

# The Road to High-Quality Early Education



Education Commission  
of the States

## ECS Policy Brief

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## Acknowledgements

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ECS is grateful to The Pew Center on the States for partial support of this paper. The Pew Charitable Trusts applies the power of knowledge to solve today's most challenging problems. The Pew Center on the States identifies and advances state policy solutions. <http://www.pewcenteronthestates.org>.

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# Introduction

Ensuring that young children receive high-quality early education has gained prominence recently, as educators and policymakers focus on improving 3rd-grade reading proficiency. However, the questions remain: what constitutes high-quality early childhood education and how can it be achieved? This paper begins to address these questions based on discussions that took place at the Education Commission of the States' 2011 National Forum on Education Policy.

This paper features two sections that grew out of presentations at the National Forum. Part I highlights the efforts of one state, Colorado, to establish the structures and governance needed to deliver high-quality early childhood education and care. Part II describes one classroom-level approach to achieving high-quality early education. Both sections draw on the expertise of presenters with years of first-hand experience in early childhood education, and also include key recommendations for policymakers.



# Part I

## **Striving for High-Quality Programs and Services: Lessons from The Colorado Story**

The story of early childhood education in Colorado is one of transition from an underperforming and under-regulated system to a comprehensive system that offers young children a quality education under the watch of an engaged public and a framework of cohesive policies. This transformation came about through great collaboration, innovation and grassroots activism. At the National Forum, three panelists joined forces to tell “The Colorado Story.” They were: Barbara O’Brien, former Lt. Governor of Colorado and former president of the Colorado Children’s Campaign, Virginia Maloney, director of the Marsico Institute for Early Learning and Literacy at the University of Denver and Diane Price, president and CEO of Early Connections Learning Centers. The session was moderated by Gerrit Westervelt, executive director of The BUILD Initiative.

### **Early Learning Landscape: The Call for Quality**

In the 1980s, as more families had two working parents, the call for quality child care began to grow. With the release of the 1995 report, *Cost, Quality and Child Outcomes in Child Care Centers*, the issue became even more prominent. The influential paper, which measured the quality of child care in Colorado, California, Connecticut and North Carolina, found that most child care centers were “poor to mediocre,” and that little was known about measuring their quality.<sup>1</sup> The nearly 500-page report, based on 401 child care centers and preschools in the four states, startled working parents and provided ammunition to advocates for children’s issues. Findings that quality of care was related to “higher staff-to-child ratios, staff education, teacher retention, administrators’ experience, and their effectiveness in curriculum planning,” shaped not only public opinion, but policy responses as well.

Concern about quality, coupled with the launch of welfare reform and an increase in employed mothers, led policymakers, advocates and parents to seek a coherent definition of quality child care and education. Research on the subject led to the creation in 2000 of a tiered rating system for Colorado child care centers. Qualistar implemented the new system, called the Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), after it was developed with input from approximately 50 early childhood educators and advocates.<sup>2</sup> QRIS

featured transparent standards that could be readily communicated to the public. Colorado was one of the first states in the nation to develop a rating system and remains the only state to combine ratings with recommendations for improvement through a child care resource and referral system.<sup>3</sup>

***“Colorado was one of the first states in the nation to develop a rating system and remains the only state to combine ratings with recommendations for improvement through a child care resource and referral system.”<sup>3</sup>***

The Qualistar rating is based on five components: learning environment, training and education, adult-to-child ratios and group size, family partnerships and accreditation.<sup>4</sup> Trained Quality Rating Specialists visit providers to observe, collect forms and data, and then deliver a Quality Performance Profile© (QPP) detailing areas of strength and areas for quality improvement, as well as a quality improvement plan.<sup>5</sup> In addition to rating providers and issuing recommendations for improving quality, Qualistar administers the Colorado Capital Fund (QCap) which supports quality-related capital improvements in early childhood learning centers by awarding grants up to \$25,000.<sup>6</sup> The fund has helped improve quality ratings in early childhood centers, and attracted attention and subsequent funding from high-profile funders such as the Gates Family Foundation.

