

# Continuing to Monitor and Measure Progress in Colorado's Early Childhood Areas of Opportunity: 2021

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Colorado is recognized as a national leader in creating innovative policies and programs that support young children and families. Despite considerable progress in recent years, there are still challenges that must be addressed at the local and state level to ensure equitable and comprehensive access to services and supports for the benefit of all children and families.

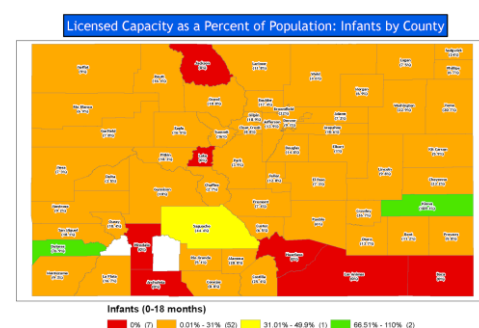
In order to unify the state's efforts and advance a set of high-priority focus areas, the Early Childhood Leadership Commission (ECLC) identified three Areas of Opportunity that are most important to advance in order to better support Colorado's children and families. The ECLC's Data Subcommittee identified key indicators to track Colorado's progress in the Areas of Opportunity:

- ▶ IMPROVE ACCESS TO HIGH-QUALITY EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION FOR ALL FAMILIES
- ▶ ELEVATE THE EARLY CHILDHOOD WORKFORCE TO ENSURE COORDINATED CAREER PATHWAYS AND APPROPRIATE COMPENSATION
- ▶ SUPPORT IMPROVED FAMILY HEALTH AND ECONOMIC SECURITY THROUGH A TWO-GENERATION APPROACH

In 2021, the ECLC released the "[Continuing to Monitor and Measure Progress in Colorado's Early Childhood Areas of Opportunity](#)" report which provides updated information across the Areas of Opportunity as well as key insights into how Colorado is advancing early childhood outcomes. While we are just beginning to see the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, we would anticipate seeing greater disparities in future data, especially for already marginalized communities.

## INFANT AND TODDLER CARE: NEGLECTING OUR YOUNGEST

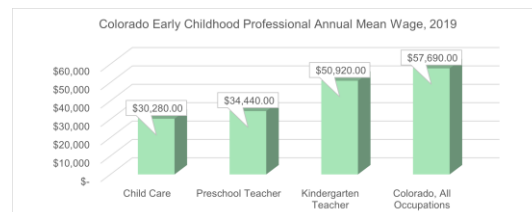
Despite numerous efforts to support early childhood providers, the data within the first Area of Opportunity on access to high-quality early care and education continues to demonstrate significant deficits and disparities in access to infant and toddler care. The majority of counties in the state have licensed capacity for 30% or less of the infants in their communities. Further, policies and initiatives in support of preschool expansion are likely to address preschool access and quality, while infant and toddler care continue to be a challenge.



- ▶ **ACTION:** Advance policy strategies and secure funding for programs that address both access and affordability of high-quality infant and toddler care.

## WORKFORCE COMPENSATION: A KEY COMPONENT TO IMPROVING SYSTEMS

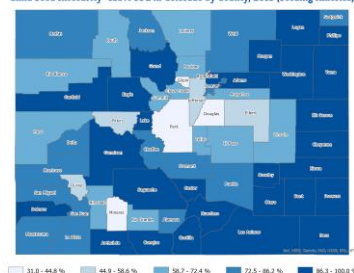
Once again, data demonstrates that compensation for Colorado's early childhood workforce is extremely poor in comparison to other teaching professions. Compensation is critical to developing a high-quality, stable, diverse workforce.



► **ACTION:** Support efforts to elevate the importance of early childhood educators and to recruit, retain and compensate a highly-qualified, diverse workforce.

## FOOD SECURITY: LOSING GROUND

Child Food Insecurity <185% FPL in Colorado by County, 2018 (Feeding America)



The data demonstrates that we are losing ground in child food security, particularly in our families earning the lowest incomes. Coloradans are reporting hunger at three times the level it was before the pandemic, with people of color and parents with children most impacted. Stable, healthy nutrition is critically foundational in healthy child development.

► **ACTION:** Increase access for all families to nutritious food, clean water, and other basic needs that help children to grow to their full potential.

## ECONOMIC SECURITY: PROTECTIVE ACROSS OUTCOMES

Across all Areas of Opportunity, it is evident that economic security is protective and supportive of positive outcomes for families and young children. While the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on family health and economic security have not been fully observed, data continues to demonstrate the protective nature of economic security in areas such as mental well-being, birth outcomes, and nutrition. Attention should continue to be paid to how Colorado can support all families during the recovery of the pandemic and beyond.

► **ACTION:** Encourage efforts to increase economic security, family health and overall well-being support for all families.

The COVID-19 pandemic has severely impacted the well-being of families and children across Colorado and deepened the disparities across families who are often marginalized. As information was collected for this report, it became evident that the complex nature of serving children and families - along with the lack of consistent, connected data - made it extremely difficult to understand how children and families were faring and how policy makers could direct funding and programmatic changes to best meet the needs of all families, especially those furthest from opportunity. **It is critical that we work together to address these disparities and continue to elevate the Areas of Opportunity across Colorado so that all children are healthy, valued and thriving.**