

# THE EARLY CHILDHOOD COLORADO FRAMEWORK

2023 Framework Refresh



**ECLC**  
Early Childhood Leadership Commission

This *Framework* is a shared vision for Colorado's young children and their families. It guides planning and mobilizes action to ensure all children are valued, healthy, and thriving. The *Framework* is led by the Early Childhood Leadership Commission and embraced by families, providers, foundations, state agencies, nonprofits, and other early childhood partners across Colorado.

# ABOUT THE FRAMEWORK

## THE OPPORTUNITY

**Every child deserves a strong start.** The first few years of life can offer a great window of opportunity. We know that infants and young children grow and develop more quickly than during any other stage of life. Experiences during the early years can build a strong foundation for all future health, learning, and success. At the same time, there are also significant barriers that children may face that prevent them from reaching their full potential. Understanding this, Colorado has made an important commitment to its young children. The *Early Childhood Colorado Framework* creates a shared vision for Colorado where *all children are valued, healthy, and thriving*. Since 2008, the state’s early childhood community has embraced the *Framework* as a guiding tool to build a strong and equitable early childhood system designed to provide a comprehensive range of high-quality supports during this most critical time of life. This newly revised *Framework* provides an up-to-date version of the document that takes into account the most recent advances, as well as some of the ongoing challenges, in the state. This refresh seeks to provide renewed energy toward the bold and common goal to create a Colorado where every child is able to thrive.

## THE FRAMEWORK IS . . .

**A shared vision** for Colorado, designed to promote action and dialogue about the future of young children across the state. It offers a broad, yet ambitious theory of change that is grounded in values, a strong early childhood system, and improved outcomes to give our children the strongest start possible.

**A tool designed by and for the community** to read, consider, and use. It has been informed by the many voices of those connected to Colorado’s early childhood system—including families, early childhood professionals, and local and state leaders. It is an open invitation for all who are seeking to understand what is established and what is possible to drive change on behalf of babies and our youngest children.

**An iterative and living document** that is meant to capture the best thinking of the time and be responsive to the current context. It builds upon the fundamentals of prior versions (adopted 2008 and [updated 2015](#)). It will never be final but will be nimble, iterative, and constantly evolving to improve.

## THE FRAMEWORK IS NOT . . .

**A document to overrule all others** or to be the sole plan for early childhood in the state. There are a diverse range of organizations, agencies, and institutions that are pursuing their own plans and strategies. The *Framework* is designed to be supportive and to offer an overarching “North Star” to help align and promote collaboration among these ongoing efforts.

**An instruction manual** to share all the information needed to guide next steps. While the *Framework* lays out a broad vision, there will be more work to do in partnership to determine if, what, and how to change to meet our shared goals.

**A perfect plan . . .** The *Framework* was created with the hope that it would provide a set of clear ideas to build from and organize around. While it will not always be perfect, the hope is that it will continue to inspire and lead to lasting change on the journey to making Colorado a great place for young children to grow, learn, and thrive.

## THE FRAMEWORK IN ACTION

### HOW TO READ IT

The *Framework* is grounded in a bold theory of change (p. 4). This visual shares a high-level and interactive picture of what is needed to move toward the shared vision for young children in Colorado. For each component of the *Framework*, click on the ★ or visit the related pages to read and learn more.

### MORE TOOLS TO HELP USE IT

The following tools have also been created to support the use of the *Framework*:

#### Learn More

Looking for additional resources to help use the *Framework*? To see the *Framework* and all its resources in one place, please visit the *Framework* website. <https://earlychildhoodframework.org/>