Qualistar represents the first step toward defining quality in the early years, when program outcomes are particularly difficult to measure. Colorado’s Quality Rating and Improvement System has helped parents choose quality care for their children, and helped providers improve the quality of their care. A RAND study assessing the efficacy of the research and evidence-based system found that measuring quality has led to improvements in quality for centers rated by Qualistar. The “next generation” of the Qualistar rating system currently is being developed; these efforts are focused on better measuring intangibles such as teacher-child relationships, leadership and workforce quality, and promoting social-emotional development.<sup>7</sup> In addition, Qualistar aims to embed the rating system in Colorado’s child care licensing system in order to increase participation and improve quality for centers statewide.<sup>8</sup> Increasing the reach of QRIS and linking it to K-12 data systems and standards are priorities for Colorado in the future.

In addition to defining quality, increasing access to quality programs became a priority as a result of welfare reform. In Colorado, counties had (and have) much autonomy in implementing and funding early education programming. At the same time, the state had significant authority over the Child Care Assistance Program. In order to reconcile local and state decisionmaking and help local communities expand child care options, the Colorado General Assembly in 1997 established the Consolidated Child Care Pilot Projects.<sup>9</sup> The pilots encompassed 12 Colorado communities (13 counties), impacted approximately 7,800 children ages birth to 5 and reached approximately 59% of the state's population.<sup>10</sup>

The Consolidated Child Care pilots were intended to:

- Consolidate and coordinate funding and services
- Expand infant and toddler care (birth-3)
- Initiate full-day/full-year services for 3- to 5-year-olds
- Expand care to non-traditional hours
- Consolidate services (education and care) for children of different ages
- Improve quality of care.

Pilot initiatives were required to combine funding from the Colorado Preschool Program (CPP) with child care subsidy money from other sources.<sup>11</sup> Previously, strict requirements for categorical government funding and uncoordinated programs made it difficult to meet the

needs of children and families. For example, half-day Head Start and CPP programs did not fully cover child care for a parent working full time, and children under 3 were ineligible for the programs (age 4 for CPP). This type of systemic barrier was identified at the outset, and pilot communities were offered waivers exempting them from rules which would prevent full implementation of pilot projects.

In 1999, independent researchers assessed the pilot communities and found evidence of increased collaboration, consolidation of funds leading to implementation of comprehensive services, increased flexibility allowing programs to better meet local need, and increased access for eligible children.<sup>12</sup> From these pilot initiatives, early education stakeholders in Colorado learned valuable lessons for future statewide programs, including the importance of waivers and the benefits of creating an integrated system of early care and education. By 2007, the 12 pilot communities established in 1997 had evolved into 31 local Early Childhood Councils serving 56 out of 64 counties in Colorado.<sup>13</sup>

