

Colorado's Race to the Top

Early Childhood Alignment Brief

Section I – Overview

On Feb 17, 2009 President Obama enacted the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. This legislation was designed to stimulate the economy through critical investments in transportation, health care, renewable energy, critical government services and education. However, the Recovery Act is as much about reform and renewal as it is about providing a financial safety net. This notion is particularly emphasized in the area of public education.

The Recovery Act contains four state-level education reform assurances:

- To improve the collection and use of data through longitudinal data systems;
- To enhance the quality of standards and assessments;
- To provide support for chronically low performing schools; and
- To achieve equity in the distribution of highly effective teachers and leaders

Though every state in the nation is required to pursue the above-mentioned assurances as a condition of receiving State Fiscal Stabilization funds (the primary source of education funds in the Recovery Act), an additional \$4.35 billion was earmarked by Congress for the purpose of establishing an unprecedented national competition among states that show promise in successfully implementing the Recovery Act's assurances. The competition has been called Race to the Top.

On July 24, 2009, the U.S. Department of Education issued a notice of proposed priorities, requirements, and selection criteria for the Race to the Top (RTT) competition. Although early education reform was not included as a competitive priority, Governor Ritter, Lieutenant Governor O'Brien and Commissioner of Education Dwight Jones are committed to including early education in Colorado's Race to the Top application. Colorado has long supported an aligned preschool through 3rd grade continuum, recognizing that early childhood education is the foundation for school readiness and later academic success. A high-quality early education system includes well-defined program and early learning standards, developmentally appropriate practices and assessments, data and accountability measures and most importantly great teachers.

Colorado will submit a Race to the Top application in Phase I, which is due in December, with the understanding that Phase I awards will be announced in March 2010.

During the next month, Lt. Governor Barbara O'Brien encourages Colorado's early childhood community to come together in formal and informal "water cooler" meetings to develop bold, innovative strategies and recommendations that can be incorporated into Colorado's Race to the Top application. In addition, staff from the Lt. Governor's Office will hold regional forums to solicit input from stakeholders. This process will result in recommendations being forwarded to the Co-Chairs of the Race to the Top Assurance Area Committees for consideration in the final application. **Stakeholder input and recommendations can be sent directly to the Lt. Governor's Early Childhood Team at early.childhoodteam@capitol.state.co.us until Friday, October 9, 2009.**

This briefing paper provides a starting point for these conversations. The paper provides background, discusses current challenges and opportunities and explains the progress Colorado has made in each of the four assurance areas as it relates to early education. Finally, this paper is intended to help stakeholders consider how Race to the Top funds could accelerate the state's progress towards meeting our goals on increased student achievement, better grade retention, and improved high school graduation rates through developing an early education system that is well aligned and coordinated with the K-12 education system.

Section II: Background and the National/International Perspective

Research consistently demonstrates that high-quality early education is a key component to closing the achievement gap for at-risk and minority children. The early years of a child's life are critical to fostering cognitive capacity and developmental resilience that have lasting effects in preparing children for school and beyond. During this period, the human brain grows to 80% of adult capacity by age 3, and 90% by age 5. Unfortunately, many at-risk preschool children lack access to high-quality early education and arrive at Kindergarten without the developmental resilience, skills, and competencies essential to thrive in school.

What we know about the importance of effective early childhood standards and assessment

- Using valid, reliable, and developmentally appropriate assessment tools to individualize instruction for young children helps close the achievement gap.
- Developmentally appropriate assessment and standards are part of a more comprehensive system of accountability.
- Best practice in assessment of young children’s learning and development requires collaboration between educators, health, mental health, and family support providers working within a coherent interagency system.

What we know about the importance of effective early childhood teachers

- The quality of children’s early learning experiences is directly related to the preparedness of teachers who provide foundational experiences that lead to future success in school and life.
- Education and training of teachers that include focused early childhood development content areas are associated with optimal outcomes for young children as they enter school.
- Better teacher preparation allows for earlier identification and focused interventions for children with special needs. These interventions are significantly more effective when conducted in pre-k programs.
- Education staff continuity is associated with improved child academic outcomes.