#### Help Spread the Word

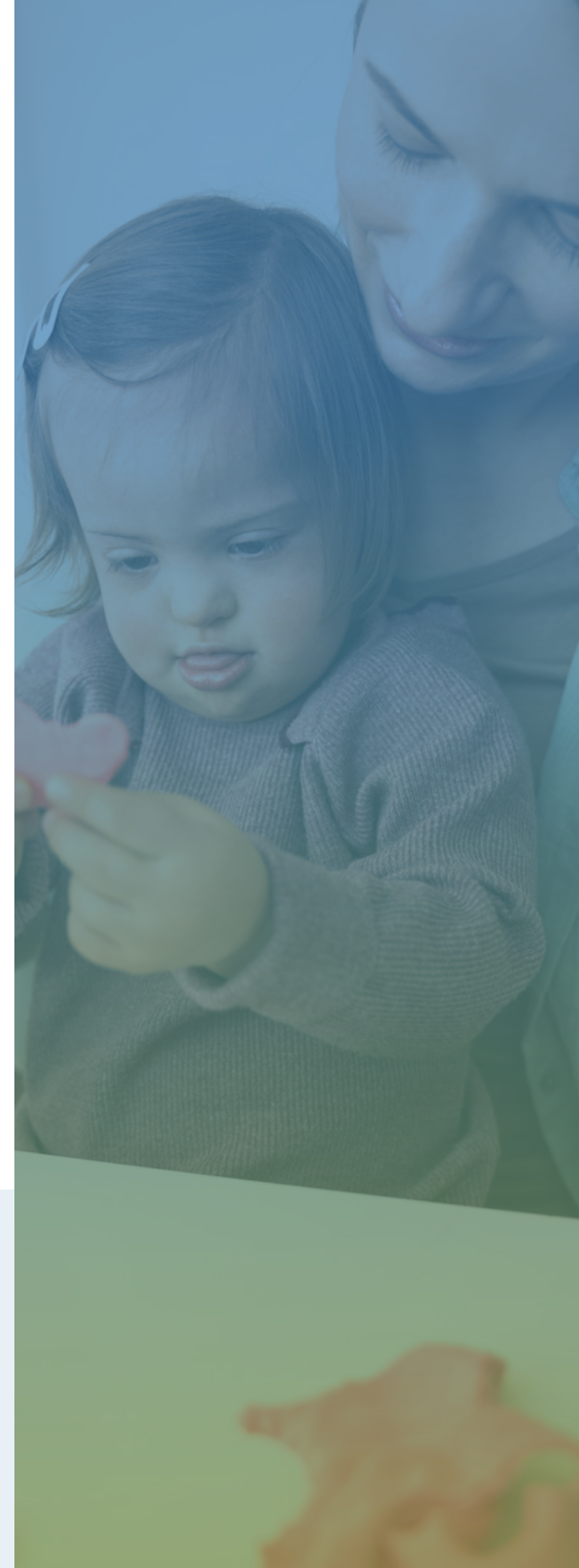
Looking for ways to share the *Framework*? Here are tools to pass along the information to those you know.

## OUR ROLE IN BUILDING COLORADO'S FUTURE

**Every Coloradan has a role to play in making our state the best place for children to grow and learn.** No single person, organization, or agency holds the resources or capacity to achieve the state's shared vision alone. Instead, success will require everyone to roll up their sleeves and take action in some way. It will require shared accountability and commitment on behalf of all young children and their families. Considering the significance of the early years, there is no time to waste. The *Framework* is an important step and provides a unifying model to envision what a more equitable and hopeful future would look like if all of Colorado's children are valued, healthy, and thriving. It's our collective actions that will contribute to building a stronger Colorado where young children are able to develop to their fullest potential and lead the way to a brighter tomorrow.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The *2023 Early Childhood Colorado Framework* has been developed in partnership with the Early Childhood Leadership Commission and a wide range of families, advocates, and experts from across the field. The revised *Framework* has been built on the wisdom, perspectives, and experiences they so generously shared. The hope is that this renewed vision leads to an early childhood system that truly honors, values, and supports every child, family, and community in Colorado. [Learn more about the many contributors.](#)



# THE EARLY CHILDHOOD COLORADO FRAMEWORK

## If WE BELIEVE



### ★ PRINCIPLES

#### Equity Driven

#### ALL CHILDREN SERVED

#### CHILD, FAMILY, AND COMMUNITY CENTERED

#### HOLISTIC SERVICES APPROACH

#### THRIVING, EFFECTIVE WORKFORCE

#### MIXED DELIVERY SYSTEM

#### HIGH QUALITY STANDARDS

#### INNOVATION

#### STREAMLINED EFFICIENCY

#### DATA-DRIVEN, OUTCOMES-FOCUSED DECISIONS

#### ACCOUNTABILITY

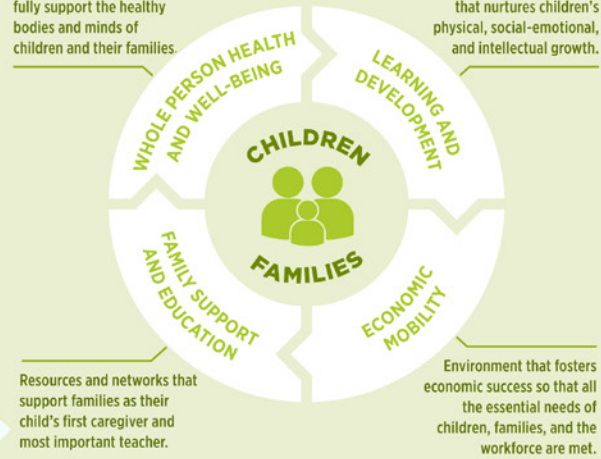
## And BUILD A STRONG SYSTEM



### ★ EARLY CHILDHOOD SYSTEM

Comprehensive services to fully support the healthy bodies and minds of children and their families.