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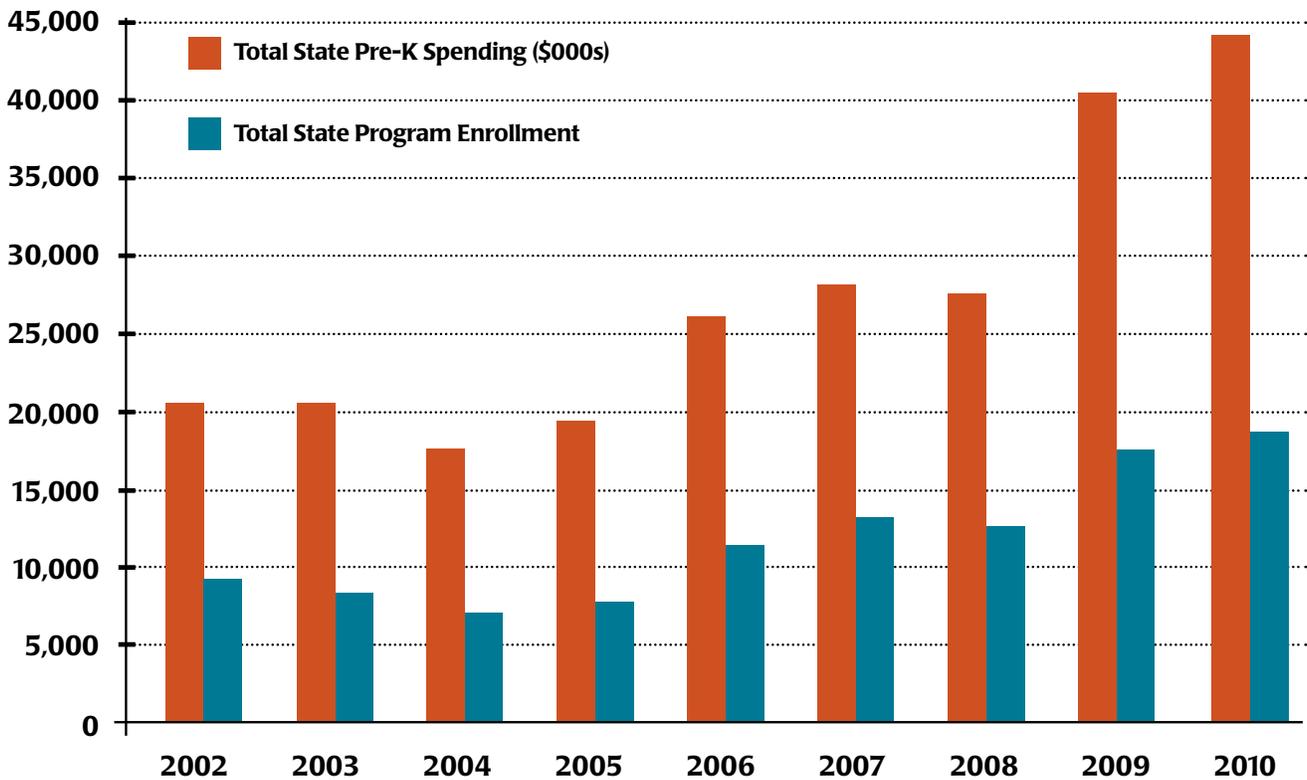
## Pre-K as the linchpin: Pre-K in Colorado

Colorado has steadily increased its commitment to Pre-K, viewing it as an essential component of quality early education and later success in K-12. Pre-K especially acts as a vehicle for expanding funding and access for children and connects early education and care to the public schools. In 1988, the Colorado General Assembly created the Colorado Preschool Program (CPP) to serve the young children in Colorado who were most vulnerable to starting grade school unprepared. The legislature aimed to provide quality early childhood education in order to help children achieve their full potential, curb dropout rates, reduce dependence on public assistance, and decrease criminal activity. The program provides full-day kindergarten in some districts, but primarily supports half-day, comprehensive prekindergarten programs for children at risk.

In addition to CPP, the Denver Preschool Program (DPP) is open to all Denver children the year before they are eligible for kindergarten. DPP is the result of a voter approved initiative to earmark sales tax revenue to provide tuition credits for parents, and quality improvement resources to preschools. A Denver family may use the tuition credit at any preschool that is licensed by the state and enrolled with the Denver Preschool Program, regardless of where the school is located.

Sources: CPP Web site; DPP Web site; 2005 NIEER Yearbook.

## Colorado Preschool Program (CPP) Funding and Enrollment



Source: Nieer State Preschool Yearbooks (2003–2010)

### **Early Learning Landscape: Aligning Early Childhood Education with K-12**

Along with discussing quality, the recent focus on early literacy nationwide has steered the discourse on early care toward accountability and alignment with the K-12 system. The “P-3” movement has spurred initiatives such as the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s national campaign to ensure all children read proficiently by the end of 3rd grade, and has reinvigorated the debate surrounding what quality means in early education. Stakeholders pushing for quality in early education are asking what constitutes a developmentally appropriate curriculum, and how educators can best prepare children for K-12.

As educators recognize the importance of aligning birth-to-5 initiatives with formal schooling, early childhood stakeholders are seeking core knowledge standards in preschools as well. In December 2009, the Colorado State Board of Education approved an aligned set of content standards for preschool through 12th grade that

defines the knowledge, concepts and skills that children should acquire at each age and grade level.<sup>14</sup>

The federal Early Learning Challenge (ELC) has reinforced the focus on kindergarten readiness and alignment with early childhood services, portraying early care as a crucial precursor to, and extension of, the K-12 system. The ELC is an extension of the Race to the Top competition and provides \$500 million for initiatives impacting children aged birth to 3. The ELC emphasizes the use of kindergarten entry assessments and tiered Quality Rating and Improvement Systems to promote school readiness.<sup>15</sup> However, while this federal program emphasizes access to quality early childhood services for disadvantaged populations, Colorado frames ECE as a movement toward quality services for all children. ECS National Forum panelists stressed the importance of this point to the success of ECE initiatives in Colorado. By framing early education as an issue for all children, advocates garnered widespread support from parents, legislators, foundations, the business community and other key stakeholders.

