quality_report_june_10_2016_508.pdf

**33** Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (2020). Early childhood workforce index 2020. https://cscce.berkeley.edu/workforce-index-2020/the-early-educator-workforce/early-educator-pay-economic-insecurity-across-the-states/

**34** Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (2020, February 11). What's causing the shortage of qualified early care and education teachers? There's a hole in the bucket. https://cscce.berkeley.edu/hole-in-the-bucket/ ; McLean, C., & Craven, M. (2021, June 6). Why did the child care teacher cross the road? To get to higher pay. The Hill. https://thehill.com/opinion/finance/557045-why-did-the-child-care-teacher-cross-the-road-to-get-to-higher-pay

**35** EdPolicyWorks at the University of Virginia (2021, December). The effects of financial incentives on teacher turnover in early childhood settings: Experimental evidence from Virginia. https://files.elfsightcdn.com/022b8cb9-839c-4bc2-992e-cefccb8e877e/6de6fd54-e921-4c88-a452-ad7cabccc362.pdf

**36** https://ecclacolorado.org/teachscholarships/

**Council for a Strong America** is a national, bipartisan nonprofit that unites membership organizations, including law enforcement leaders, retired admirals and generals, and business executives, that promote solutions ensuring that our next generation of Americans will be successful, productive members of society.

1400 S. Colorado Blvd. / Suite 460 / Denver, CO 80222 / 720.358.4700

COUNCIL FOR A
STRONG AMERICA

StrongNation.org