Early care and education that nurtures children's physical, social-emotional, and intellectual growth.



Resources and networks that support families as their child's first caregiver and most important teacher.

Environment that fosters economic success so that all the essential needs of children, families, and the workforce are met.

#### WORKFORCE

Early childhood professionals who are diverse, equitably compensated, and prepared to serve in the many settings involved in child health, development, and education.

#### LEADERSHIP

A strong underlying network of leaders to make timely and responsive decisions about programs and policies.

#### FUNDING

Abundant resources to fully meet the needs of children, families, and communities.

#### DATA & RESEARCH

Information to better understand the early childhood system and plan future actions that lead to improved, sustainable, and more equitable outcomes.

#### Collaboration

All elements working together—in local communities to the state level—toward a shared vision for all of Colorado's young children.

## It WILL LEAD TO



### ★ OUTCOMES



#### Access

All children and families have access to a range of early childhood services that are culturally relevant, meet their needs and preferences, and are equitably allocated and available.



#### Quality

Every young child and family experiences a high-quality environment that supports all areas of well-being, affirms all aspects of their identity, and leads to equitable opportunities.



#### Alignment

All the components of the early childhood system are aligned and coordinated so families are able to easily identify, navigate, and receive services.

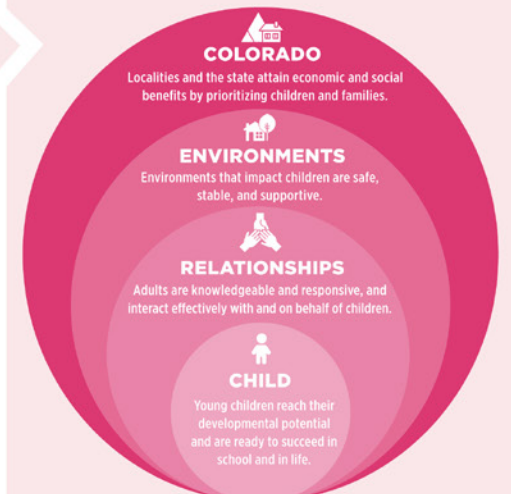
## The FUTURE OF COLORADO



### ★ VISION

**ALL CHILDREN ARE VALUED, HEALTHY, AND THRIVING**

### ★ IMPACT



# THE VISION

ALL  
CHILDREN  
ARE VALUED,  
HEALTHY, AND  
THRIVING

*A shared and bold vision for young children that paves the way for a stronger Colorado.*

## WHY DOES THIS VISION MATTER?

**Children are born with great potential.** The science is clear: children are born learning. Young brains are developing faster than during any other period in life, forming one million new neural connections every second. Research tells us that the early years of a child's life—from birth through age 8—set the foundation for all future health, learning, and well-being.

**Positive early childhood experiences make a difference.** Babies and young children develop best in relationships with warm, nurturing caregivers and when they have access to a range of high-quality early childhood supports. A nourishing early childhood environment is linked to lifelong benefits, such as academic success, higher earnings, improved health, lower participation in social service programs, and lower chances of involvement with the criminal justice system. The benefits of responsive early childhood services even extend beyond children, enabling families to participate in the workforce and creating jobs in local communities. Also, research conducted by Nobel Laureate James Heckman shows that effective programs for children experiencing poverty and related social injustices can provide about \$6 for each \$1 invested—delivering a return on investment of 13% over time. The result: stronger children lead to stronger families and communities, and a stronger society as a whole.

**Unfortunately, not all children have access to the resources needed to thrive.** While the early years are an incredible window of opportunity, they can also be a time of intense vulnerability for children. Inequities that have been built into our current systems limit access to positive early childhood experiences, particularly for Black, Indigenous, Latine, and other communities of color. Barriers such as hunger, housing issues, and lack of education options continue to prevent children from reaching their full potential for learning and success. The COVID-19 pandemic has introduced even more hardship and shed new light on long-standing issues that have widened gaps for young children and their families. For these reasons, high-quality early childhood experiences have remained out of reach for many children.