## Key Colorado Stakeholders: Grassroots Activists

Often discussed as a grassroots movement, early childhood programs in Colorado gained support through the work of numerous advocacy organizations that spoke out on behalf of children. Term limits in the state, along with a plethora of pressing campaign issues (which often trumped children’s issues) led advocates to realize that they had to get legislators to support early care and education well before the end of their eight-year terms. In other words, they had to “steepen the learning curve.”<sup>16</sup> Barbara O’Brien, who is currently a senior fellow with the Piton Foundation, noted that it often took years for individual legislators to back meaningful early childhood legislation, and because of this, advocates decided not to politicize children’s issues or seek a legislative champion. O’Brien noted that advocates in Colorado focused on recruiting local leaders, disseminating information on children’s initiatives, and supporting legislators who, in return, would support their cause. The recruitment of local advocates for children’s issues, from superintendants to school board members to community leaders, was integral to gaining public support for early care and education.

A major force in the ECE movement has been the Colorado Children’s Campaign, established in 1985 as a bi-partisan “voice for children.” The organization’s research and advocacy activities have helped uninsured children gain access to health care services and increased the number of low-income and minority children attending high-quality preschools, among other successes.<sup>17</sup> O’Brien served as president of the organization from 1990 to 2006 and was integral to its success and momentum. Today, the organization serves as a unifying voice and convener for key partners, collects and analyzes data, and builds public awareness in order to influence legislative decisions.

Critical to the success of early care and education initiatives in Colorado has been collaboration among statewide nonprofit groups and the ability of numerous local and specialized organizations to come together around a common goal. Colorado organizations such as Clayton Educare, the Colorado Children’s Campaign, Early Connections Learning Centers and Qualistar Early Learning provide high-quality services for children, combine funding streams to maximize services and work together to produce results for Colorado’s children. Early childhood advocates regularly convene at conferences, meetings and summits to work toward high-quality programs and services. One example is the Early Childhood Summit, a coalition of 10 of the

largest early childhood organizations in the state. The focus of the Summit, which is convened by the Colorado chapter of the National Association for the Education of Young Children, is to collectively address policy issues and advocate for children.

## Key Colorado Stakeholders: Foundations

Public-private partnerships and foundation support have been vital to building early childhood programs in Colorado. With little state funding designated for children under 3, a strong network of foundations stepped up to fill in funding gaps and provide resources for quality early childhood programs. In 1996, a group of foundations from across Colorado came together to form the Colorado Early Care and Education Funders Network (ECE Funders). The purpose of the group was to share information and collaborate on a strategic plan for early care and education in the state.<sup>18</sup> From this collaboration a comprehensive set of services for Colorado’s children emerged, without wasted resources or redundant programs. Currently comprised of 15 members, ECE Funders convenes to discuss emerging issues across Colorado and the most effective ways to allocate and prioritize resources for addressing early childhood needs.

### **ECE Funders Network: Participating Foundations**



- The Aloha Foundation**
- Chambers Family Fund**
- The Colorado Health Foundation**
- The Colorado Trust**
- Cydney And Tom Marsico Family Foundation**
- The Daniels Fund**
- The Denver Foundation**
- Donnell-Kay Foundation**
- Gates Family Foundation**
- Helen K. And Arthur E. Johnson Foundation**
- David And Laura Merage Foundation**
- Mile High United Way**
- The Piton Foundation**
- Rose Community Foundation**
- Temple Hoyne Buell Foundation**

ECE Funders played a key role in developing:

- **Qualistar**, by seeking an effective means of evaluating child care centers and promoting high quality programs
- **Smart Start Colorado**, by advancing systems planning through a community assessment toolkit, a family resource mapping project, and various public engagement efforts
- **Early Childhood Services Mapping Initiative**, by assembling data on child care services in Colorado and their cost and quality
- **Clayton Educare Center**, by providing funding to launch the center as well as for professional development and improvements to the Clayton Campus.

