

P-3: The Foundation of the Learning Continuum

Definition of P-3

P-3 focuses on the earliest years of the P-20 education continuum, beginning with the years before children enter school (Pre-school) and extending through 3rd grade, transcending the traditional boundaries of early care and education (ECE) and elementary school. Here, the term “pre-school” is used not to describe a specific program, but to encompass the services and programs that children experience before their entry into the formal K-12 school system, including, but not limited to, early intervention services, child care, family child care, pre-kindergarten (a distinct type of program that provides educational services to 3- and 4-year old children), Early Head Start, and Head Start programs. P-3 also includes the important primary school years.



Infants and Toddlers in a P-20 Context

Starting the continuum at birth is supported by an impressive body of literature that shows that nearly 90% of human brain development occurs during the first three years of life.¹ The volume and rapidity of brain development lay crucial foundations for children’s lifelong social, emotional, and cognitive development. For infants and toddlers, this development happens within the context of relationships, with families providing the most important and the most consistent interactions. The first three years of life also represent a period of tremendous vulnerability because infants and toddlers are wholly dependent on adults for their health and well-being. Nationally, at least 50% of 9-month old children are in some kind of regular, non-parental child care arrangement.² Public policy plays an important role in ensuring that these child care (pre-school) arrangements are of high quality, staffed by qualified adults, and nurture and support young children’s development.

Access to Programs – Pre-Kindergarten and Full-Day Kindergarten

Research shows that achievement gaps between children exist as early as kindergarten entry, if not before.³ Research also shows that many pre-school programs (including high-quality child care, state-funded pre-kindergarten, and Head Start) for 3- and 4-year olds are effective investments for closing achievement gaps in the short term, helping children perform better in both math and reading during their kindergarten year, and in producing long-term benefits to society including fewer grade retentions, fewer special education placements, increased high school graduation rates, decreased arrest rates, and increased employment earnings. Unfortunately, in Colorado, such high-quality preschool programs are not widely available. The Colorado Preschool and Kindergarten Program (CPKP) funds only 16,360 slots for at-risk children, leaving more than 7,000 eligible children – and even more children who are not eligible, but could still benefit from such a program – unserved. Many children are in licensed child care facilities (both center- and home-based) that are of widely variable cost and quality, making some pre-school program options either unaffordable or undesirable for families.

¹ Carnegie Task Force on Meeting the Needs of Young Children. (1994). *Starting points: Meeting the needs of our youngest children*. New York: Carnegie Corporation of New York; Hart, B., & Risley, T. R. (1995). *Meaningful differences in the everyday experience of young American children*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes; Shore, R. (1997). *Rethinking the Brain: New Insights into Early Development*. New York: Families and Work Institute.

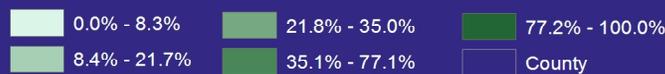
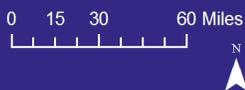
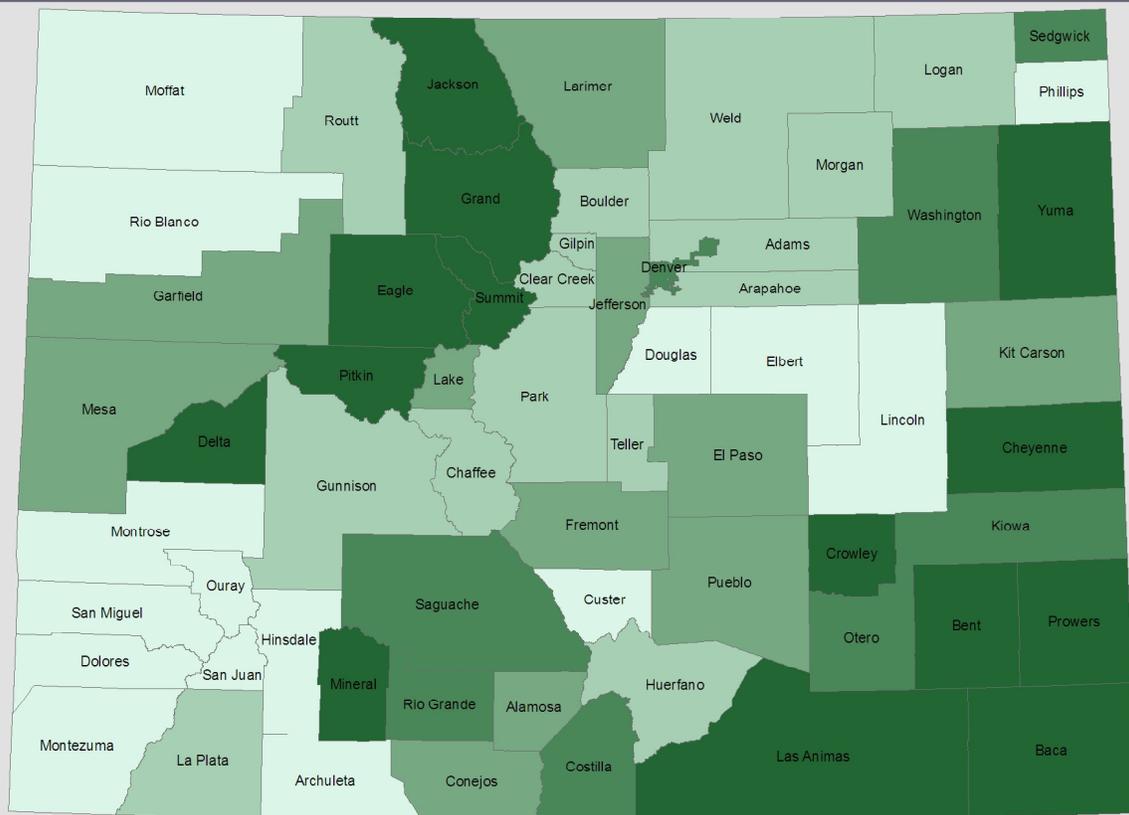
² Flanagan, K. D., & West, J. (2004). *Children born in 2001: First results from the base year of the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Birth cohort (ECLS-B)* (No. NCES 2005-036). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics.

