

## Support HB18-1134: Use of Colorado Preschool Program Positions

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### Background

The Colorado Preschool Program (CPP) has been operating in our state since 1988. Children who have access to CPP compared with at-risk peers with no preschool access are (1) more likely to be meeting grade level expectations upon kindergarten entry, (2) less likely to be identified with a reading deficiency under the READ Act, (3) less likely to be retained, and (4) more likely meet or exceed expectations on science, social studies, reading, and math assessments in middle and high school. Given the evidence of success, the legislature chose to expand the program by 8,200 slots in 2013 and 2014. In the expansion those years, the legislature decided to use a new mechanism called the "Early Childhood At-Risk Enhancement (or ECARE)" program. School districts are allowed to use ECARE slots for full-day kindergarten or preschool.

### The Problem & The Solution

The expansion under the ECARE program, however, was not clear that this program, like CPP since its inception, is targeted at children who are facing challenges that put them at-risk of not being school ready. HB18-1134 clarifies that children who receive funding through the Early Childhood At-Risk Enhancement (ECARE) program so that they can access a full day kindergarten must meet the Colorado Preschool Program (CPP) eligibility requirements, which is current policy for children who receive ECARE funding to support access to preschool.

### Who is eligible?

The eligibility requirements include any one of the following: children may have multiple risk factors and local districts may expand the list of risk factors in order to meet the unique needs of the community (the percentage of current CPP recipients with each risk factor is indicated in parentheses):

- Abusive adult in the house (3%)
- Parental drug/alcohol abuse (5%)
- Teen parent (6%)
- Child in foster care (6%)
- Homelessness (7%)
- Frequent relocation (11%)
- Parent without a high school education (19%)
- Poor social skills (26%)
- In need of language development (34%)
- Free/reduced-price lunch eligible (63%)

It is worth noting that, while the majority of children in the program are economically disadvantaged (63%), more than a third are not economically disadvantaged but still face family risk factors that jeopardize their school readiness.

Why is this a smart policy to adopt?

With limited resources to support access to full-day kindergarten, this bill ensures that slots allocated for early learning are focused on children with demonstrated challenges (including, but certainly not limited to, being economically disadvantaged) that put them at risk of not being school-ready.

The state uses eligibility criteria to help ensure that the program provides early learning opportunities for the students who may benefit the most from a high-quality early learning experience and who also face the most barriers to accessing one. These criteria currently apply in cases where ECARE slots are used to provide access to preschool, and this bill would ensure that the same criteria apply when an ECARE slot is used to provide access to a full day of kindergarten. With limited resources, these programs still cannot serve all the eligible children. As such, we must focus limited resources on those who are most likely to benefit rather than expand these programs beyond their intended scope. This ensures that taxpayers get the biggest return on their investment in promoting school readiness.