

Early Childhood and School Readiness Legislative Commission

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Committee Charge

Pursuant to state law (Section 26-6.5-203, C.R.S.), the Early Childhood and School Readiness Legislative Commission (ECSRLC) may meet up to four times per year to study issues concerning early childhood and school readiness. Topics to be studied include: health care, mental health, parental involvement, family support, child care, and early learning. The commission is required to solicit input from the public, especially from those who have expertise in early childhood and school readiness issues. The commission is also required to consult with the Early Childhood Leadership Commission, which is a group focused on improving outcomes for young children from birth to age eight, to discuss policy concerning early childhood and school readiness.

Committee Activities

The ECSRLC held five meetings during the 2021 interim. Presentations were made by state departments, early childhood professionals, members of the nonprofit and advocacy communities, and members of the public on a wide range of subjects related to early childhood and school readiness, including:

- early child care and education access and affordability;
- Department of Early Childhood transition planning;
- early child care workforce recruitment and retention;
- mental health in early childhood and the child care workforce; and
- community and family strengthening efforts.

The following subsections discuss the ECSRLC's activities during the 2021 interim.

Early child care and education access and affordability. The commission heard from representatives from the Office of Early Childhood (OEC) in the Colorado Department of Human Services (CDHS), Early Milestones Colorado, the Colorado Children's Campaign, Executives Partnering to Invest in Children, Mile High United Way, Council for Strong America, and the Common Sense Institute on the current landscape of early child care in Colorado and the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Presenters discussed the need to improve access to high-quality and affordable early care and education for all families, the impacts of a decline in licensed child care infant capacity, and the consequences of limited access to quality early care and education on children, families, and the economy. The commission also heard a report on home-based child care in Colorado and was briefed on the results of a statewide survey on Family, Friend, and Neighbor (FFN) care.

Department of Early Childhood Transition Planning. Representatives from the Early Childhood Leadership Commission spoke to the commission about the transition planning process for the new Department of Early Childhood created by House Bill 21-1304. The presenters focused on the transition timeline, stakeholder engagement process, guiding principles, and universal preschool program implementation.

Early child care workforce recruitment and retention. The commission heard from representatives from the Colorado Department of Higher Education, OEC, directors of family child care homes and child care centers, and an FFN care advocate on early childhood workforce development initiatives, the need to use state and federal stimulus funding to support the early care and education workforce, and the importance of training and support for FFN providers. Presenters and the commission discussed issues facing the early child care and education workforce, including staff shortages, difficulty filling vacant positions, low wages, low retention rates, high demand for child care spots, and workforce capacity building efforts.

Mental health in early childhood and the child care workforce. Representatives from CDHS, Healthy Child Care Colorado, Right Start for Colorado, and mental health consultants and providers spoke to the commission about early childhood mental health programs, strategies, and supports. The commission members learned about the Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation program, a service partnering early childhood programs and mental health consultants to improve the overall development and mental health of children and caregivers, as well as the investments, supports, and services that are needed across the infant and early childhood mental health continuum.

Community and family strengthening efforts. Representatives from the Family Resource Center Association and the Early Childhood Council Leadership Alliance spoke to the commission about the work their organizations are doing to provide services and supports to families throughout the state by using comprehensive, coordinated case management and acting as a family-friendly access point to the wider community by tailoring the centers to the culture and needs of each community. The commission also heard preliminary recommendations from the Safe Child Care Task Force and learned about the Home Visiting Investment Plan.

Committee Recommendations

As a result of committee discussion and deliberation, the Early Childhood and School Readiness Legislative Commission recommends the following bill for consideration in the 2022 legislative session.

Bill A – Early Childhood Tax Credit. The bill creates a refundable income tax credit for early childhood educators who have an adjusted gross income of less than or equal to \$75,000 for a single return or \$85,000 for a joint, has held an early childhood professional credential for at least 6 months, and is the licensee of an eligible early childcare program or employed by an eligible program for at least 6 months. The credit can be claimed from January 1, 2022, through January 1, 2027. Credit amounts include:

- \$500 for an Early Childcare Professional I, IV, V, and VI;
- \$750 for an Early Childcare Professional II; and
- \$1,000 for an Early Childcare Professional III.

After January 1, 2023, the Department of Revenue (DOR) must adjust the amount of the credit by inflation. The CDHS must provide DOR with an electronic report of each individual who held an early childhood professional credential each year.