



Colorado's Early Childhood Councils: 2016 Evaluation Report

Executive Summary

Many state and local leaders are working to develop an early childhood system to better coordinate programs and services that support early learning and development, health and well-being, and family outreach and education to address identified needs of children and families. The fragmentation of this system is historically due in large part to the multiple federal, state, and local funding streams designed to support children and families prenatally through early elementary school.

In 2007 the Colorado General Assembly established the Early Childhood Councils (HB07-1062) and charged them with “increasing and sustaining the quality, accessibility, capacity, and affordability of early childhood services for children five years of age or younger and their parents” in the areas of: early care and education, family support, mental health, and health.¹ The establishing legislation for the Councils requires a triennial evaluation to understand the status of the state’s efforts to build a cohesive early childhood system across the state. In March 2016 Child Trends, a non-profit research and evaluation organization, partnered with the Colorado Department of Human Services, Office of Early Childhood (CDHS) to conduct an evaluation that meets these requirements. We developed a study designed to address the following research questions, as required in legislation:

1. What is the overall performance of the Councils?
2. What is the overall performance of the state in meeting the needs of the Councils?
3. To what extent are there feasible opportunities to combine funding sources that are available to the Councils?
4. What are the barriers to delivery of quality early childhood services?
5. What is the impact of the rule waiver process?

This study used multiple data collection strategies in order to provide a ‘360 review’ of the Councils’ work, drawing from data provided by the Councils themselves, their community partners, governing members, and early care and education providers. Staff members at CDHS also participated in a key stakeholder interview and several meetings which helped to inform our teams’ understanding of the context for the Councils’ work and the design of our data collection instruments. There are several key findings from this study, which follow in the next sections.

¹ General Assembly of the State of Colorado. House Bill 07-1062. http://www.eccbouldercounty.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/3.-1062_enr.pdf.

What is the overall performance of the Councils?

This question was addressed by examining Council capacity, goals and activities; efforts to track and measure progress; and perceptions of Councils' effectiveness from the perspective of community partners, governance members, and early care and education providers. A summary of findings and recommendations for each of these topics is included below.

Capacity

Council capacity and the communities they serve vary.

The most notable differences among Councils emerged around funding, staffing, and governance structures. Across all Councils in the 2015 fiscal year, total funding ranged from \$45,000 to \$4,068,614 and the average number of staff ranged from two to 24. Variations in staff and funding may be reflective of the communities these Councils serve. For example, a rural county with a lower population of children, families, and early care and education providers will be staffed differently than a Council with a larger population. Variations in Council governance structures exist in terms of the total number of members (which ranges from 4-53), the types of members represented, and decision-making processes being used.



Next steps: The capacity of the Councils and the needs of the families and providers they serve are important contextual features that should be kept in mind when considering next steps. The Councils should work to ensure they have adequate staff with the right skills and capacity to implement the Councils' scope of work and meet the needs of the communities they serve. Furthermore, CDHS and the Councils should work together to identify additional supports and strategies that will help build Councils' long-term capacity, for example, professional development and training opportunities exclusively focused on building strong local leadership². Clearer guidance should be provided by CDHS on Council governance and membership, so Councils can ensure they are compliant with statute and strengthen the role of their members and governing bodies.

Goals and Activities

Nearly all Councils reported that their work has shifted toward supporting quality improvement among early care and education programs. Most Councils reported this change was due, at least in part, to the increase in CDHS funding to support quality improvement in early care and education programs. However, it is important to note that Councils' goals and activities were either documented in many different ways or are not documented at all in a current strategic plan. Only 14 of the 31 Councils submitted strategic plans that identified their *current* goals and activities. Of the 14, only seven included measurable goals and outcomes, that is specific measurement strategies or progress indicators by which performance of the Councils could be measured.

