



WATERSHED
ADVISORS

SOLUTIONS THAT SCALE:
How Watershed is supporting
leaders to address America's
biggest education challenges

**MAKING UNIVERSAL
PRESCHOOL WORK FOR
FAMILIES IN COLORADO**



THE CHALLENGE

Access to high-quality early childhood programs and services is essential to boosting young children’s development, supporting working families, and growing a prosperous economy. Research has established that every dollar invested in high-quality, birth-to-five early childhood education for disadvantaged children has the potential to deliver a **13% annual return on investment**.¹ But too many kids don’t have access to this education — and, too often, states fail to effectively scale their existing programs to reach more kids.

The biggest hurdle? Fragmented early childhood systems without a sustainable funding stream or a coherent vision for success.

These patchwork systems are frustrating for parents and providers alike. They make it difficult and confusing for parents to know what supports are available and how to access them. For example, a parent often has to interact with each individual provider of their choice just to figure out if they are eligible and can apply for a child care subsidy, for Head Start, and/or for a school district-run preschool. And, these systems make it impossible

for local providers to get sufficient, stable funding to support the children in their communities and make their small businesses viable.

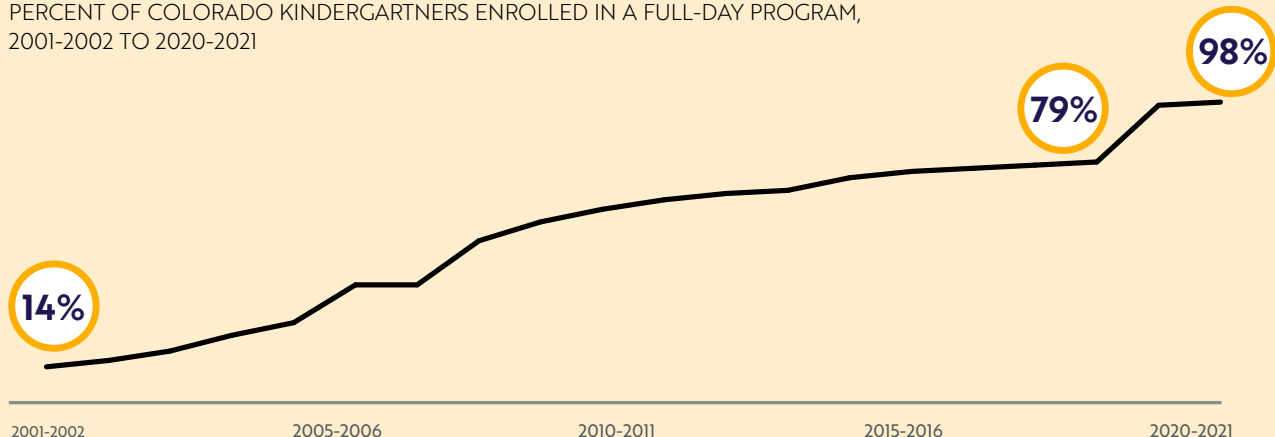
This is what Governor Jared Polis encountered when he set out to establish universal preschool in Colorado in 2020. There was no one agency in the state positioned to leverage every dollar and every spot to achieve the promise of his campaign goal.

As a result, only one-quarter of 4-year-olds in Colorado were being served by the state’s limited, district-run preschool option, the Colorado Preschool Program.²

Colorado voters wanted better. In 2020, a bipartisan majority of voters (67%) supported Proposition EE³ to provide funding for universal preschool. Proposition EE increased the state tax on tobacco, established a nicotine products tax, and would direct 73% of this new funding to universal preschool. Preschool programming would be offered in a variety of licensed settings, also known as “mixed delivery,” like schools, child care centers, and home-based options.

TWO YEARS AFTER COLORADO’S LEGISLATURE PASSED A BILL TO FULLY FUND FULL-DAY KINDERGARTEN FOR ALL WHO CHOOSE IT, NEARLY ALL KINDERGARTNERS WERE ENROLLED IN A FULL-DAY PROGRAM.

PERCENT OF COLORADO KINDERGARTNERS ENROLLED IN A FULL-DAY PROGRAM, 2001-2002 TO 2020-2021



Sources: Colorado Children’s Campaign and Kids Count Colorado

Beginning in July 2023, all Colorado children, regardless of family income, would have access to a minimum of 10 hours per week of voluntary, high-quality preschool.