The creation of a funders' collaborative helped the Colorado Children's Campaign weather a funding crisis. This is another example of the key role foundations played in The Colorado Story. The collaborative of 11 Colorado foundations came together in 2000, a year after Barbara O'Brien approached the Rose Community Foundation about the group's financial struggles. The consortium helped the Colorado Children's Campaign (CCC) strengthen its message and increase its impact, streamlining the organization and the ECE movement in the process.<sup>19</sup> The foundations' willingness to come together around the Colorado Children's Campaign fundamentally changed the nature of their investments. While foundations had previously funded initiatives on their own, they were now sharing information to make decisions about funding programs. In addition, through their work with the Colorado Children's Campaign, foundations began to realize the value of funding advocacy rather than focusing solely on programs and services.<sup>20</sup> This shift created a tight-knit group of early childhood advocates and funders and led to a shared understanding of early childhood issues.



In addition to advancing a common vision and coordinating services and funding, Colorado foundations involved in the early childhood sphere promoted outcome-tracking and accountability.<sup>21</sup> Foundations provided financial support to the Early Childhood Leadership Commission (ECLC), played a key role in developing the Early Childhood Colorado Framework and helped garner support from the business world by linking early childhood programming with economic development. Foundations today are involved in numerous collaborations, including the ECLC, and provide continued support and guidance to the early care and education movement in Colorado.

## A Funders' Collaborative for Change: Participating Foundations



- Adolph Coors Foundation**
- Anschutz Family Foundation**
- Anthem Blue Cross and Blue Shield Foundation**
- Chambers Family Fund**
- The Colorado Trust**
- The Daniels Fund**
- The Denver Foundation**
- Donnell-Kay Foundation**
- The Piton Foundation**
- Rose Community Foundation**
- Temple Hoyne Buell Foundation**

### **Key Colorado Stakeholders: Businesses**

Today, many business leaders view early childhood programs as a way to invest in America's economic future by creating a healthy, educated workforce and consumer base. Research shows that the return on investment in early childhood programs is significant, especially for vulnerable populations. Higher salaries, lower crime rates and fewer out-of-wedlock births are just a few examples.

In Colorado, private sector involvement has helped push the early childhood agenda by creating organizations committed to early care. For example,

Executives Partnering to Invest in Children (EPIC) was founded in 2010 by Colorado Concern to create a coalition of business leaders, nonprofits and foundations to work on children’s issues. The Business Coalition to Advance Reform of the Education System (BizCares) is another such coalition. It includes top companies such as Molson Coors Brewing Company, as well as chambers of commerce, economic development organizations, business roundtables and industry associations.<sup>22</sup> BizCares, along with its parent organization Colorado Succeeds, seeks to influence Colorado’s education agenda by informing the business community of the “education crisis and opportunities to reform the system” and “infusing a business-like approach to education reform.”<sup>23</sup>

Business leaders are not only raising funds for children’s initiatives, but are committed to making early care, education health, and parenting among the highest priorities of Colorado’s public and private investments.<sup>24</sup> Early childhood advocates have recruited business leaders for committees and panels that focus on children’s issues. Governor Ritter called for four members from the business community to sit on the ECLC, and The Pew Charitable Trusts and Telluride Foundation extended invitations to prominent CEOs for the Early Childhood Economic Summit. In return, the prevailing focus of the business community on efficiency and results has become a part of Colorado’s paradigm in achieving quality in early care and education.

***“Today, many business leaders view early childhood programs as a way to invest in America’s economic future by creating a healthy, educated workforce and consumer base.”***

### **Key Colorado Stakeholders: Legislators**

To a large extent, the work of a successful grassroots movement culminates with legislative involvement and action, and in Colorado, the grassroots movement has been very successful. Numerous early childhood education bills have been passed, councils have been created, and governors and legislators have remained committed to early childhood education, health and care. Since 1990, Colorado has dedicated significant time and resources to child care and early education. Key initiatives springing forth from legislation include the Denver Preschool Program, full-day Kindergarten, numerous child care pilots, local Early Childhood Councils and the Early Childhood Colorado Framework (ECCF).

