

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) about the Colorado Universal Preschool Program Process Evaluation

About the Colorado Universal Preschool Program

What is the Colorado Universal Preschool Program?

The Colorado Universal Preschool Program is a statewide program that helps eligible families access publicly-funded preschool. The program serves all 4-year-old children and qualifying 3-year-old children through a mixed delivery system that includes school districts, community-based child care centers, and home-based providers. The program was established in 2022 and launched during the 2023–2024 school year.

The program aims to increase access to preschool and support children’s readiness for kindergarten.

What does “mixed delivery system” mean?

The Colorado Universal Preschool Program is a “mixed delivery system,” which means that universal preschool is offered in different types of preschool settings. These include:

- School district-based preschool programs
- Community-based child care centers
- Home-based child care providers

This approach is intended to give families multiple options for choosing preschool services, while building on Colorado's existing early childhood system.

Who is eligible for the Colorado Universal Preschool Program?

Through the Colorado Universal Preschool Program, all 4-year-old children in Colorado

can receive up to 15 hours per week of tuition-free preschool. Depending on available funding, 4-year-old children may qualify for up to 30 hours per week if their family income is below a certain threshold and they meet other criteria (for example, if they are a multilingual learner, have an Individualized Education Program or IEP, are homeless and/or unhoused, are in foster care, or their family's income is below the federal poverty line). In addition, 3-year-old children who meet at least one of the qualifying factors listed above can qualify for 10, 15, or 30 hours of coverage per week, depending on the school district.

How do families apply for Universal Preschool?

Families can apply through one of four pathways:

- **Pre-Registration**, for families seeking to continue their child's care with their current provider, or a provider where their sibling is attending or where a family member works
- **Family Matching**, where families list their preferred providers and are matched to providers through a statewide matching process
- **Direct Enrollment**, where families work directly with a provider to enroll their child (after the Family Matching deadline)
- **Individualized Education Program (IEP) Placement**, for children to be placed with a provider that can provide services aligned with their IEP

What does “blending, braiding, and stacking funds” mean?

Early childhood programs often receive funding from multiple sources, which may include funds from federal, county, municipal, or other entities. “Blending”, “braiding”, and “stacking” describe different ways these funding sources can work together.

- **Blending** combines multiple funding sources into one pool.
- **Braiding** coordinates multiple funding sources while keeping each funding source separate and adhering to each source's specific requirements.
- **Stacking** allows different funding sources to pay for different services or portions of care for the same child or program, when permitted.

Where can I learn more about the Colorado Universal Preschool Program?

For more information about the Colorado Universal Preschool Program, you can visit the Colorado Department of Early Childhood's [Universal Preschool Program webpage](#).

About the Process Evaluation

What are the goals of the Colorado Universal Preschool Program Process Evaluation?

The overall goal of the process evaluation is to document how the Colorado Universal Preschool Program is being implemented during its launch and early years. The evaluation focuses on three areas:

- **Program foundation:** to describe how the program was built. This includes the Colorado Universal Preschool Program’s governance model, infrastructure, and funding models.
- **Program launch:** to describe how the program started. This includes communications about the Colorado Universal Preschool Program, how providers and families experience the application and enrollment process, and what program delivery looks like at the provider level.
- **Program participation:** to describe the children, families, and providers who participate in the Colorado Universal Preschool Program. This includes the numbers and characteristics of program participants, patterns of participation across the state, and the range of subgroups families represent.

The evaluation is designed to help the state understand what is working well, identify opportunities for improvement, and support continuous learning as the program grows.

What does “independent evaluation” mean, and what is Child Trends’ role?

An independent evaluation is conducted by researchers who do not manage or operate the program being evaluated. In other words, the people who implement the program are different from the people who evaluate it.

The Colorado Department of Early Childhood oversees the Colorado Universal Preschool Program and contracted Child Trends, a national research organization focused on improving the lives of children and youth, to conduct an independent evaluation. Child Trends independently designed the study, collected and analyzed the data, interpreted the findings, and prepared the reports. This separation helps ensure that the findings are unbiased and not influenced by political pressures.

What is a “process evaluation,” and how does it differ from an “outcomes evaluation”?

A process evaluation examines how a program is implemented. It asks questions such as:

- How is the program operating?
- How are participants experiencing it?
- What is working well?
- What implementation challenges exist?

An outcomes or “impact” evaluation asks different questions, such as whether the program improves children's learning, development, or kindergarten readiness.

Because the Colorado Universal Preschool Program is still a relatively new program, this evaluation focused first on implementation. In the future, a separate evaluation may examine outcomes.

What exactly is the evaluation measuring?

The process evaluation focuses on how the Colorado Universal Preschool Program is being implemented and measures things like:

- Overall successes and challenges
- How the Universal Preschool Program is organized and managed
- Universal Preschool Program communications and resources
- Application, matching, and enrollment processes (for example, understanding of these processes, and supports for or barriers encountered when completing processes)
- How providers structure, staff, and operate their programs
- Early childhood practices and services offered by providers
- Providers’ and families’ participation, including reasons for participating or not
- Providers’ and families’ experiences
- Variation in experiences across the state and for different subgroups of providers and families
- Opportunities for providers, families, and others to provide input

The evaluation does not measure children's academic, developmental, or kindergarten readiness outcomes.