## FIVE FAST FACTS

- The foundation for all future health, learning, and well-being is set during the early years—birth through age 8.
- During the first few years, a child's brain is developing faster than during any other period in life—forming one million new neural connections every second.
- Studies show high-quality early childhood programs can lead to lifelong benefits, such as academic success, higher earnings, improved health, and lower participation in social service programs and the criminal justice system.
- Investments in effective programs during the early years offer a return of 13% over time—about \$6 for each \$1 invested.
- Colorado has made a clear commitment to its youngest children to make sure they are valued, born healthy, and set up to thrive.

**Colorado has made great strides in supporting its youngest children.**

Acknowledging the importance of these first crucial years of a child's life, Colorado has made a clear commitment. The state provides numerous early childhood programs and services, each designed to meet the needs of young children and their families. The state has come a long way, but there is more work to do. There is still distance between what children deserve and what the state's early childhood system is offering. It will take effort from all involved to reach the vision for a system that truly honors, values, and supports every child. We know that when all of our young children are able to develop to their fullest potential, all of Colorado will as well.



“If we're trying to make this a community . . . everyone owns this. It should be more about what it is we're trying to create—not necessarily just services. It's the environment that we're creating for children to thrive.”

— Early Childhood Program Administrator



# PRINCIPLES

*Our guiding principles are beliefs that must hold true to give our youngest children the best chance for success.*

## CORE PRINCIPLE

Equity is embedded in and centered throughout all of our work. In order for us to achieve our vision, we have an ongoing commitment to addressing racism and other social injustices—first and foremost—as the key to creating an early childhood system where all young children can thrive.

### EQUITY DRIVEN

Equity means that every child has a fair and just opportunity to reach their full potential. This means efforts connected to the early childhood system actively work to eliminate bias and discrimination in all interactions, practices, and policies. Equity is distinct from diversity (the presence of individuals with various identities) and equality (the same answer, size, approach in every instance). It allows flexibility based on the context and what is most appropriate for a given group, recognizing different challenges, needs, and histories. This involves prioritizing resources and affirming the rights of children, families, the early childhood workforce, and communities who have been most impacted by systemic inequities so that outcomes are no longer predicted by race, language, zip code, ability, or any other social factors.

## OTHER FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES

Alongside equity, these additional principles are vital to shaping what we do and how we do it in order to ensure that babies, young children, and their families have what they need for overall well-being and success.

### ALL CHILDREN SERVED

Colorado's early childhood system is designed to support all young children from birth through age 8. Doing so means offering a wide range of programs and services that are universally available to all, while also providing additional targeted resources for those impacted by systemic inequities. Every effort is made to reach and fully support children during the early years so they have the strongest start in life.

### CHILD, FAMILY, AND COMMUNITY CENTERED

The circumstances of children across Colorado can vary greatly, as do their families and the communities they live in. A responsive early childhood system acknowledges and is driven by their diverse hopes, strengths, and realities. This includes making sure their voices lead the way so that early childhood resources and supports are able to truly meet their needs.

### HOLISTIC SERVICES APPROACH

A holistic approach means a child is seen as a whole person. Starting with prenatal care, services focus on supporting all aspects of growth and learning for children throughout the early years. Services are provided alongside their families as the well-being of children is linked and inseparable from those who care for them everyday. This involves fostering cognitive, mental, social, emotional, and physical health for all to promote overall wellness and lifelong success.

## **THRIVING, EFFECTIVE WORKFORCE**

A strong early childhood system requires a strong workforce. This involves all the professionals working on behalf of young children and families being valued and recognized for the important work they do each day. This includes being equitably compensated and having comprehensive benefits and support for their well-being, as well as robust opportunities for preparation, training, and career advancement. It takes a clear and dedicated effort through programming, policies, and funding to ensure the workforce has what they have earned and deserve.

## **MIXED DELIVERY SYSTEM**

The growth and development of Colorado's children take place in a diverse range of settings. For this reason, the early childhood system works to support and build the capacity of communities, programs, and the workforce in all settings. All our efforts meet children and families in the places and spaces where they are with quality resources that will help them collectively thrive.

## **HIGH QUALITY STANDARDS**

High quality standards ensure that young children are provided with safe, nurturing, and engaging environments where they can grow, learn, and explore. This involves setting standards across all areas that lead to effective programming and providing pathways and supports to achieve them. It also includes making sure that all measures of quality are responsive and reflect the values, beliefs, and practices of children, families, and communities whom programs interact with and serve.