What we know about supporting Low Performing Schools

- In order to close the achievement gap, efforts must begin before Kindergarten. Research demonstrates that the achievement gap is evident long before children reach the age of five (5). Again, these interventions are most effective during these early years.
- Research also demonstrates that high-quality early education programs with a strong parent education /involvement component strongly contribute to school readiness outcomes for children.
- The intense focus on struggling schools requires that we ensure these schools, and other early education programs that provide services to the children entering those schools, have evidence-based, high-quality early education programs. At-risk children who have the benefit of quality early childhood education (ECE) stay in elementary and middle school at significantly higher

rates, are less likely to need special education services, score better on achievement tests and graduate from high school at higher rates than their peers who failed to attend such a program.¹

What we know about the importance of Longitudinal Data Systems and Data Systems to inform

Instruction

- Everyday classroom assessment, including formal and informal data, is essential for guiding best practice with instructional decisions and use of curricula that result in increased student achievement.
- Effective assessment is aligned and incorporates data-driven instruction and curricula.
- Longitudinal data systems should begin when children enter pre-kindergarten programs. This provides accountability at every level in preparing students for third grade reading proficiency and high school graduation.

Section III: The Colorado Context

Based on U.S. Census Bureau data, there are approximately 342,000 children under the age of 5 in Colorado (approximately 68,500 in each age cohort), and the size of this population grows every year. Approximately 92% of these children will enter Colorado's public school system. Childhood poverty has increased 85% since 2000 in Colorado with more than 192,000 children living in poverty in 2007 and 68,000 of them are age 5 or younger.² In Colorado, 239,000 children under the age of 6 had all available parents working. With approximately, 117,000 licensed child care slots available for children under 6 years of age, more than half of Colorado children who potentially need care cannot be accommodated in licensed facilities.³ In the 2008-09 school year, the Colorado Preschool Program was authorized to serve 20,160 preschool-aged children. This number of slots would provide preschool to only 27.8 percent of four-year-olds within the state.⁴ Colorado Head Start programs in 2008-09 were funded to serve 9,082 children ages 3 and 4 who live at or below federal poverty guidelines, approximately 50 percent of eligible children. Additionally, 35% of Colorado children living in poverty do not have health insurance, ranking Colorado 50th in the nation, and the highest percentage of uninsured

¹ Ready for Kindergarten (2005), A Report from the Denver Public Schools Task Force on Early Education and School Readiness

² 2009 KidsCount in Colorado, Colorado Children's Campaign

³ Ibid.

⁴ Colorado Preschool Program, A Strong Investment in Colorado's Future, 2009 Legislative Report

children is between birth and 5 years of age⁵. Research shows that uninsured children have the highest rate of school absenteeism.

Colorado's vision that all children are healthy, valued, and thriving encompasses a comprehensive approach that acknowledges the role for coordinated health, mental health, early learning, and family support and parent education services and supports.⁶ Access to high-quality early education environments and supports before children enter school and during the early primary grade years is a critical component of Colorado's comprehensive vision. The vision for early learning ensures a seamless, high-quality early care and education system that is connected to, and coordinated with, health, mental health and family support, preparing all children for academic success.

The P-3 Subcommittee of Governor Ritter's P-20 Education Coordinating Council worked closely with the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) to develop Colorado's description of school readiness:

*"School Readiness describes both the preparedness of a child to engage in and benefit from learning experiences, and the ability of a school to meet the needs of all students enrolled in publicly funded preschool or kindergarten. School Readiness is enhanced when schools, families, and community service providers work collaboratively to ensure that every child is ready for higher levels of learning in academic content."*⁷

The P-3 Subcommittee work plan addresses the need for a P-3 teacher licensure and has contributed a considerable foundation for conversations and strategies around building a high-quality early learning system⁸⁹¹⁰¹¹.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ *Early Childhood Colorado Framework*, July 2008.

⁷ School Readiness Description/Approved by the State Board of Education in December 2008.