What information and data are being used for the evaluation?

Year 1 of the evaluation used multiple sources of information collected in spring of 2025, including:

- State administrative data on applications, enrollment, payments, and providers
- Surveys of preschool providers, Local Coordinating Organizations (LCOs), and state and regional leaders
- Interviews with state and regional leaders
- Focus groups with preschool providers and LCO representatives

In the next phase of the evaluation, beginning in spring 2026, we are also conducting surveys and focus groups with families whose children are attending or applied to attend Universal Preschool.

Using multiple data sources allows us to compare findings across different perspectives and identify areas of agreement and differences.

Who participated in the evaluation?

During the first year of the evaluation, surveys were completed by:

- 376 preschool providers from across Colorado
- 24 representatives from Colorado's 32 Local Coordinating Organizations (LCOs)
- 13 state and regional early childhood leaders

Participants in interviews and focus groups included:

- 13 preschool providers
- 10 LCO representatives from 7 LCOs
- 13 state and regional leaders

Participants in the surveys and focus groups represented nearly all 32 LCOs across the state, both Metro and non-Metro areas, and all three provider settings (i.e., community-based, home-based, and school district-based providers). Relative to the population of all Colorado licensed providers, the provider survey sample included an overrepresentation of community-based providers and an underrepresentation of school-based providers. Still, school-based providers who responded to the survey represented 38 school districts.

Because of project timelines, families did not directly participate in Year 1 data collection. Instead, information about families' experiences came indirectly through providers, LCOs, state and regional leaders, and statewide administrative data. Gathering families' perspectives is a major focus of the next phase of the evaluation. We expect to share

findings from data collected from families beginning in 2027.

About the Findings from Year 1

Do the findings show that the Colorado Universal Preschool Program is working?

The evaluation is not designed to answer a simple yes-or-no question about whether the program “works.” Instead, it is designed to understand how the program is being implemented, including what is happening in practice, how different groups are experiencing the program, what is working well, and where there are opportunities for improvement.

Findings from the first year of the evaluation show that the Colorado Universal Preschool Program has made substantial progress during its first years of implementation. For example, provider participation has been strong, access to preschool has expanded, and the program has continued to improve its operations since launching.

At the same time, the evaluation identified opportunities to strengthen implementation, including improving communication, supporting LCOs, streamlining application and enrollment processes, and expanding the use of data to guide continuous improvement.

As with any new statewide program, implementation is expected to continue evolving over time.

Does the process evaluation show whether the Colorado Universal Preschool Program improves children’s readiness for kindergarten?

No, this evaluation does not examine children's learning or kindergarten readiness. Because the Colorado Universal Preschool Program is still a new program, the evaluation first focuses on understanding whether it is being implemented as intended and where improvements may be needed. Once the program has had time to mature, future evaluations will be better positioned to examine whether it is achieving its long-term goals, such as improving children's readiness for kindergarten.

How are the findings being used to improve the Colorado Universal Preschool Program?

The purpose of the process evaluation is to provide evidence that can support continuous improvement as the Colorado Universal Preschool Program continues to develop.

The Year 1 findings have already been shared with the Colorado Department of Early Childhood and informed the department's annual SMART Act reporting and discussions during the 2026 legislative session. The findings are intended to help state leaders, policymakers, and other interested groups better understand how the program is being implemented, identify areas of strength, and recognize opportunities for improvement.

Does the process evaluation compare the Colorado Universal Preschool Program to other early childhood programs in Colorado, or to other public preschool programs across the country?

No, this evaluation intentionally centers on how the Colorado Universal Preschool Program is operating, with the goal of obtaining information that can support program improvement.

Although the Colorado Universal Preschool Program intersects with other early childhood funding streams and programs in Colorado, it has a different structure and purpose, which would make direct comparison inappropriate. For example, the Colorado Universal Preschool Program is designed to combine a universal approach that offers preschool access to all 4-year-olds statewide, as well as a targeted approach that offers additional coverage to children based on certain qualifying factors. In contrast, other programs may only use a universal approach or may only use a targeted approach to ensure that certain high-priority populations have access. Other programs – whether they use a universal or a targeted approach – likely operate under different funding rules, eligibility criteria, and service models than those used in the Colorado Universal Preschool Program.

In addition, the Colorado Universal Preschool Program differs from other statewide universal preschool programs across the country in terms of program design, program maturity, population served, and other factors that make the Colorado context unique. While comparisons to other states are not the focus of this evaluation, readers who are interested in state-funded preschool efforts across the U.S. may wish to read the latest [State of Preschool Yearbook](#) from the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER).

What's Next

What comes next?

The videos summarize findings from the first year of our three-year process evaluation. Future phases of the evaluation will include direct input from families, examine how implementation changes over time, and address additional evaluation questions that

could not be answered during the first year.

As the program matures, future evaluations can also help inform whether Colorado Universal Preschool is achieving its long-term goals.

Where can I learn more about the evaluation?

For more information about the process evaluation, you can explore Child Trends' [full Year 1 Report](#) or [Executive Summary](#).