Next steps: A clear definition of the goals, activities, and expected outcomes that are common across Councils is needed in order to evaluate their collective impact. To increase both communication and understanding about the scope and nature of the Councils' work, CDHS and the Councils should work together to develop a set of core functions (i.e., goals; activities; outcomes; and strategies for measuring progress) that are needed to promote quality, accessibility, capacity, and affordability of early care and education, family support, and health and mental health programs and services. This work should build upon CDHS's current statement of work for the Councils and could be guided by the Early Childhood Colorado Framework. In addition, since maintaining a current strategic plan is required in the establishing

² Ponder, K. (2015). Chapter 2: Local Systems Building through Coalitions. *Rising to the Challenge: Building Effective Systems for Young Children and Families*, a BUILD E-Book. BUILD Initiative. Retrieved from: <http://www.buildinitiative.org/Portals/0/Uploads/Documents/E-BookChapter2LocalSystemsBuildingThroughCoalitions.pdf>

legislation of the Councils guidance, on the development of strategic plans can be further supported through the promulgation of rules.

Councils emphasized that their work to promote coordination and efficiency across the early childhood system supports the success of their quality improvement initiatives. When considering the core functions of the Councils, it will be important to maintain flexibility to enable Councils to identify and address their local systems-building needs. It is equally important for each Council to develop a strategic plan that uses a common format that includes measurement strategies for their identified goals and outcomes.³

Having a shared understanding of the Councils' core functions and common goals will not only increase understanding and communication about the Councils' work, it can also support future evaluation efforts to examine the Councils' effectiveness and impact. It is important to note that data collection for this evaluation was conducted near the same time as the launch of the new Council Quarterly Reporting system. While there was not a sufficient amount of data for our team to analyze trends in this evaluation, these data will be a tremendous resource for examining effectiveness across Councils in the next evaluation.

Measuring Progress

While many Councils rely solely on state systems, several have developed their own strategies for measuring and monitoring their work. At different times in the survey Councils expressed frustration that state reporting systems do not capture all of the Councils' work, beyond specific activities funded by the state. As a result, many Councils developed their own methods to specifically measure their activities, in order to fully describe the breadth of their work. Yet these unique approaches impede the ability to demonstrate the statewide impact of the Councils. Councils also articulated that they were not always clear about how the data collected by CDHS through the Quarterly Reports is being used.



Next steps: Efforts to work with Councils to define their core functions, goals, and activities (as noted above) should be coordinated with guidance about progress monitoring. CDHS should consider developing tracking and measurement strategies that demonstrate the Councils' collective work across counties and the state of Colorado, potentially guided by the Early Childhood Colorado Framework. This work has already begun with the current Council statement of work and the new Council Quarterly Reporting system, and should continue to build on existing efforts to define the Councils' core functions and outcomes, (i.e., indicators work led by the Early Childhood Council Leadership Alliance; ECCLA) when appropriate. If these data are collected in a consistent way over time, CDHS will be able to better assess the Councils' work in a systematic way and will have the ability to track trends over time.

While it is critical that Councils report the specified outcomes of their state-funded work, CDHS should work with Councils to develop a data collection structure or process that allows Councils to report the outcomes of their locally-determined work in a similarly consistent and quantifiable manner. The rules process might also provide further guidance on key features each Council should include in their annual reports. This would help Councils address the core outcomes that are monitored by CDHS, while also providing flexibility for Councils to report to key stakeholders and their early childhood communities about their successes related to their overall community early childhood systems building work, which may go beyond CDHS-funded work.

³ Early Childhood Leadership Commission (ECLC). Early Childhood Colorado Framework. Retrieved from: <http://www.earlychildhoodcolorado.org/early-childhood-colorado-framework/>

Perceptions on Effectiveness

On average, community partners perceive the Councils as being effective in supporting local early childhood systems. While partners' ratings were high on average, there was wide variability in the individual ratings (3 to 10 on a scale of 1 to 10), indicating that some Councils are perceived as more or less effective than others by their partners. **On average, ECE providers report that Councils are effective in meeting the needs of their programs.** Through our surveys with providers, we noted different patterns based on providers' registration status in Colorado Shines. Sixty-four percent of registered providers (318 out of 498 who responded to a survey) said they received support from a Council within the last 18 months, compared to 27% of unregistered providers (45 out of 167 who responded to a survey).

Next steps: Developing strategies for frequently collecting feedback from partners and providers will be a valuable ongoing evaluation method for assessing the impact and effectiveness of the Councils' work. In addition to direct evaluation of the Councils, CDHS and the Councils should examine how their quality improvement initiatives are working for ECE providers to ensure their investments are best serving young children and their families.