Unique to the Colorado Story is the side-by-side involvement of foundations, advocacy organizations, child care centers and nonprofits, which have informed legislation and maintained a unified vision for early education and care in the state. Despite changes to the names of legislative committees (from Child Care to School Readiness, for example), legislators in Colorado have kept ECE on their radar and continue to pass meaningful legislation:

- In the 1990s, the Office of First Impressions under Governor Roy Romer created a council to improve professional development and compensation for early childhood professionals.<sup>25, 26</sup>



- An interim committee on early childhood spearheaded by Congresswomen Dottie Wham and Kay Alexander produced five pieces of legislation, one of which established a child care commission.<sup>27</sup>
- In 2007, the Colorado General Assembly passed legislation that turned the Early Child Care Pilots into a system of 30 local early childhood councils that focus on availability, accessibility, capacity and quality of early childhood services.<sup>28</sup> Today Colorado's Early Childhood Councils have over 1,000 members and represent nearly 600 local organizations across the state.<sup>29</sup>
- In 2008, Senate Bill 08-212 established the Colorado Achievement Plan for Kids, which authorized the Colorado Department of Education to develop a kindergarten readiness assessment process that will be part of the Results Matter system.<sup>30</sup>
- In 2010, the Ritter/O'Brien administration issued an executive order to form the Early Childhood Leadership Commission (ECLC) to coordinate federal- and state-funded services for children from birth to age 8.<sup>31</sup>
- In 2011, the Hickenlooper Administration identified early childhood literacy as one of three education priorities for the state.<sup>32</sup>

The ECLC, together with Governor Hickenlooper and Lt. Governor Garcia, is currently working on the next steps in Colorado's journey toward high-quality early childhood services with the goal of boosting 3rd-grade reading proficiency.<sup>33</sup>

### **Early Childhood Roadmap**

The Early Childhood Colorado Framework (ECCF) emerged from the collaborative efforts of legislators, advocates, foundations, the business community and parents in Colorado. The framework was developed in 2008 by Lt. Governor O'Brien's office and was reviewed and supported by key foundations and organizations in the state. The ECCF communicates a unified vision of quality and is frequently cited by stakeholders in early education and care as a roadmap to quality programs and services. The document contains the current guidelines for measuring inputs and outcomes. It includes quantifiable criteria for improving quality in ECE such as:

- Increase the availability of community resources and support networks for early childhood practitioners, professionals, and programs
- Increase the number of children with special needs who receive consistent early learning services and supports
- Decrease gaps in school readiness and academic achievement between populations of children.

### **Conclusion**

The Colorado Story is a complex narrative hinging on the collaboration of a diverse group of stakeholders. The call from parents and advocates for quality care prompted data collection and research, the implementation of a rating system, collaboration among foundations, involvement from the business community and numerous legislative initiatives. It culminated in a unified vision for early childhood education and care for the state of Colorado, as well as improvements to quality, funding and coordination of services.



## Lessons

Engaging a diverse group of stakeholders can lead to greater visibility of children's issues, as well as program synergies and resources.

Grassroots advocacy and a focus on generating public interest can ensure continuous progress and visibility, despite legislative turnover and funding cuts. However, frequent creation and dissolution of councils, committees and governmental offices can waste time and money.

Foundations investing in early care and education can increase their impact by sharing information and coordinating programs and resources. For example, the choice made by Colorado foundations to fund advocacy has led to an increased commitment to children's issues in the state.

Local flexibility may be necessary in order to coordinate disparate government programs and funding streams.

Listening to the voices of parents and providers as well as recruiting local advocates can increase the visibility and exigency of children's issues.

The business community is becoming more interested in early childhood issues and can help enact education reform. Colorado has encouraged the involvement of the business community and in turn, executives have helped shape Colorado's early childhood landscape.

## Recommendations for Policymakers

1. Develop a shared vision and roadmap for early care and education. Engage stakeholders in the process of developing a roadmap to increase the likelihood that they will use it. The roadmap must be available to and understood by all stakeholders.
2. Work toward sustained leadership and governance to prevent gaps in services and wasted time and money. Such problems can occur when councils, committees and other groups are repeatedly created and disbanded. Reinventing the wheel can impede sustained improvement.
3. Educate the public on why children's services are important and frame early care and education as a universal good that garners bipartisan support. Public engagement in early care and education services is crucial to sustaining momentum.
4. Expand access to high-quality, state-funded pre-kindergarten programs for three- and four-year-olds. Allow both high-quality child care providers and public schools to become pre-k providers.
5. Encourage pre-K to connect kindergarten and the early grades through shared professional development and aligned standards.



