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**COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY RECOMMENDATIONS  
TO SUPPORT A STATE-WIDE EARLY CHILDHOOD  
PUBLIC AWARENESS AND ENGAGEMENT EFFORT**

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## **I. Introduction**

Colorado is on a mission to improve outcomes for young children. Research shows that the foundations for long-term success in school and in life are laid in a child's first few years. Of critical importance is the concept of developing "the whole child" (social, emotional, academic development, etc.) from birth to age eight. More specifically, we now know that 85% of a baby's intellect, personality, and social skills are developed in the first three years of life.

Recently a network of partners including state and local agencies, nonprofits and foundations developed a new version of the Early Childhood Colorado Framework, a collective vision to guide planning and mobilize actions on behalf of young children and their families across the state. The vision described in the Framework is that "all children are valued, healthy and thriving." The framework details the guiding principles and resulting efforts that must be taken to coordinate, align and integrate resources in or for Colorado to realize this vision. No one entity, organization, department or partnership can realize the vision independently.

One vital element in supporting Colorado children is advancing parental awareness of the importance of early childhood and engaging parents with the resources they need to support their child's development. In an effort to better understand what is taking place in other states around this issue as well as efforts in Colorado, Elementive Marketing and Early Milestones Colorado completed statewide and national environmental scans of messages and tools to foster family and community engagement with early childhood programs.

### **Parent Awareness Programs in Other States**

Parent awareness and engagement communications programs are happening in many states across the country. Some of these include:

- Arizona: First Things First
- Massachusetts: Brain Building in Progress
- Pennsylvania: PA Promise
- Ohio: Grow Power Wellness
- Vermont: Let's Grow Kids

Some efforts to strengthen parental awareness and engagement in other states have been top down, some more bottom-up. Some of these efforts appear to be more insular to the early childhood community, while some are more 'public,' appealing to a broader swath of the population. Some have strong brand sharing across the state with partners, some have less brand sharing with partners.

All efforts leverage uniform messages and sometimes a branded moniker in an effort to raise overarching awareness and engagement among parents. Some of these initiatives create tools for broader dissemination to stakeholders.

## **Parent Awareness Campaigns in Colorado**

The Colorado environmental scan indicates that there are many exciting parent awareness campaigns currently happening in the state, with many initiatives focused on improving the early care and education of children. However, this doesn't mean there are not additional challenges accompanying all of these efforts:

- There are areas of Colorado where there is a high saturation of messages being broadcast (including Denver/Boulder and Larimer/Weld County) and areas where there aren't nearly as many (i.e., Pueblo).
- There are a significant number of messages and communications going out through multiple channels in an effort to reach parents and caretakers.
  - Some providers feel messages may be competing/confusing to parents
  - Certain topic areas get a lot of promotion, while others that do not
- Despite the numerous efforts underway, many key target audiences including parents and informal caregivers are not hearing the messages, or the messages are getting lost.
- Currently, there is little measurement in place to determine how well all these efforts are collectively impacting young children and their families in Colorado.

The consensus seems to be that there isn't a shortage of messages about early childhood development; rather, it is more about how they fit together and how to fill in the gaps that may exist. Many providers interviewed expressed interest in a statewide collaborative effort to raise awareness that doesn't reinvent the wheel, is inclusive and builds on and supports existing initiatives and programs.

## **Opportunity**

Colorado is unlike any other state when it comes to early childhood development. Numerous partners worked collaboratively to develop the Early Childhood Colorado Framework. This document establishes fundamental goals and strategies for action in three major categories –*family support and education, health and well-being and, learning and development*. The Framework outlines outcomes revolving around increasing access, increasing quality and increasing equity and results in a shared vision for the state: all children are valued, healthy and thriving.

Given the current situation, Colorado is in a strong position to leverage all of these efforts and build a collaborative communications strategy to significantly enhance parent awareness and engagement in early childhood. Clearly, there is an opportunity in Colorado for a broad “umbrella” communications structure that integrates the key categories of *learning and development, health/mental health and family supports*.

This communications structure would increase parent awareness and engagement by creating more coordination among promoters of early childhood. It would also facilitate business, government, foundations and nonprofits to get involved.

## II. Goals

The goals of the communication strategy are to fuel a collective effort that helps Colorado children and parents by:

- Raising awareness of the important role and impact that both parents and informal caregivers (*those whom parents entrust with the care of their children*) have on the early development of their children.
- Connecting them with the wide range of programs, resources and tools available to them at a local level.
- Enhancing their ability to ensure quality experiences that build a strong foundation for learning and social emotional development.

## III. Target Audiences

### 1. The first level of target audiences are the end users of the information:

**Pregnant women, parents and other informal caregivers with children in all child care settings**

Education around early childhood development needs to start with pregnant women in the prenatal stage and communications to parents should continue through their children reaching age 8. We know that 60-70% of 0 – 5 children are not in formal early care and learning environments and much of the communications effort needs to be directed towards these informal caregivers.

