

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 at least 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 four meetings during the 2019 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 care and education access, affordability, quality, and workforce;
- early childhood mental health;
- child maltreatment and fatality prevention recommendations;
- school readiness, literacy, preschool, and full-day kindergarten; and
- community-based resource centers.

The following subsections discuss the ECSRLC's activities during the 2019 interim.

Early child care and education access, affordability, quality, and workforce. The commission heard from representatives from the Colorado Department of Human Services (CDHS) Office of Early Childhood, Early Childhood Leadership Commission, Colorado Children's Campaign, Red Rocks Community College, the Denver Preschool Program, and early child care centers about the need to improve access to high-quality and affordable early care and education for all families and to recruit and retain early child care workers and educators. The commission discussed the impacts of a decline in licensed child care capacity for infants and the consequences of limited access to quality early care and education on children, families, and the economy, as well as issues facing Colorado's early childhood workforce such as staff shortages, difficulty filling vacant positions, low wages, and high demand.

Early childhood mental health. Representatives from CDHS, Mental Health Colorado, Colorado Children's Campaign, Children's Hospital Colorado, and Early Childhood Partnership of Adams County spoke to the commission about early childhood mental health programs, strategies, and supports. An example of such a program is 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 in school settings and lower suspension and expulsion rates. The commission learned about the importance of preventative strategies in improving early childhood mental health, such as early screenings and assessments; integrated behavioral health; enhanced home visiting; and bolstering programs that promote trauma-informed care and improve positive relationships between parent and child and teacher and child.

Child maltreatment and fatality prevention recommendations. The commission was briefed by representatives from the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment (CDPHE) and CDHS on the Colorado Child Fatality Prevention System and the recommendations put forth in 2019 by the two departments to prevent child maltreatment and child fatalities. These recommendations include: strengthening maternal mental health programs; focusing on access to quality, affordable, and safe housing and child care for families; increasing home visiting program enrollment; implementing graduated driver's license requirements; strengthening primary seat belt laws; spearheading additional firearm death prevention research; and implementing delayed school start times.

School readiness, literacy, preschool, and full-day kindergarten. The commission heard from representatives from the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) on the importance of early intervention in closing achievement gaps, promoting and developing high-quality, evidence-based early learning and literacy strategies, kindergarten readiness, full-day kindergarten implementation, and the need to ensure that all kids are reading by third grade. The commission learned about the department's P-3 Office, which is set up to support vertical alignment between early childhood systems and K-3 systems, and about how CDE is supporting districts with full-day kindergarten implementation and re-allotting Early Childhood At-risk Enhancement (ECARE) positions from kindergarten to full day preschool.

Community-based resource centers. 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 learned that the missions and purposes of these organizations are to align resources within communities and the state to effectively serve young children and their families, and to increase and sustain the quality, accessibility, capacity, and affordability of early childhood services.

Committee Recommendations

As a result of committee discussion and deliberation, the Early Childhood and School Readiness Legislative Commission recommends the following four bills for consideration in the 2020 legislative session.

Bill A – Supports for Early Childhood Educator Workforce. The bill makes several changes to state law related to early childhood workforce programs, including requiring that:

- CDHS recognize prior experience in the educator credentialing system;
- CDHS create a pathway for programs to be licensed while aspiring educators pursue a credential;
- CDHS and CDE align the early childhood credential system, educator licensing system, and the childcare program licensing, and report on the current supply and future need for qualified early childhood educators;
- CDHS, CDE, and the Department of Higher Education develop resources to increase concurrent enrollment opportunities and support career pathways that allow students to serve as early childhood educators;
- CDHS establish the Early Care and Education Recruitment and Retention Grant and Scholarship program for individuals pursuing a career in early care and education, nonprofit entities administering a similar scholarship program, or licensed early care and education programs; and
- the Colorado Department of Labor and Employment establish the Early Childhood Educator Apprenticeship program to create pathways into the early childhood profession.

Bill B – Helping Others Manage Early Childhood Act. The bill requires CDHS to issue a request for proposals in order to implement a statewide public awareness campaign. The campaign must be in place no later than the 2021-22 academic year. The public awareness campaign must ensure that people connected to early childhood education are aware of:

- what is expected from early childhood education;
- what a child is expected to know by kindergarten; and
- what resources are available for early childhood education.

The bill also requires the CDHS, in collaboration with the CDE and early childhood councils, to offer two types of workshops throughout the state: multicounty workshops focused on professional development in the early childhood education field and regional workshops focused on how to open a child care center or preschool.

Bill C – Increase Quality in Early Childhood Education Programs. The bill requires that CDHS provide technical assistance and financial incentives to help early childhood care providers with a Colorado Shines quality rating advance to or maintain at least a level-three rating. Early childhood councils must assist CDHS by providing local community outreach and engagement strategies.

Under current law, early childhood councils that apply for school-readiness quality improvement funding must submit a school readiness plan that includes targeting or recruiting early childhood

programs rated as level two or higher, or that are actively working towards a level-two rating but face demonstrated hardship. The bill requires that plans instead target or recruit programs that are rated at level one or higher. If an early childhood council received funding prior to FY 2020-21, the council must amend their plan.

Bill D – Early Childhood Mental Health Consultants. The bill requires CDHS to develop and implement a statewide voluntary program of early childhood mental health consultation by July 1, 2022. The program is intended to increase the number of qualified mental health consultants supporting professionals who work with young children and to give guidance and support to families, caregivers, and providers in addressing health social-emotional developmental needs of children through age eight. In developing the program, CDHS must create a model of consultation, a professional development plan, and a certification process for the consultants, as well as a data collection and information system to analyze implementation and outcomes. CDHS and the Department of Health Care Policy and Financing (HCPF) must also explore funding options for the program and report their findings to the Joint Budget Committee by January 1, 2022.