⁸ *Fighting Fadeout: Supporting Achievement Beyond Early Childhood Education/University of Denver/October 2008*

⁹ P-3 Subcommittee 2008-09 Work Plan

¹⁰ P-3 Successful Practices: A Guide to Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment/Colorado Department of Education/November 2008

¹¹ *Educating the Educators: Effective Practices for Early Childhood Teachers' Training and Professional Development/University of Denver/November 2008*

Goals

Colorado aims to improve the quality of children’s early learning experiences before they enter school (pre-school) and during the primary school years (K-3), engaging parents and families throughout the process. Interdepartmental collaboration among state agencies, well-established policies and practices, and a commitment to evaluate and use data for decision-making are essential in order to affect such change. Specifically, Colorado will:

- Provide young children with access to a solid, multi-dimensional foundation for learning prior to school entry;
- Dramatically reduce the number of children entering school with gaps in school readiness; and,
- Incorporate early childhood best practices and research into the P-3 years.

For the past two decades, dedicated individuals, organizations and state departments in Colorado have been working to develop an early education system that ensures high-quality care, equal access to resources and support and results-oriented accountability. Towards that effort, the Lieutenant Governor’s Office, the Department of Human Services, the Department of Education, the Department of Public Health and Environment and early childhood advocates have worked together to support initiatives and implement legislation that benefit young children and families. The following information provides a snapshot of the current early childhood landscape in Colorado regarding the Race to the Top Assurance areas.

Current Landscape - Early Education Standards and Assessments

- **SB09- 212 (Preschool to Postsecondary Alignment Act)** - In implementing the Colorado Achievement Plan for Kids (CAP4K), the State Board of Education has adopted a school readiness description and will adopt revised Colorado Model Content Standards by December 2009. The State Board is expected to adopt a school readiness assessment and a preschool through elementary and secondary education assessment system by December 2010. This alignment eliminates traditional barriers between Colorado’s pre-K, K-12 and higher-education systems.
- **Results Matter Assessment and Accountability System** – Participation in this system is required for all children enrolled in the Colorado Preschool Program or in preschool special education

services. In addition, multiple Head Start and private programs are voluntarily participating for a total of 44,000 children across the state. Programs choose one of three developmentally appropriate, valid and reliable assessment tools and assess children’s learning and developmental progress three times per year. These comprehensive child assessment systems include teachers’ daily observations, portfolio assessments and developmental checklists. Assessments are web-based and provide immediate access to progress reports for planning and accountability reporting purposes.

- **The Head Start Child Outcomes Framework** - The Framework guides Head Start programs, which provide comprehensive early education to low-income children, in their ongoing assessment of the progress and accomplishments of participating children. The Framework, based on the Head Start Performance Standards, is composed of 8 general Domains, 27 Domain Elements, and 100 examples of more specific indicators of children's skills, abilities, knowledge and behaviors. Every Head Start program implements an appropriate child assessment system that aligns with their curriculum and gathers data on children's progress in each of the 8 Domains of learning and development. Many Head Start programs utilize the Colorado Department of Education’s Results Matter assessment system.

Standards and Assessment – Guiding Questions for Bold and Innovative Solutions

1. What can Colorado do to improve the early education system through the use of common core standards across learning environments (e.g. preschool, child care, Head Start, early intervention)?
2. What does Colorado need to do in order to ensure that teachers in all settings have the knowledge and skills to implement and utilize early learning standards and assessments?
3. How can we ensure the effectiveness of the alignment of standards between early education and K-3?
4. How can proven models of assessment for young children inform K-3 instruction, standards and assessments?