Based on the research in this area, we also recognize that there needs to be a special emphasis on young children under the age of three, with a focus on reaching low income and CCCAP eligible families, as well as families with one of more risk factors. These communications should focus on both English and other language speaking parents and caregivers.

Our communications strategy with this audience is recognizing that parents are key influencers for other informal caretakers. We know that parents are the decision makers in selecting other informal caregivers, such as friends, family and neighbors.

As parents start to realize the importance of adult-child interactions and experience on the development of their child, they will begin to influence those with whom they place their care. We believe this strategy of targeting parents to influence informal caregivers has the greatest chance of success.

**2. The second key target audience are all the partners involved in the work of promoting parent awareness and engagement. This would include both existing and new providers of parent awareness and engagement at state/local/community level. This list includes:**

- Early Childhood Partners
- Early Childhood Advocates
  - State Government Agencies
  - Statewide Networks
  - Preschool Programs
  - K-3 Educators
  - Mental Health Providers
  - Health Care Providers
  - Hospitals
  - Faith-Based Entities
  - Direct Service Providers
  - Home Visitation Providers
  - Professional Development Providers
  - Media Partners

This effort also would seek to cultivate new partners from other sectors such as businesses, nonprofits and funders.

#### **IV. Message Strategy**

Despite many great efforts taking place, there is an even greater opportunity to leverage these efforts to strengthen parent awareness and engagement across Colorado. The opportunity exists to tie these messages to the vision, values and outcomes established in the Early Childhood Colorado Statewide Framework—that all children are valued, healthy and thriving.

This is an opportunity for a broad umbrella effort in which any and all partners across the state can play a role. This effort will:

- Leverage all existing efforts to *amplify awareness, maximize reach and strengthen engagement* with all Colorado parents and informal caregivers
- Create more sharing, alignment, coordination and learning among promoters of early childhood
- Attract more cross-sector early childhood champions
- Integrate *learning and development, health and well-being and family support and education messages into an integrated whole*

*A key element of this model is that it creates a more holistic view of various approaches across the state so there can be more strategic alignment to reach more parents and caregivers.*

### **Critical considerations for the communications model**

**1. This is not a branded campaign or program and is not owned by any party.**

This effort is not owned by any single organization, but exists as a true collective effort. In doing so, it will build a shared sense of ownership and investment. By acting as high level collaborative communications model it can foster conversations and collaboration that will identify critical gaps and spark creative problem solving and strategic support.

It is important to note that the state will play a vital role in this effort but will not lead the effort and instead work as a strong partner alongside all the other partners. The overall effort will need to be coordinated and managed by an outside neutral partner.

**2. This effort needs to exist as a high level structure that enables partners to self-identify how and where their work contributes to the larger state vision.**

By doing so, partners can identify ways to expand reach and build awareness. They can identify potential areas where they overlap with other partners as well specific opportunities to collaborate. This effort will also enable them to identify products, tools and resources to support their efforts statewide and locally. Finally, it should foster more conversation and collaboration among statewide partners.

**3. This approach will facilitate and lead to new cross-sector partnerships.**

It will expand and attract new cross-sector champions and voices — *all in support of early child development in Colorado*. Businesses, foundations, nonprofits and government see the collective effort and identify where to best align their support. This effort can also help align government-to-government collaboration, so multiple government departments and agencies can connect and join in.

This approach will also position Colorado for more federal funding opportunities by making clearer the overall need in the state and the coordinated structure in place to address it. It will fuel the sustainability of statewide efforts by providing more clarity and alignment to Colorado's statewide efforts. It will help Colorado assess progress against the framework.

## V. Communication Model

While additional input and collaboration from the early childhood community would be needed in the development of this effort, we envision a model that achieves the following goals, *structurally*, across the state. This model:

1) **Provides a broad enough yet unifying structure for all existing efforts across the state**

The model would be an inclusive one in which any and all partners can participate. It would create more collaborative communications around three areas that are integral to the Early Childhood Colorado Framework:

- Learning and Development
- Health and Mental Health
- Family Supports

2) **Enables all players to self-select where they 'fit'**

The model would enable partners to identify additional ways to leverage resources across the system more strategically to deepen and expand reach, awareness and engagement.

3) **Serve to 'tee up' all other efforts across the state**

The key here is that this model would not replace any existing efforts but provide an overarching structure to enhance efforts everywhere.

### Model Overview

The new model will seek to:

- **Position Colorado** as a champion for early childhood development.  
  
Colorado can take advantage of its collective vision and the collaborative partnership among state agencies, nonprofits and foundations to promote itself as both an advocate and a resource for early childhood development throughout the state.
- **Grab** parents attention by reinforcing the critical role they play in their child's early development  
  
A unified effort will be able to more on point in gaining parents attention about their vital role in early childhood and more consistent in getting this message out.
- **Organize** the message closet

The model will enable partners to clearly fit their messages into one of the three core buckets established in the Framework—health and well-being, learning and development and family support and education— and give providers the ability to integrate messages from the other buckets as they see fit.