## **INNOVATION**

Innovation pushes us beyond what is currently in place to inspire creative thinking, try out bold ideas, and drive improvement. This includes lifting up promising practices that have been effective in Colorado, as well as developing and testing new approaches that may lead to important benefits for children and their families.

## **STREAMLINED EFFICIENCY**

Greater efficiency boosts the impact of our efforts and is essential for lasting change. This involves meaningful collaboration and coordination to streamline operations across all parts of the early childhood system. More efficiency reduces barriers and leverages resources so that young children and families can easily access and make full use of the available early childhood supports.

## **DATA-DRIVEN, OUTCOMES-FOCUSED DECISIONS**

Data deepens our understanding of the strengths and needs for early childhood in the state. This involves leveraging quality information to build on what's working, address challenges, and provide targeted, responsive supports. It means data are used in effective ways to inform decision-making at all levels that will lead to improved outcomes for young children, families, and the communities they live in.

## **ACCOUNTABILITY**

Understanding impact is key to making real progress. This involves clearly defining outcomes for the early childhood system to measure, track, and share growth. This also includes holding the system accountable for meeting its set goals and shifting when needed based on lessons learned. It means making sure all efforts ultimately lead to the desired impact and positive change for all young children and families across the state.



# EARLY CHILDHOOD SYSTEM

A strong early childhood system is one that offers a wide range of programs, supported by a solid foundation, and with all pieces working toward the same goal.

## DOMAINS

Colorado is committed to creating an environment where all children are surrounded by supported families, programs, and an early childhood workforce that ensure they are safe, healthy, and ready for lifelong learning.

## WHAT IS AN EARLY CHILDHOOD SYSTEM?

A strong early childhood system includes the following:

- **DOMAINS:** all child- and family-serving programming—such as early learning, health, housing, and economic development—supported by a thriving, effective workforce
- **INFRASTRUCTURE:** key components that make up the underlying foundation supporting the system, including governance, funding, and data
- **COLLABORATION:** clear connections between each of these elements

### WHOLE PERSON HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

**Comprehensive services to fully support the healthy bodies and minds of children and their families.**

*This includes:* Health care • Oral health • Infant and early childhood mental health • Reproductive health • Maternal health and prenatal care • WIC • Nutrition supports • Insurance and Medicaid access • Early identification and intervention . . . and more.

### FAMILY SUPPORT AND EDUCATION

**Resources and networks that support families as their child’s first caregiver and most important teacher.**

*This includes:* Home visiting • Family resource centers • Child abuse and neglect prevention • Faith communities • Peer networks • Respite care • Training and advocacy support . . . and more.



### LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

**Early care and education that nurture children’s physical, social-emotional, and intellectual growth.**

*This includes:* Head Start and Early Head Start • Parent partnerships • Preschool / Pre-K • Center and home-based childcare • Special education • Family, friend, and neighbor care • Libraries, museums, and other cultural institutions . . . and more.

### ECONOMIC MOBILITY

**Environment that fosters economic success so that the essential needs of children, families, and the workforce are met.**

*This includes:* Job training and placement • Credit counseling • Food assistance • Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) • Housing support • Financial supports • Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) and other tuition assistance • Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) • Tax credits • Transportation • Internet access . . . and more.



“When I think about early childhood, I think it is a broad spectrum across multiple settings and multiple professionals to reach young children in our state. And that we really have to be thoughtful and intentional about making sure we’re really leveraging all of those opportunities to support young children.”

— Early Childhood Systems Leader

## WORKFORCE

**Early childhood professionals who are diverse, equitably compensated, and prepared to serve in the many settings involved in child health, development, and education.**

*This includes:* Accessible preparation programs • Equitable compensation and benefits • Mental health and well-being support • Strategies to diversify the workforce • Traditional and nontraditional career pathways • Ongoing coaching and professional development • Scholarships for continuing education • Support for recruitment and retention • Quality working environments • Business counseling and resources • Recognition and professionalism of early childhood field . . . and more.



“When I think about the vulnerability of young children under six years old . . . how impressive they are . . . how important a caring relationship with an adult provider is . . . and how much time providers spend with young children, I can’t get over the fact that the compensation is not equitable. It’s not even a living wage. I would love to see greater compensation.”

— Early Childhood Provider

## INFRASTRUCTURE

Colorado’s early childhood system must be supported by a solid foundation so it can function efficiently, effectively, and equitably.