Current Landscape – Early Education Teacher Effectiveness

- **HB09-1065 Educator Identifier Pilot Program**– This pilot uses information about educators' experience to evaluate their performance and guide improvement, analyze the effectiveness of teacher preparation programs and better understand the distribution of high-performing teachers.
- **Colorado Office of Professional Development (OPD)** – OPD is a statewide entity responsible for improving the quality of services, supports and education for young children and their families. The OPD manages the Early Childhood Professional Credential, which was created through legislation in 2000. The Colorado Early Childhood Professional Credential is a voluntary, tiered system of credentials that recognizes increased knowledge and experience for those who care for and educate our youngest children. Credentials ensure that all professionals caring for and educating young children have the same core early childhood knowledge regardless of setting - family child care, child care centers, public schools. The OPD tracks the number of early childhood professionals with a credential. In 2009, the OPD received a grant to provide incentives to early care and education professionals who complete college-level coursework.
- **Strengthening ECE Professional Development through Community Colleges** – A project sponsored by Boettcher Foundation, Clayton Early Learning, the Colorado Community College System, Colorado Office of Professional Development and Qualistar Early Learning. The Project Sponsors are working together to achieve **NAEYC Accreditation for the Community College's Early Education Programs**. There are 14 community colleges in Colorado currently in progress to receive a National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) accreditation for their early education programs. The process includes reviewing curricula, for rigor, relevance and diversity.
- **The Qualistar Rating System** – The level of early education teacher qualifications is collected and reported for every classroom that receives a Qualistar rating.
- **Bachelor's degree in early care and education** - Four of Colorado's public colleges and universities and two private institutions are offering 4-year degrees in early education.

- **Articulation agreements** – Transfer articulation agreements exist between 2 and 4-year institutions regarding ECE credits. However, students experience difficulties in having their transferred ECE credits apply to their major.
- **T.E.A.C.H (Teacher Education and Compensation Helps) Early Childhood** – Funded through a significant investment of federal Child Care Development Block Grant dollars. T.E.A.C.H. provides college scholarships to child care professionals to help them earn early childhood credentials and degrees. This program works to increase the education levels of Colorado’s child care professionals, reduce turnover in the child care field and increase child care wages.
- **Temple Buell Professional Development projects** – Nine early childhood councils have established professional development offices in their local communities. The focus is on building a highly-trained and competent workforce by providing scholarships and providing coaching and mentoring for early care and education professionals to support their college experience. A primary focus of these projects is to retain early childhood professionals. Local projects develop systems to track information on individual scholarship recipients including their level of credential and job history.
- **New Child Care Licensing requirements** – By May 2010, state law will require that every lead teacher in a licensed early education classroom in Colorado will need at least two college level courses in ECE, with one of them being ECE 101.
- **The Colorado Preschool Program (CPP) Credential Requirements** – State law requires that CPP teachers meet the licensing requirements for group leader established by the Colorado Department of Human Services. However, some school districts require their early education teachers to have a teacher license through the Department of Education which requires a 4-year degree.
- **Head Start Teacher Credential Requirements** – Head Start has the highest educational requirements for early childhood teachers. Currently, every Head Start teacher must have at least a Child Development Associate (6 college courses in ECE) and 50 percent of teachers must have an AA degree in early childhood or a related field. By 2013, 100 percent of Head Start teachers will need an AA degree and 50 percent will need a Bachelors degree in early education or a related field. A teacher with a degree in a related field must have 18 college credits in early education. By 2013, 100 percent of assistant teachers will need to have a Child Development

Associate credential. Head Start programs track the level of credentials for each teacher and are required to report on teacher turnover.

Teacher Effectiveness – Guiding Questions for Bold and Innovative Solutions

1. How should Colorado define and identify an “effective early education teacher?”
2. How do we recruit and maintain effective early education teachers?
3. How can the state use Race to the Top funds to help ensure ECE teachers are adequately prepared to work with diverse families and children, including immigrants and children with special needs?
4. What systems could be put into place to support early education teachers to enhance their skills?
5. What are the opportunities to develop mechanisms to reward teachers for doing well and/or entire programs/school staff?