³ Lee, V. E., & Burkam, D. T. (2002). *Inequality at the starting gate: Social background differences in achievement as children begin school*. Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute; Magnuson, K. A., Meyers, M. K., Ruhm, C. J., & Waldfogel, J. (2005). Inequality in children’s school readiness and public funding. *Focus*, 24(1), 12-18.

Similarly, research shows that full-day kindergarten is an important factor in closing achievement gaps and boosting children's academic success.⁴ Fewer than 30% of Colorado kindergarteners in public schools attend full-day kindergarten.⁵ Unlike the other grades in the K-12 system, the state does not guarantee adequate funds to school districts to provide full-day kindergarten. CPKP funds almost 2500 full-day kindergarten slots. For all others, school districts must impose additional mill levies, charge parent fees, use federal Title I dollars, or generate other local funds to pay for full-day kindergarten.



Colorado's Children Enrolled in Full-Day Kindergarten Programs 2005



Source: 2007 Kids Count
2005 Pupil Count provided by the
Colorado Dept. of Education
Calculations performed by the
Colorado Children's Campaign.

⁴ Ackerman, D.J., Barnett, W.S., & Robin, K. B. (2005). *Making the most of kindergarten: Present trends and future issues in the provision of full-day programs*. New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER), Rutgers University.

⁵ Colorado Children's Campaign. (2007). *2007 KidsCount in Colorado!* Denver, CO: Author.

Improve the Quality of K-3 classrooms

To maintain the gains children make in high-quality pre-school and/or full-day kindergarten programs, it is important to consider the quality of grades 1, 2, and 3. Research shows that children's classroom experiences in elementary school are of highly variable quality and, in direct contradiction to the holistic learning needs of young children, lacking both the instructional and emotional climates that have been shown to be related to positive child outcomes.⁶ This is particularly problematic for low income students, because placement into elementary school is primarily dependent on residential location, with low income children more likely to end up in low resource – and, therefore, low quality – schools.



Implications and Questions to Explore

The challenges of access, quality, and equity across the P-3 continuum lead to important questions for state policymakers:

1. Should the state expand, refine, and align learning standards for children from pre-school through 3rd grade? How is this best accomplished?
2. Should the state establish a new governance structure to oversee early care and education programs and funding streams?
3. Should the state expand early childhood options for Colorado's children?
 - a. Should Colorado expand its support of full-day kindergarten?
 - b. Should students' attendance in kindergarten be mandatory?
 - c. Should Colorado have universal pre-kindergarten?
 - d. Should Colorado have a more coordinated policy approach for programs and services for infants and toddlers (0 to 3)?
4. Should the state strengthen its efforts to improve classroom, teacher, and school leader quality during children's primary school years (K-3)?
5. Should the state establish, and support school district implementation of, standards for Ready Schools?
6. Can the state improve its efforts to smooth children's and families' transitions during the P-3 years?

⁶ National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Early Child Care Research Network. (2005). A day in third grade: A large-scale study of classroom quality and teacher and student behavior. *The Elementary School Journal*, 105(3), 305-323; Pianta, R. C., Belsky, J., Houts, R., Morrison, F., & Network, N. I. o. C. H. a. H. D. E. C. R. (2007). Opportunities to learn in America's elementary classrooms. *Science*, 315, 1795-1796.



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