# Part II

## Achieving High Quality

At the 2011 ECS National Forum, Dr. Lilian Katz, Professor Emerita at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, discussed the importance of quality in early learning classrooms, what it looks like in practice, and what key stakeholders can do to improve it. In her presentation, Building the Foundation, she highlighted three aspects of quality early childhood education: fostering a love of learning, using a project-based curriculum and building children's social competency.

First, Katz emphasized the distinction between the acquisition of academic skills and fostering the lifelong dispositions to learn. She noted that dispositions differ from skills in that children may acquire reading skills, but unless they also have the disposition to be a reader, they might not use and develop reading skills outside of required assignments.<sup>34</sup> The disposition to learn is inborn in all children and early learning experiences, both in and out of the classroom, encourage or deter children's natural intellectual curiosity. The disposition to learn motivates children to use the skills they acquire in the classroom throughout their lives and generates a thirst for knowledge and understanding. Katz warned, however, that early academic pressure may undermine the development of dispositions for learning.

According to Katz, it is crucial to develop intellectual curiosity and build understanding in the early years, rather than simply transmit knowledge. She described quality early learning environments as those which are able to convey academic skills, such as literacy or numeracy skills, in the course of projects that motivate children to apply them in meaningful and purposeful ways.<sup>35</sup> It is this love of learning and stimulation of intellectual curiosity, she said, that separates high-quality from low-quality early learning experiences. This is an important distinction, as teaching methods can be changed without significant increases in resources.

Too often, says Katz, the debate around appropriate early learning curricula is based on a misleading dichotomy of formal instruction versus play.<sup>36</sup> In an effort to engage children, early childhood educators too often organize "fun" cut-and-paste type activities that fail to intellectually challenge students. Often teachers view the alternative to fun activities as rote memorization or academic drills that focus on inculcating specific knowledge and skills. However, she maintains that high-quality early childhood education programs can engage children intellectually and simultaneously help them to acquire useful skills by utilizing the project approach, which often entails local projects that students choose together through group discussions.



A project is defined as an in-depth investigation of a phenomenon in the children’s own experience worth understanding more fully. The project approach begins with a set of questions, proceeds to predictions of possible answers followed by data collection and analysis, and concludes with discussion of findings.

Typically, projects are adaptable — as children make new findings, the primary questions or even the project objective may change. In addition, the project approach accommodates various learning styles in contrast to rigid academic instruction. As a result, more children may engage and understand important ideas in a classroom utilizing the project approach. Ultimately, the key requirement is that projects are deeply interesting to the children participating. This kind of experience engages children intellectually and deepens children’s understanding of the world around them while honing academic skills.

### Phases of a Project

- **Phase I Getting Started:** Children and teacher(s) select and refine a topic to be investigated; determine research questions.
- **Phase II Field Work:** Children observe, investigate and record findings. Field trips may occur to gather data, draw from observation, construct models, explore, predict and discuss.
- **Phase III Culminating and Debriefing Events:** Children prepare and present reports of results in the form of displays of findings and artifacts, talks, dramatic presentations or guided tours.

*Source: Clearinghouse on Early Education and Parenting*

In her presentation, Katz concluded that while formal instruction in the early years may yield short term test results on account of “teaching to the test,” preschool curriculum and teaching methods that emphasize interactive roles for children yield better school participation and achievement in the long term.<sup>38, 39</sup>

Academic instruction often casts children in a passive role, whereas the project approach invites children to actively investigate and engage in their surroundings, take responsibility for their findings and initiate discussion. When viewing ECE through a lens of cultivating dispositions for learning, formal academic instruction at an early age may fail to nurture children’s natural curiosity and cause them to disengage. In addition, formal academic instruction may actually be damaging in the long run.<sup>40</sup>

### Project Approach Example

#### **The Ball Experiment**

1. A kindergarten class collected 31 balls from family, friends and neighbors.
2. Subgroups of children examined the texture and circumference, and discussed the concepts of sphere, hemisphere and cone.
3. Students made predictions about weight and bounce heights based on a ball’s appearance, then tested their hypotheses.
4. Children made drawings, wrote captions, designed graphs, worked individually and participated in group discussions.