THE SOLUTION

Elected leaders tend to look for quick wins. But fixing systems takes longer. This is why fragmented early childhood systems persist in most states, despite their inability to meet the needs of families or service providers. Governor Polis decided to buck this trend and do it right — recognizing the opportunity and obligation that state leaders have to create a system that is easy for families to navigate and reaches all of the state’s youngest learners.

The quick win would have required using this mandate to place the new universal, voluntary preschool program inside one of the existing state departments. But neither the Department of Education, which housed the existing Colorado Preschool Program, nor the Department of Human Services, which housed child care subsidies and other family support services, was positioned to work across the whole system – birth to five – to achieve accessible, sustainable, high-quality universal preschool.

Governor Polis recognized that this major, historical investment in early childhood provided an opportunity not just to fund additional preschool seats within the current system, but to truly transform the early childhood system to make it work better for both families and providers.

To do this, the state would need to unify the early childhood-serving education and social services systems into one agency, in order to maximize funding and offer families choice in where their children would receive early childhood programs and services.

The Governor envisioned a system in which:

- Every child would be able to access high-quality early childhood experiences that support their growth and development before starting kindergarten.
- Every family would be able to easily navigate the early childhood system and would be supported in selecting a high-quality early childhood option that meets the needs of their child and enables parents and caregivers to participate in the workforce.
- Every provider would be able to focus on providing a high-quality experience for children and hiring and retaining a qualified and well-compensated early childhood workforce.



To determine the path forward, Governor Polis prioritized engaging with stakeholders and building a coalition of the state’s early childhood advocacy organizations. Governor Polis then worked with the state legislature to pass HB21-1304,⁴ which created a new Department of Early Childhood (CDEC). This legislation also created a planning process, bringing together representative groups of stakeholders to advise and make recommendations for the new department and the new universal, voluntary preschool program.

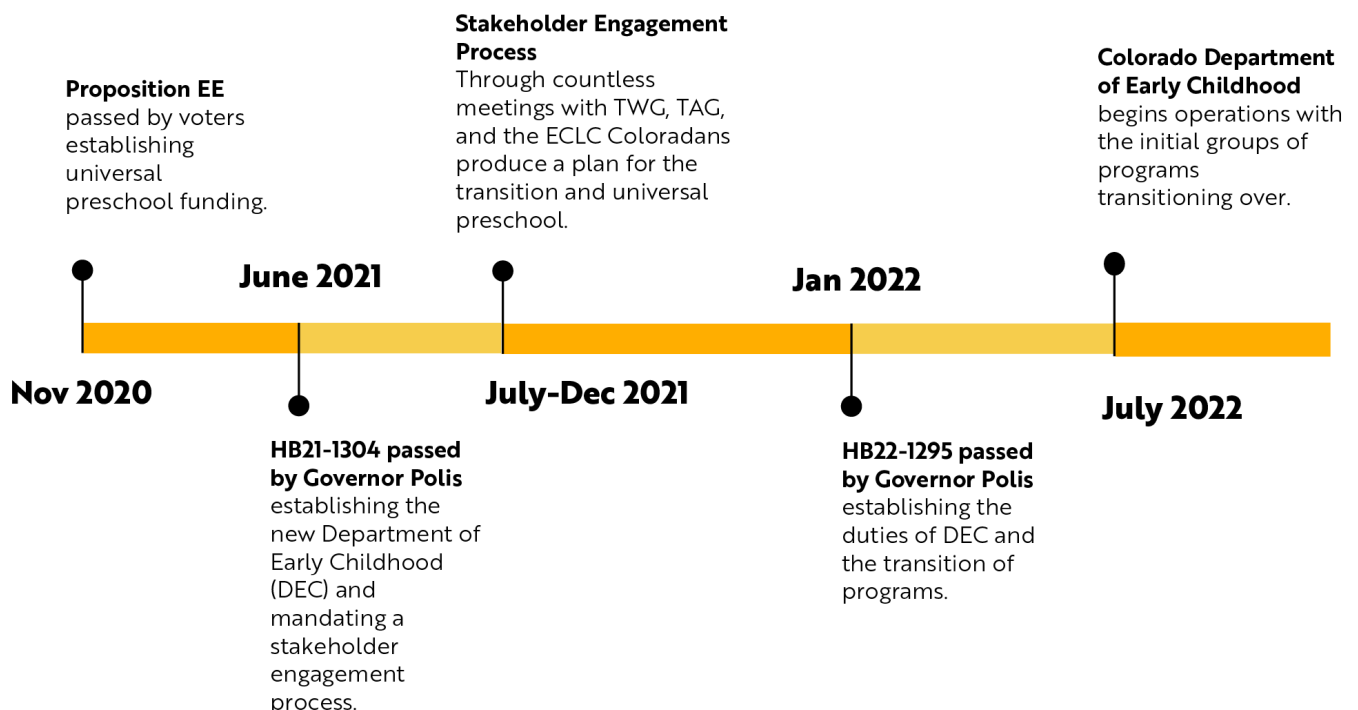
Not only was early childhood now elevated to a cabinet-level agency, but it also had its own stable funding for the first time ever in Colorado’s history, solidifying its future for years to come.

