EARLY CHILDHOOD DATA IN COLORADO

COLORADO CHILDREN'S CAMPAIGN
Every Chance for Every Child

The birth to five years are some of the most important for a child's growth, and the care and services children receive in this time can set the stage for their future development. Unfortunately, Colorado currently lacks information about many key aspects of early childhood in our state.

How many families in Colorado have multiple children under age 5 who need care? How many children are in different care settings? How many open spots do the state's child care centers and preschools have – and how many does Colorado need? Which children and families are having trouble accessing child care or preschool and why? What programs support children and families when they transition to kindergarten, and how do we define a successful transition?

These are just a few of the many questions Coloradans should be able to answer but are unable to with the limited data and tools that exist in 2024.

Without data, policymakers and advocates will not be able to effectively serve children, families and early childhood providers, especially those who face the most barriers to accessing our current early childhood system. And without data, we cannot understand how access to early childhood services and supports during children's most formative years affect their outcomes later in life.

A Complicated – but Necessary - Undertaking

Colorado is not the first state to grapple with this gap in information. While only two states (Georgia and Mississippi) fully link all early childhood data systems across all programs, at least 22 states link some or nearly all of their data, and 18 of those have built an Early Childhood Integrated Data System (ECIDS). A robust ECIDS allows states to track important data, including the number of children served by programs, families receiving benefits from multiple programs, and children who should be receiving services but are not.

The Colorado Department of Early Childhood, which began operations in 2022, has a mandate to collect comprehensive data to help answer some of these important questions. Collecting, publishing, and analyzing early childhood data is essential to the success of all programs facilitated by or housed within the Colorado Department of Early Childhood (CDEC) and to improving our understanding of and services for Colorado's youngest residents.
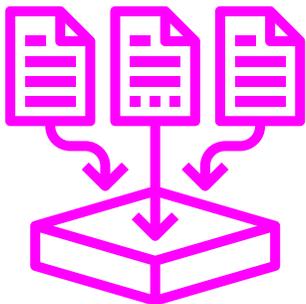
The Department has already begun this complicated undertaking, in partnership with stakeholders in the early childhood space. It is clear, however, that this work will take a continued investment of time, funding, and commitment from the Governor, Legislature, and CDEC staff. As Colorado continues this important work, state leaders need to take steps to ensure they are creating a system that is effective, equitable, and accessible.

The Colorado Children's Campaign recommends:

Creating a System That Is Comprehensive. Early childhood is often characterized by data silos, meaning that data, if they exist at all, are separated by program, department, or funding source (or sometimes all three). Individual data sets are not connected or analyzed collectively to determine how children and families are doing. For example, right now in Colorado, it is impossible to easily access up-to-date data on child care openings, early childhood program provider demographics, or universal preschool access for children of any specific racial or ethnic background. It is unclear if some of this data is collected at all.

Colorado's ECIDS should be comprehensive, updated regularly, and able to provide a holistic overview of child and family access to all early childhood programs and supports, early childhood program provider demographics, and child and family outcomes, in the short and long term.

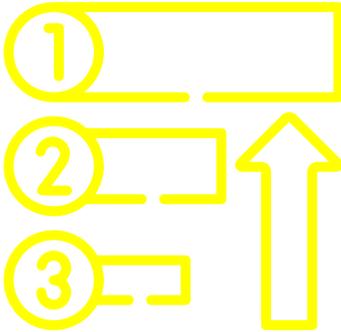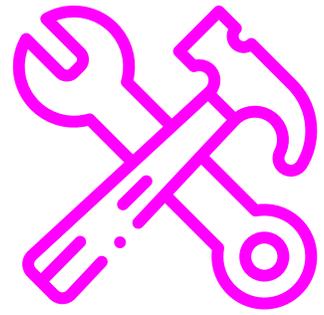**Connecting Early Childhood Data to Other Relevant Data Systems.** The goal for an ECIDS (or any early childhood data collection system) is to track outcomes over time. To track those outcomes, any ECIDS created in Colorado should connect with our state's K-12 data system and other relevant data systems across state agencies. As an example, this should include connections to systems that track information about public benefits for which families may also be eligible, even if those systems are governed by other state agencies.

Collecting and Sharing Disaggregated Data: Any data collected by the state should be disaggregated, at minimum, by the categories mandated in statute, which are: socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, language, and disability. Data needs to also be available on a county-by-county basis so local leaders can make the most informed decisions possible. The state should also collect and share information about the early childhood workforce, including Family, Friend, and Neighbor (FFN) providers, because children thrive when the adults taking care of them can also thrive.

Disaggregated data ensures that advocates and policymakers can identify gaps in access to early childhood programs and services, and in family and child outcomes, empowering advocates and policymakers to craft targeted policies that make the most impact for Colorado's children and families facing the most barriers to opportunity.

Building Tools To Ensure Data Is Publicly Available and Publicly Accessible: The state needs to prioritize the management and strengthening of public dashboards or automated reports to promote transparency and ensure that early childhood stakeholders, including families and program providers, have access to regularly updated, de-identified, and disaggregated data. Dashboards should be designed to be read and understood by a wide audience and should be accessible to people whose first language is not English. Tools such as a multilingual data dictionary would support the state's accessibility efforts.

Prioritizing Privacy: Any data system (ECIDS or otherwise) should adhere to confidentiality and use best practices in data stewardship to ensure the privacy of children, families, and providers. Staff at CDEC must comply with data confidentiality best practices when handling confidential, individual-level data, and CDEC must ensure that all publicly available data does not include any personally identifiable information about children, families, or providers. Families and providers must be able to trust the state with their information.

Fully Funding a Skilled and Collaborative Data Team: Data collection and analysis is a complicated, costly process which needs to be tended to with intentionality and attention to detail. Right now, the limited data that does exist isn't analyzed in a timely manner because CDEC does not have enough staff with specialized expertise to respond to requests or manage projects.

Any projects associated with this effort must be fully funded to ensure the continued availability of functional technology and skilled staff at CDEC. Projects also need to be fully staffed by data managers, data analysts, and other appropriate staff. Raw data on its own can be confusing and possibly lead to misunderstandings. A fully staffed, skilled team can help external parties understand the data and what it truly means.

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Promote a Culture of Growth and Trust: All state decisions should be made based on a transparent analysis of data about family, child, and provider experience in early childhood programs and services, with equity at the forefront of every conversation and decision. In order to do this, state legislators and state agency leaders need to actively prioritize a data-driven, equity-centered culture of growth and trust around data collection and analysis.

When data collection is founded only on the tenets of "accountability" or tracking funding, it can lead to distrust, fear, or even resistance. The result is a disconnected series of data silos that make it difficult (if not impossible) to identify and address data trends. Partnerships between CDEC and other state and local departments or agencies should include detailed data sharing agreements, in order to nurture a positive culture. The best, most effective progress for children and families is made within a culture of trust, collaboration, growth, and continuous improvement.

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