Current Landscape - Supporting Low Performing Schools

- **HB08-1388** - Expansion of Colorado Preschool Program by 6,254 new slots for 3- and 4-year olds. Increased allocation for full-day Kindergarten by \$30 million.
- **SB09-163 Education Accountability System**– Modernizes and aligns reporting on school accountability systems to help students throughout Colorado. Requires school districts with accreditation issues to improve school readiness in their preschool and Kindergarten programs.
- **HB07-1062 Local Early Childhood Councils** – Expanded the system of local early childhood councils statewide and developed the Early Childhood Councils Advisory Team.
- **HB02-1238-School Readiness Quality Improvement Program** - In 2002, the Colorado legislature established the School Readiness Project. The focus of the project is to improve the quality of early education settings that serve children who will attend a low performing school that receives Title 1 funding. The Early Childhood Councils oversee the School Readiness projects and provide accountability reports to the Colorado Department of Human Services.
- **Evidence-Based Programs** - The Pyramid Model, The Incredible Years Dinosaur School and the Good Behavior Game are evidence-based approaches for young children that promote strong social and emotional development and help prepare children academically for success in school.

The Nurse Family Partnership (NFP), Parents as Teachers (PAT) and Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters (HIPPO) are evidence-based home visitation programs for families with young children and have been proven to increase a parent’s level of involvement in their child’s education and improved academic outcomes for young children.

Supporting Low Performing Schools – Guiding Questions for Bold and Innovative Solutions

1. How can Race to the Top funds be used in early education to effectively decrease the gaps in school readiness and academic achievement between populations of children?
2. How can Race to the Top funds be used to coordinate early education improvement strategies and comprehensive, community-based strategies to better target high-risk communities with low performing schools?
3. How will these strategies support a family’s ability to access high-quality early education services and supports?
4. What role should Colorado play in identifying, designing, supporting and implementing transformational community-based, multi-generational interventions in high-risk communities with low performing schools?
5. What would a true, P-3 initiative look like that is fully supported and aligns high-quality early education with high-quality Kindergarten through 3rd grade?

Current Landscape - Data Systems to Inform Continuous Improvement

- **HB08-1364** - Interdepartmental data protocols: Convened a working group to create unique student identifiers for children who receive state or federally funded early childhood services.
- **HB09-1285**– Permits state departments to share data and create comprehensive longitudinal information, in particular that concern educational attainment and employment.
- **Head Start Child and Family Data** – All Head Start grantees are required to maintain a database to track child and family outcome data including attendance, health and nutrition history, strengths and needs of each family and resources needed. Head Start grantees are required to report aggregate data on a yearly basis to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

- Several Colorado communities have successfully instituted longitudinal data tracking systems from preschool through third grade, which have helped inform the type and intensity of early education environments that are needed to prepare children for future academic success.

Data Systems – Guiding Questions for Bold and Innovative Solutions

1. How can the early education community support an effective and relevant transition from preschool to K-3, with an opportunity to share information among providers and educators?
2. How can Colorado make data accessible and user-friendly to a variety of users (i.e. families, educators, cross-system professionals, policy makers)? How should Colorado envision a data clearinghouse that includes data on young children?
3. What processes and procedures need to be in place to integrate the use of longitudinal data to inform program and professional development, funding and policy change?
4. How do we overcome barriers between education, health and mental health to develop a streamlined data system?

Section IV – Conclusion

Colorado is fortunate to have leaders who recognize that education reform begins in preschool. The Race to the Top competition provides early childhood stakeholders the opportunity to move forward and create a system where all children are valued and thriving. To this end, innovation is essential; however it must lead to improved processes and results. The children and families of Colorado deserve our best efforts and most innovative thinking, and we welcome all who wish to engage in this process.

Proposed Metrics for Benchmarking Progress on Assurances

- The number and percentage of early education professionals with sufficient professional education and training.
- The number and percentage of school leaders and P-3 teachers with sufficient training in and knowledge of early childhood education.
- The extent to which early learning standards exist and are integrated into a variety of early learning environments.
- The extent to which early education assessments are developmentally appropriate and used to inform teaching, child learning and professional development.

- The extent to which gaps in school readiness and academic achievement between populations are decreasing.
- Progress towards a statewide data system that includes data from a variety of early education programs and services in order to track program and child outcomes, support child learning and transitions into school settings, and identify program and teacher quality improvement areas.
- The extent to which parents and families are engaged in early learning services and supports and participate in related boards, advisories and task forces.
- The number and strength of collaborations that schools have with community and non-profit partners that provide child and family services and supports.