Meeting Objectives:
- Approve the November 10, 2021 Meeting Minutes
- Discuss Universal Preschool Recommendations
- Hear comments from the Early Childhood Community

Attendees: Adeeb Khan, Pamela Harris, Susan Steele, Tom Massey, Heather Craiglow, Sue Renner, Lucinda Burns, Melissa Colsman, Jeanne McQueeney, Ida Rhodes, Jasmin Ramirez, Kristina Heyl

Welcome, Introductions & Approve Minutes
Tom Massey called the meeting to order at 2:34 pm and asked for a motion to approve the November 10, 2021 meeting minutes. Sue Renner motioned to approve the minutes as drafted, Jeanne McQueeney seconded the motion, and the minutes were approved unanimously.

Universal Preschool Recommendations Discussion and Public Comment
Tom introduced Nasha Patel with Watershed Advisors to review the draft universal preschool recommendations and feedback collected so far. Nasha reminded the group of the required components that the Transition Work Group must include in the universal preschool recommendations and the themes being considered. These include application, funding flow, local partnerships, alignment with other programs, eligibility and prioritization for funding, mixed delivery, quality and evaluation, workforce, and special education service delivery.

To frame the work, Nasha explained that the recommendations are meant to provide the Department of Early Childhood (DEC) with guidance, direction and vision. These recommendations will serve as a starting point for the universal preschool program with the understanding that additional work with continued stakeholder engagement, review and evaluation will be necessary.

Next, Nasha walked the group through several universal preschool recommendations incorporating feedback from Transition Advisory Group members at their meeting the previous day. First, Nasha discussed the draft recommendation on infrastructure. Colorado’s infrastructure investment should include local leads empowered to solve local challenges; align and ensure equity of funding in communities; and ensure a strong commitment for resources from the DEC. If a community is unable to establish a local lead, DEC should fulfill those responsibilities until one is identified. DEC should ensure Colorado’s aligned early childhood vision is executed successfully across the state and should recruit and build the capacity of local partners within the first three years of universal preschool implementation. Local leads will be competitively selected and held accountable for a rigorous set of expectations with support from DEC. Local leads could be any public or nonprofit organization. DEC’s role should be to build a common application; empower, launch, and oversee local leads; build capacity through infrastructure investment; align programs; incentivize local share; and ensure equitable funding. In this recommendation, funding would flow from the state to local leads in each community. Local leads should create a birth to five community plan with local partners and should ensure equitable distribution of funding adhering to DEC guidelines and promoting availability of care across ages. DEC should establish a unified vision for early childhood experiences birth to five.

Questions were raised about how many local leads will exist around the state, how they will be renewed, the cost of management, and whether having local leads manage funding flow is most efficient. Others asked who will local leads be applying to and when? Legislative work will impact timing, but hopefully the process will begin this spring. Leads will likely apply to DEC, and there will have to be a demonstration of local buy-in to ensure applicants will be the best fit for their community. Another question was raised about how to ensure every child is covered by a catchment area, avoiding gaps or overlaps. DEC would have to
ensure complete implementation coverage, but a one-size fits all approach would not account for ways local communities are already working collaboratively to provide care in their regions. Concerns were raised about the timeframe and costs to build this robust infrastructure before the launch of universal preschool in 2023. A suggestion was made to include language around leveraging existing local infrastructure.

The next recommendation centered on an easily accessible, streamlined common application process. DEC should ensure this application collects only as much information from families as is necessary. The application should reduce duplication of information collection and complexity of process for providers. It should include all publicly-funded early childhood services from birth to preschool and should include all funding sources that can be blended, braided or stacked with universal preschool dollars. DEC should fund and empower local navigation support to assist families with the application process.

Nasha then discussed the recommendation on eligibility and prioritization of funding. DEC should engage stakeholders and experts to determine a base per-child rate for universal preschool factoring in weighting for harder to serve populations and considering regional differences and other additional incentives such as teacher qualifications, quality, and others. DEC should ensure the total Colorado Preschool Program (CPP) funding does not drop overall, however the rate should not be connected to the school finance formula without accounting for inequities. The rate should be kept stable or increase over time, and there should be a plan for funding allocation in times of scarcity and excess. Three-year-old access should remain consistent, and implications to the entire birth to five system should always be considered.

There was discussion on whether universal preschool funding would cover additional services for families beyond instruction in the classroom, if that would take away from targeted funds for additional hours, and whether local plans should account for funding for additional services. The group also asked for clarification around the CPP rate not dropping below its current rate.

Nasha moved on to discuss quality and evaluation. Stakeholders have shared that there currently is not enough alignment across program standards and regulations or a clear understanding of quality across the state and programs. Current quality measures do not cover all types of providers, and QRIS level is not always an indicator of quality. The recommendation is for DEC to review existing regulations and standards to ensure alignment across funding sources; review standards from CPP, NIEER, HeadStart, and guidance on BBB to find ways to simplify and align standards; look for solutions when standards limit universal access; establish one definition of quality and support local communities to achieve it with a phased approach and capacity building; contract with an external evaluator to measure the success of universal preschool; and engage a broad range of stakeholders when deciding implementation of quality and evaluation.

