



ECLC Recommendation on Governance of an Early Childhood System in Colorado

Colorado has consistently led the country in striving to provide responsive, innovative early childhood services. Through the strength of state leadership and visioning, the implementation of programming from state and local experts, the strength of community and family voices, the commitment of the philanthropic community, and the state's deep commitment to partnership, Colorado has developed a vast array of services available to children, families, and the early childhood workforce. This is due in large part to the efforts of public and private early childhood stakeholders at the local, regional, and state levels - including dedicated staff across multiple state agencies - who have worked tirelessly to develop a strong foundation of early childhood services for all Coloradans. Building on this collaborative nature, the Office of Early Childhood was created in 2013 in order to continue to align systems to serve children holistically and thoughtfully across the [Early Childhood Colorado Framework](#) domains: health & well-being, family support & education, and learning & development. This was an important and transformative step in connecting and aligning many of the systems in the early childhood space. However, the lack of authority to fully integrate funding streams, service delivery, and data systems across the full spectrum of early care and learning programs and services has led to an often inequitable and overly complex patchwork of access for children and families, especially for those furthest from opportunity.

Given the incredible opportunity created by the passage of Proposition EE and the ensuing dedicated funds to support early childhood education, the Early Childhood Leadership Commission (ECLC) has thoughtfully and intentionally explored governance models that maximize the value of the new funding and provide an opportunity to advance a more comprehensive, responsive system of early care and learning centered on equity throughout Colorado. In order to realize the opportunity provided by Proposition EE and continue the progress toward a unified vision for serving children and families, it is essential that Colorado revisit the current structure of early childhood care and learning service delivery.

The ECLC is recommending the creation of a new cabinet level state agency dedicated to early childhood that consolidates the various authorities, programs, and funding streams that currently exist across state agencies and focuses on a unified vision of comprehensive early childhood service delivery for all children birth to age five.

The ECLC firmly believes a new, streamlined governance structure that adequately supports a unified early childhood system can best ensure access to quality and comprehensive whole-child experiences, advance equity, prioritize family and community engagement, and provide transparency and accountability. This new state agency is in the best interest of families, children, and the early care and education providers who serve them. Significant implementation planning and resources will be essential over the next year to develop a thoughtful transition plan that builds upon the expertise and knowledge within state agencies, service providers, and community partners and allows for stronger planning and integration that will lead to better delivery of services.

In order for alignment across the complexities of the early childhood system to be fully realized, the new state agency must include the following components:

- 1) [Child and Family Centered Services](#)

Children are best served when they have seamless access to a wide array of family-driven, integrated, holistic, and comprehensive services that span the domains of the [Early Childhood](#)

[Colorado Framework](#). A whole-child, family-centric approach is necessary to ensure every child - especially those furthest from opportunity - have the ability to thrive. A new state agency will allow Colorado to target investments to equitably expand access and to design programs and systems based on family voice and needs while continuously engaging families to improve child and family experience, health and well-being.

2) [Streamlined Administrative Burden](#)

Working together to create efficiencies in administrative, eligibility, and authorization functions at the family, program, provider, and community levels is critical to ensuring a successful early childhood system. The new state agency will oversee universal preschool funding as well as other state, federal, private, and related early childhood funding streams and align the requirements and regulations related to this funding to create early care and education opportunities that honor family choice and support access for all. In addition, this streamlined approach will level the playing field for all providers - including community-based centers, family child care homes, and school settings - to participate and deliver services through a truly supported mixed-delivery system that provides high quality early care and education. The new state agency will be designed to innovate and use supporting agencies as needed to meet the needs of both public and private providers and create a thriving early childhood infrastructure.

3) [Funding Opportunity and Accountability](#)

It will be essential for a new state agency to have the authority and the flexibility to streamline and grow investments in the early childhood system. This should include the ability to align eligibility requirements in order to layer funding streams, including local funds; the authority to contract for services, which could incorporate program quality standards into the contracting process; and the opportunity to explore alternative funding options (such as future bonding or debt authority). Fully-supported, tech-centered, and coordinated data integration across programs is essential to ensure accountability of the system and to advance positive outcomes for children. The entity should also be responsible for evaluation of service delivery and outcomes and include requirements for unified quality improvement across the early childhood system.

4) [Governance and Authority](#)

Statutory authority that centralizes the management and oversight of program planning, funding, policy, and implementation to support a holistic, comprehensive and responsive approach to an early childhood system is critical to the success of a new state agency. This should include a formalized policy-making board, as well as processes for authentic, consistent family and community engagement and input. The new state agency should be charged with ensuring consistency across standards, funding streams, and requirements, including early childhood workforce requirements, with a particular focus on elevating workforce compensation and benefits, and protecting and enhancing the diversity that exists across the early childhood field, while recognizing the unique needs of communities throughout the state.

Colorado has made significant strides to support young children and their families. As we look to the future, we have an opportunity right now to advance a bold, innovative, and equitable approach to streamline the multitude of agencies and complex processes to create a truly unified system that elevates our shared early childhood vision, amplifies the voice for early childhood at the state cabinet level, prioritizes family and community engagement, embeds the foundation of a whole-child approach to service delivery, better prepares the state for future federal funding opportunities, and improves the alignment of standards and requirements at the family, provider, community, and state levels. This bold, strategic, and exciting step will continue to allow Colorado to be a leader in its journey so that all children are valued, healthy, and thriving.