What is the overall performance of the state in meeting the needs of the Councils?

Councils were mixed in their perceptions of the helpfulness of supports offered to them. Most of the Councils are using the supports offered by the Colorado Department of Human Services (CDHS), Colorado Department of Education (CDE), and the Early Childhood Council Leadership Alliance (ECCLA); however, their perceptions of the helpfulness of these supports were fairly divided. Along with describing the supports they had received, some Councils explained they have been generally overwhelmed by Colorado Shines and the new data systems.

Next steps: Though there are several supports currently in place to assist Councils, CDHS's continued efforts to reach out to Councils individually to assess their specific needs will help identify new types of supports to offer to Councils. It may also be that all 31 Councils do not need the same types of assistance and outreach, so offering supports for small groups of Councils with similar needs may be beneficial and more efficient. For example, smaller learning communities could be developed around specific topics. This could include a regional network of Councils that meet periodically for updates, training, and sharing of lessons learned. It is important to note that before data from this study were analyzed or reported back to CDHS, CDHS launched new technical assistance efforts that were not included in our Council survey. These include individualized supports such as weekly communication between Councils and QRIS Coordinators and monthly meetings. When considering additional supports to meet the unique needs of Councils, it will be important for CDHS to build upon and promote the supports currently being offered.

To what extent are there feasible opportunities to combine funding sources that are available to the Councils?

Although Councils appreciate the various funds that support their work, it can be challenging for them to manage multiple funding streams. Councils noted that managing multiple funding streams is complicated and time consuming from an administrative standpoint. Moreover, when a program receives multiple sources of funding, it can cause inefficiencies for service delivery and tracking, especially when coaches are trying to individualize quality improvement supports based on a program's needs. Ideally, Councils would like to combine multiple CDHS fund streams for quality improvement activities in a way that maintains the original intent of these initiatives so that progress can be tracked over time while also allowing for more flexibility in how resources and services are allocated to programs. Finally, Councils articulated a need to review and update language to make it easier to determine provider eligibility for some funds. For example, the term "low-performing" in the establishing legislation for the SRQIP is no longer used to distinguish school performance.

Next steps: Moving forward, CDHS should continue to engage Council staff in conversations about how to coordinate funding in ways that support efficient and effective service delivery. Even if funding sources cannot be combined in statute, there may be opportunities to better align the requirements and eligibility of funding sources to enable more flexibility at the local level to streamline QI delivery. Any effort to update legislative language as needed to increase the ease of determining provider eligibility will also be beneficial.

What are the barriers to delivery of quality early childhood services?

Both long-term (i.e., workforce retention) and short-term (i.e. combine funding streams, coordinated communications efforts) are needed to address barriers to the delivery of quality early childhood services. Councils reported market forces (e.g., lack of competition and low supply of qualified ECE professionals); and funding as challenges in delivering and sustaining high-quality early childhood services. Councils also explained that ECE providers struggle with recruiting and retaining qualified staff, and further, that families with young children in their communities are encountering a limited number of child care slots and inadequate transportation options. We also asked community partners for their perceptions of the strengths and challenges in their local early childhood systems. Many partners explained that effective coordination of early childhood supports is already happening in their community, yet several others provided recommendations for ways local systems might be streamlined through strong communication and public awareness. Several partners recommended efforts to increase the public awareness of and support for the Councils' work.

Next steps: Initiatives at the state or local level designed to increase the qualifications and compensation of the early childhood workforce may play an important role in helping to retain highly-qualified ECE professionals. In addition, state leaders and the Councils should continue to work together to seek ways to combine or better coordinate funding to increase the efficiency and effectiveness (i.e., address challenges of differing time frames for spending, inability to combine funding for a more coordinated QI response, differing eligibility requirements). Further, local early childhood services would be better streamlined if strong communication structures were in place, such as a central website for the Councils. Public awareness campaigns about the services and supports being offered by the Councils would also be beneficial.

What is the impact of the rule waiver process?

Through our key informant interviews with CDHS staff, we learned that the process is rarely used by Councils and the Early Childhood Leadership Commission did not receive any rule waiver requests within the past year. Nonetheless, details regarding the process for submitting a rule waiver were included in this report for reference.

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