Next, Nasha described the current early childhood workforce challenges. There is currently a severe workforce crisis with a loss of about 7% in the last year, and workforce preparation and competencies vary greatly. Universal preschool will require a larger workforce than Colorado has ever had. The profession must be elevated and respected in communities across the state. Innovative solutions should be considered to ensure enough teachers are available for the launch of the new preschool program including incentivizing providers to increase compensation; simplifying the process for entering and remaining in the workforce; ensuring the process for joining the early childhood workforce is welcoming and without barriers; considering an induction model to decrease the time it takes to place a teacher into a classroom; clearly defining the competencies needed by the workforce; and developing strategies with the Colorado Department of Higher Education (CDHE), Colorado Department of Labor and Employment (CDLE), and Colorado Department of Education (CDE) to sustainably recruit and develop new members of the workforce with stackable, credit-bearing options.

Nasha provided some brief contextual information from CDE on the current state of preschool special education in Colorado. The Department of Early Childhood Transition Plan recommends CDE, in partnership with DEC and stakeholders, create a special education implementation plan to support districts, administrative units and other providers to fulfill the requirements of IDEA and Colorado’s Exceptional
Children’s Education Act (ECEA). This report recommends DEC consider additional funds for children with disabilities in the universal preschool rate and ensure accountability for strong collaboration between DEC and CDE on special education service delivery and support. DEC should establish clear expectations for supporting children from specific subgroups; create an interagency agreement with CDE to ensure all federal regulations are complied with; and support programs and communities to provide individualized, meaningful, culturally relevant, active and participatory learning for all children.

Nasha asked the group to provide their reactions and feedback. Suggestions included adding additional components of the workforce to the recommendations such as special education service providers, family supports, nutrition, and transportation; considering the use of waitlists as part of ensuring universal preschool is fully enrolled; addressing monitoring to ensure fidelity to the model and accountability; including information about the frequency and duration of the universal preschool program; addressing screening and referrals; and including transitions to Kindergarten in the report.

Public Comment was included as part of the universal preschool discussion. Michael Taylor asked questions about whether the Transition Advisory Group is considering expertise from organizations or individuals who have previously implemented universal preschool in other states and whether there are examples from other states worth modeling. Nasha has worked to collect information from other states, but in many ways, this will be unique to Colorado given the state’s landscape. North Carolina, Florida, Louisiana, and Oregon all use similar infrastructure models with local leads. The Denver Preschool Program is also considered an important model for implementation, as well as some individual counties across the state.

Taran Schneider, Executive Director of Healthy Child Care Colorado, reiterated the need to ensure the universal preschool program is inclusive of comprehensive services. As an example of a current equity issue, Taran explained how child care health consultants are required by licensing to work with child care centers because in Colorado, the only people who can delegate the administration of medications or health procedures are registered nurses or physicians. Any child care setting in the state with a medication or health procedure needing to be taken care in the center must have a nurse to oversee that process. Therefore, there is already an infrastructure built around school nurses in public schools. Community-based child care providers do not have those school nurses, and although those positions are required by the state, they are not funded, and the financial burden lies with the provider. The incentive for a provider to enroll a child with significant health needs is nonexistent. As the work proceeds, it is important to consider health and well-being in a comprehensive way.

Charlotte Brantley previously worked in Texas as the State Child Care Administrator. She explained how they created a child care management services system, and she offered to share her experiences and expertise to help advise this process.

Christina Taylor leads the Early Childhood Council of Larimer County. She brought up some concerns among Councils around local leads. While Councils have a requirement for collaboration and connection within their communities, other agencies that might be selected as a local lead may not necessarily have those same requirements. Those connections are what create a unified system and should be called out very clearly in the selection process for any local coordinating agency.

Adeeb Khan, ECLC Commissioner and Vice President of Corporate Social Responsibility & Executive Director of Delta Dental of Colorado Foundation, was asked to describe his thoughts on fiscal implementation. He described a process where the financial transactions occur between providers and the DEC rather than local leads based on an individual’s eligibility for funding of specific services in order to reduce bureaucracies and administrative burden. Local leads would be responsible for coordination of services to ensure a cohesive system. Considerations must be made for local-level funding and multiple funding sources.

Bill Jaeger with the Colorado Children’s Campaign spoke about the hope of avoiding or shifting from a competitive environment between the many different types of providers to instead a vision of strong
community collaboration. The role of the state vs. the role of local leadership should be thoroughly considered to ensure the most efficient system.

Kristina shared that the draft universal preschool recommendations will be released to the public next Tuesday evening at the December Monthly Town Hall. The Transition Advisory Group will have an opportunity to meet and review the report on December 15. The Universal Preschool and Special Education Subgroups will also each meet one additional time to review the recommendations. Members of the Transition Working Group will host four public listening sessions to allow stakeholders the opportunity to share their reactions and input. A feedback form will be available on the ECLC website until the end of the day on December 15. The final report is due to the ECLC for approval on January 1, 2022. The ECLC will meeting on January 11 to vote on approval.

The group discussed the potential for a community readiness assessment and the importance of distinguishing the differences between management, governance, and leadership and how those apply to the roles and expectations of the local leads.

Next Steps, Final Thoughts and Adjourn
Tom thanked Watershed Advisors for pulling all the work together in a timely manner. Susan and Pamela thanked everyone for their participation. The meeting was adjourned at 4:30 pm.

Note: Any presentation requested by the ECLC does not constitute or imply an endorsement of the product, process, service, or organization by the ECLC.