*Source: The Project Approach. ERIC Digest.*

Katz suggests that an intellectually oriented, project-based curriculum strengthens children’s desire to observe, experiment, inquire and reconstruct aspects of their environment.<sup>37</sup> For example, at the ECS National Forum, she described a project undertaken by young children at a local train station. The teacher took the children to tour the facility multiple times and had them ask questions and draw pictures of the trains. Each time the children returned the pictures got more detailed as they learned about the parts of a train, how the cars attach, how the engine works and how the wheels move along the tracks.

In her discussion of high-quality early learning experiences, Katz emphasized building children’s social competency, both with peers and adults. A child’s social competence, or ability to interact with others, is improved by engaging in satisfying interactions and activities in a safe and physically engaging environment.<sup>41</sup> She cited research concluding that if children do not achieve a minimum social competency by the age of 6, it gets exponentially harder to intervene and improve in later years.

Katz emphasized “synchronous” interactions consisting of frequent sustained conversations in which each participant’s behavior is related to the responses of the other. She said that communicative competence stems from conversation, not passive exposure to language. In addition, the conversation requires something of interest or importance to talk about, a key characteristic of the project approach.<sup>42</sup>

Katz also spoke about the idea that a well-socialized child prompts positive responses from adults and peers and continues to improve his or her social competency, whereas a poorly socialized child might get caught in a negative cycle. If a child is withdrawn or socially inept, peers will tend to avoid or even reject the child, depriving him or her of opportunities to develop social skills. Without adult intervention, a child caught in this negative cycle might not achieve the social competency necessary for a positive K-12 experience. She noted that small class sizes can foster conversation and make it easier for teachers to identify and intervene when poorly socialized children face difficulties.

According to Katz, quality ECE programs are not necessarily resource dependent. In fact, she has overseen successful implementation of the project approach in high-poverty, high-needs schools, and observed many well-funded programs in which children’s minds were “wasted.”<sup>43</sup> However, small class sizes and proximity to safe, culturally rich neighborhoods lend themselves to good project work.

Katz’s research demonstrates the need to incorporate knowledge of early childhood development into policies focused on improving academic achievement. It also paves the way for classroom-based changes that can make early education more engaging to young children and more effective in preparing them for the rest of their educational journey.

### **Recommendations for Policymakers**

1. Promote implementation of the project approach in early education curriculum standards and provide examples of successful projects for various abilities and school locations (e.g. urban, rural).
2. Ensure that class size and set up are conducive to incorporating project work into the curriculum; recommend fewer students for each teacher and smaller class and/or group sizes.
3. Educate teachers on the value of the project approach as well as small group discussions and the scientific method. Ensure that teachers appreciate the importance of building dispositions for learning and children’s social competency.
4. Communicate to principals and other administrators the value of the project approach and the best way to implement it.

## **Part III**

### **Conclusion**

Taken together, the “The Colorado Story” and Lilian Katz’s *Building the Foundation* talk present tremendous opportunities to improve early care and education across the U.S. Policymakers can learn much from the leadership and collaboration of Colorado stakeholders in the quest for high quality children’s services. Children can benefit from small changes like integrating the project approach into early curriculum and creating environments conducive to building dispositions for learning and social competence.

While many factors shaped Colorado’s journey to comprehensive services for children, among the most important steps were 1) defining and measuring quality; and 2) engaging parents, advocates, foundations, business leaders and legislators in a collaborative effort to improve access to quality early education and care. The early childhood agenda can be further advanced by providing concrete, resource-neutral steps to improve the classroom experience and education outcomes for all children.

# Endnotes

1. Suzanne W. Helburn, *Cost, Quality and Child Outcomes in Child Care Centers*, Colorado University, Denver, June 1995, pg. 1.
2. Qualistar Web site, <http://www.qualistar.org/the-qualistar-rating.html> (accessed October 2011).
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