In less than one year, this planning process, which involved hundreds of meetings with parents, educators, providers, business owners, school leaders, and other stakeholders, resulted in two blueprint reports (a Department of Early Childhood transition plan⁵ and universal preschool recommendations⁶) and legislation, HB22-1295,⁷

to shape the work of the new department. Through these two reports, stakeholders guided two fundamental shifts: Establishing a clear state-level captain (CDEC) and a clear local-level captain for each region (local coordinating organizations, or LCOs). Together, these state and local captains would be accountable for administering a system built around the needs of Colorado’s children and families.

“Without Governor Polis’ decision to consolidate the responsibility for all early childhood programs and funding sources, Colorado would not have been able to design an early childhood system that will actually meet the needs of children, their families, and service providers.”

- Dr. Lisa Roy, Executive Director of CDEC



Source: Colorado Children’s Campaign and Kids Count Colorado!

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Department of Early Childhood Transition Plan

Stakeholders articulated the following:

- All early childhood programs and services are to be **consolidated into one agency** with a unified vision
- The agency should be **organized around the key functions needed** to execute a unified vision across programs and funding streams (rather than by grant program)
- The agency should have **a nimble and efficient governance structure** that centers stakeholder engagement but is able to make decisions in a timely manner
- Recommendations for the kinds of **data collection needed to drive decision-making** and constant improvement

Universal Preschool Recommendations

Stakeholders articulated the following:

- Colorado must **build and empower local coordinating organizations for universal preschool delivery and administration** of all birth-to-five programs and services
- CDEC must **establish a single, unified application** over time **for all early childhood programs birth-5**, including universal preschool, to reduce the burden on families
- Universal preschool must be provided through **mixed delivery and it must preserve care for all ages** through rules and regulations that encourage the delivery of high-quality preschool in all settings

In 2022, the Colorado General Assembly adopted these recommendations and passed legislation, HB22-1295, that fully operationalized the new Department of Early Childhood to oversee a comprehensive suite of services offered to children and families from birth to age five. The new department opened on July 1, 2022 with goals designed to position the state for success, including:

- **Holding the unified strategic vision** for early childhood in Colorado;
- **Coordinating across all funding streams and programs** to ensure a new streamlined experience for children and families;
- **Administering the new universal, voluntary preschool program;**
- **Providing accountability** for an early childhood system that is accessible to children and families, trains and appropriately compensates the early childhood workforce, and supports providers; and
- **Supporting local leads to be on-the-ground partners** in implementing the early childhood system and co-creators in finding solutions to problems that fit the specific local context in each area of Colorado.

THE IMPACT

The Colorado Department of Early Childhood now houses a comprehensive, unifying system serving children birth to age five. The new department is designed by legislation to focus on delivering a broad range of direct services for children, administering family support programs, and provider and workforce support services.

COLORADO DEPARTMENT OF EARLY CHILDHOOD (CDEC)

Direct Services for Children:

- › Colorado Child Care Assistance Program (C-CCAP)
- › Colorado Universal Preschool Program
- › Early Intervention (IDEA, Part C)
- › Early Childhood Mental Health
- › Home Visitation including but not limited to Parents as Teachers (PAT) and HIPPIY
- › Head Start Collaboration Office

Family Support:

- › Local Early Childhood Councils and Child Care Resources and Referral (CCR&R)
- › Family Resource Centers
- › Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention Program
- › Child Abuse Prevention Trust Fund
- › Colorado Fatherhood Program (CFP)
- › Promoting Safe and Stable Families

Provider and Workforce Supports:

- › Colorado Shines: Colorado’s quality rating and improvement system (QRIS) and the professional development information system (PDIS)

As a result of the vision laid out by stakeholders and signed into law in 2022, CDEC will be able to:

- › **Reduce the burden on families:** By centralizing early childhood services for children before kindergarten, Colorado is now set up to decrease the number of different local and state agencies that families and providers have to navigate to one dedicated agency and one local coordinator.
- › **Empower local leadership:** CDEC was charged with selecting, onboarding, and training local coordinating organizations (LCOs). The LCOs are responsible for reporting to the state an annual, unduplicated count of the children served, as well as waiting list numbers, vacancies, and family demand – invaluable data that will be available statewide for the first time. To date, CDEC has begun training 33 LCOs to serve as partners in each area of the state and implement the state’s early childhood vision in accordance with local context.
- › **Expand access to preschool:** Through the new universal preschool funding stream, CDEC can now dramatically expand access to preschool by growing the number of available seats and streamlining the application process for families and providers through a legislatively mandated statewide application process.⁸

OUR ROLE

As core early childhood advisors to Governor Jared Polis in 2021, Watershed took on two challenges: (1) developing a solution to the deep-rooted system fragmentation that existed in Colorado and (2) designing a universal preschool framework that could scale to every corner of the state. Beginning in spring 2021, Watershed facilitated the legislatively-required planning process to create the new state agency and to prepare for universal prekindergarten.^{9,10}

“Watershed’s support was integral to building the kind of coalition necessary to push our early childhood system to the next level.”

- Allie Kimmel, Governor Polis’ Legislative Director

As part of this process, the Watershed team:

- › Conducted an in-depth landscape analysis representative of the voices of local stakeholders;
- › Developed recommendations, with the support of Colorado’s Early Childhood Leadership Commission, that led to two blueprint reports ([here](#) and [here](#)) shaping the state’s new Department of Early Childhood; and
- › Created detailed, internal implementation plans in partnership with state agency staff, and engaged with external stakeholders to incorporate their feedback and ensure buy-in.
- › Our work is best summarized in the two blueprint reports. The implementation work now continues in Colorado, at the discretion of CDEC.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR GROWTH AND SCALE

Colorado is now better positioned to improve the quality of early childhood programs and services children receive before kindergarten. As the state builds the state and local infrastructure to support its early childhood system, Colorado can focus on sustainably increasing enrollment and improving program quality.

Colorado has the unique opportunity to serve as an example for other state leaders who look at their state’s early childhood system and see similar challenges with their own fragmented early childhood systems. Unification at the state level is necessary to simultaneously meet the needs of families and providers and create an accessible, sustainable, high-quality early childhood system. The complexity of doing so often prevents or stalls this from happening.

Colorado offers these lessons to state leaders looking to solve these same challenges:

- › **Begin with leadership:** Name a captain, set a clear vision, and hold the captain accountable to the vision. In Colorado, the Governor created a new Department of Early Childhood to oversee universal preschool, but elsewhere this could instead be an existing state department of education or an existing state department of human services.
- › **Solve for the user experience:** Work to deeply understand the problems stakeholders are experiencing and build solutions that specifically seek to address those problems.

In Colorado, this meant spending time with both families and providers to understand the on-the-ground experience and the ways in which the system prevented or added burdens for children, families, and providers. This clear understanding helped make the case for big systems change and informed responsive planning.

- **Develop clear, action-oriented plans:** Establish a clear plan, with a timeline, to ensure that needed changes occur. Make sure that the implementation plan includes metrics to track success.

With these lessons, more states can achieve a unified early childhood system that expands preschool access and better supports families, providers, and the long-term growth and success of their communities.

ENDNOTES

- 1 [The Heckman Equation: 13% ROI for Birth-to-Five Programs](#)
- 2 [Colorado Children's Campaign and 2021 KIDS COUNT in Colorado! Report](#)
- 3 [Prop EE was passed in November of 202 and ultimately became HB20-1427](#)
- 4 [HB21-1304: Early Childhood System](#)
- 5 [Department of Early Childhood Transition Plan](#)
- 6 [Universal Preschool Recommendations](#)
- 7 [HB22-1295: Department Early Childhood And Universal Preschool Program](#)
- 8 [Universal Preschool Colorado Statewide Application](#)
- 9 [Department of Early Childhood Transition Plan](#)
- 10 [Universal Preschool Recommendations](#)
- 11 [Colorado Children's Campaign and 2021 KIDS COUNT in Colorado! Report](#)
- 12 [Prop EE was passed in November of 202 and ultimately became HB20-1427](#)

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