- **Drive** parents to local providers

As a result of the collaborative, the messages will help educate parents on where to turn for assistance and connect them with local providers who are best positioned to help them.

- **Connect** parents to tools/resources

The impact of the model will be that parents not only have more awareness of their importance in early childhood education, but also can easily gain the tools and resources they need to be effective in their role.

### **Model Components**

There are several core components to the model that would help ensure its success. These include:

#### **1) A Collective Identifier**

A collective identifier can be used to help shape the effort into one that resonates with all parties and makes them feel they are a part of a collective whole. This identifier would also position Colorado as a champion for early childhood development.

- For the sake of demonstration only, an example of this identifier line could be: *Colorado Grows Great Kids*. Please note that this is meant to be descriptor and not a tagline and is not meant to ‘replace’ any existing campaign themes or identifiers that are currently in the State.
- Rather, this collective identifier would serve as an overarching identifier symbolizing Colorado’s broader commitment to early childhood development.
- Partner organizations with their own campaign identifiers could simply use this moniker as an ‘endorsement mark’, identifying their effort as part of a larger movement, i.e., *We’re A Colorado Grows Great Kids Partner*.
- An example of how others have used a collective identifier is the *Partnership for a Drug-Free America*, which implies a collective effort and one in which many organizations can participate through a variety of means.



## 2) Shared Message Bank

Another core element of the model is the development of a shared message bank that partners throughout the state could leverage. This message bank would contain two levels of messages:

1. **An overarching set of consistent and evidence-based messages that highlight the role parents play in their child's early development.** It would be critical that some consensus is created around the top three most compelling messages that partners feel will best support their efforts and that more consistency of messages is woven into the broader effort.
  
2. **Three SUITES of additional high-level messaging that tie to outcome areas:**
  - Health and well-being
  - Learning and development
  - Family support/education

Partners will have the ability to both contribute their messaging into one of the three message suites or download messages for their work that others have contributed from this shared bank of messages.

## 3) Communication Toolbox

The Communication Toolbox is another piece of the model that would enable providers to utilize consistent, high-level messaging through a range of flexible communications tools. The tools could be both existing tools and new tools and would allow for providers to localize the information.

The Toolbox would support a wide range of current communications in English and other languages and would include:

- Digital
- Print
- Events
- Earned Media

Once customized and localized, these tools would promote parent awareness and engagement around early childhood and drive parents and informal caregivers to local providers in their communities to connect them with resources to support their child development efforts.

### **Technology/Tools/Resources**

The model can harness existing technology, tools and resources and better reach parents and other caregivers through a variety of means. Some of these vehicles include but are not limited to:

- Texting platforms
- Parent Engagement tools and resources
- Media channels/campaigns
- Events (i.e., Week of the Young Child)
- Online videos
  - Online forums (for parents to connect to each other)
  - Social Media
    - Facebook (English and other languages)

Many of these tools may already be in place and can be leveraged for use by everyone connected to the model. Others may be built specifically to advance the overall communications strategy.

## **VI. Measurement**

Measurement tools should be utilized to monitor the progress of the model and identify new opportunities and areas that need improvement. In establishing the model, metrics would be established and a wide range of data collected in a variety of areas such as reach, use and effectiveness. Statewide polling can be used to measure improvements in overall awareness and engagement among parents. Research results would then identify patterns and gaps in the awareness building efforts across the state.

## **VII. Conclusion**

Based on the Colorado environmental scan of existing parent awareness and engagement campaigns as well as the strong collaborative foundation that has been established through the development of the Early Childhood Development Framework, we believe there is tremendous opportunity to leverage the many good efforts taking place to amplify awareness, deepen reach and connect parents to local providers, resources and tools even more effectively across the state.

The overarching communications model presented in this document provides a strong platform to enable all promoters of early childhood development to remain focused on their own initiatives and

efforts while contributing to a larger goal. At the same time, by collectively leveraging the efforts of many in a more synergistic and coordinated fashion, several key benefits emerge:

- 1) Amplifying the importance of early childhood development for parents and other informal caregivers as well as *all citizens* of Colorado.
- 2) Aligning and organizing current efforts across the state to deepen the reach to more parents and informal caregivers. At the same time, more strategic focus will emerge regarding existing gaps and opportunities for future investments and sustainability.
- 3) Coordinating the effort through an outside provider that has strong connections to the Early Childhood Leadership Commission and can monitor efforts taking place statewide.
- 4) Enabling a 'Collaborative Platform' and an 'Exchange' where partners at ALL LEVELS contribute to the broader model while also incorporating messages and tools into their own efforts.

In this way, the model's core components will enable Colorado to:

- Extend the reach and frequency of early childhood messages
- Organize efforts around shared interests, needs
- Share what works, what doesn't, adjust
- Implement new strategies
- Track progress

By creating a more collaborative communications model to build parental awareness across Colorado, partners throughout the state collectively acknowledge that this work matters, everyone's efforts matter and most importantly, together we are stronger on behalf of Colorado's children.