### LEADERSHIP

**A strong underlying network of leaders to make timely and responsive decisions about programs and policies.**

*This includes:* Focus on governance • Decision-making structure centered on equity • Diverse representation • Shared accountability • Data-driven and community-informed decisions • Building leadership capacity . . . and more.

### FUNDING

**Abundant resources to fully meet the needs of children, families, and communities.**

*This includes:* Maximize existing funds • More local, state, and federal investment • Fund true cost of quality • Focus on resource equity • Prioritize historically under-resourced communities • Public-private funding approaches • Business and philanthropy connections • Sustainability and long-term solutions . . . and more.

### DATA AND RESEARCH

**Information to better understand the early childhood system and plan future actions that lead to improved, sustainable, and more equitable outcomes.**

*This includes:* High-quality data • Centralized and robust data systems • Data sharing • Clear metrics and progress monitoring • Evaluation of impact and implementation • Disaggregated data (by race and other key identities) • Focus on equitable outcomes • Design and analysis alongside communities • Transparency • Public-facing reporting . . . and more.



“Increase collaboration and integration of services and supports. A true commitment to equity involves changing the way business is currently done.”

— Early Childhood Advocate

## COLLABORATION

**All elements working together—in local communities to the state level—toward a shared vision for all of Colorado’s young children.**

*This includes:* Cross-sector collaboration • Public-private partnerships • Public engagement . . . and more

# OUTCOMES + IMPACT

The outcomes and impact identify what it might take to truly reach our shared vision for all young children in Colorado.

## The OUTCOMES of a strong early childhood system . . .

### ACCESS

All children and families have access to a range of early childhood services that are culturally relevant, meet their needs and preferences, and are equitably allocated and available.

#### What it could look like:

- The public has access to information that shares the importance of the early years and what supports are available.
- Awareness and political will are built to advance support for early childhood among decision-makers and in policy solutions.
- Reliable outreach and communication from trusted sources connect families to early childhood services.
- All outreach and public-facing resources meet the language and accessibility needs of communities.
- Barriers to eligibility and applying for early childhood supports are removed.
- Families are able to find easily accessible and affordable early childhood services.
- A range of care options is available to meet the unique needs and preferences of families—no matter the age of the child, ability, hours of care needed, or location in the state.
- Communities that have historically had the least access and/or have been marginalized or underrepresented are prioritized.

### QUALITY

Every young child and family experiences a high-quality environment that supports all areas of well-being, affirms all aspects of their identity, and leads to equitable opportunities.

#### What it could look like:

- Settings and practices foster the “whole child” through physical activity, health and nutrition, social and emotional development, and developmentally appropriate learning.
- Children with health, behavioral, or developmental needs receive timely, comprehensive, and individualized services and supports.
- Families experience integrated and preventative physical, behavioral, and oral health services.
- All child- and family-serving settings promote mental health and well-being through early identification, consultation, and treatment.
- Formal and informal care and education environments are supported to reach the highest levels of quality as defined by standards and communities.
- All providers and settings are responsive to the culture, languages, beliefs, and values of children and their families—including children from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, dual/multi-language learners, immigrant and refugee families, and tribal communities.
- Children and families experience anti-bias, trauma-informed, and healing-centered practices.
- Family engagement and leadership opportunities exist within programs, schools, and communities.
- Children and families live in safe and stable environments that are free of toxins, and they have access to affordable, nutritious foods and reliable housing.
- Cultural institutions and third spaces (such as libraries, museums, and playgrounds) provide opportunities for enrichment, recreation, and social connection.
- A focus on continuous quality improvement leads to lasting change and positive outcomes for young children and their families.

“I want it to be easy and joyful to have a baby here. Instead, it’s medical bills, worrying about my health, worrying about breastfeeding, and most importantly trying to find good child care for a baby that I can afford.”

— Family Member of Young Child

“It’s about genuine, authentic, warm implementation of services. It’s not just access—it’s the actual delivery.”

— Family Member of Young Child

## ✦ ALIGNMENT

All the components of the early childhood system are aligned and coordinated so families are able to easily identify, navigate, and receive services.

### What it could look like:

- Families access information quickly, make timely connections, and receive support regardless of their initial entry point into the early childhood system.
- All settings provide effective transitions and continuity of services across and within programs, schools, and systems.
- All child- and family-serving providers are aligned and connected within communities.
- Leaders implement strategies to integrate and coordinate services between local and state levels.
- Early childhood statewide agencies and organizations effectively align across their efforts to address systems and administrative barriers.



“I wish to see a commitment from all of the systems that touch young children and families to say here’s what we do, here’s how we can contribute, and here’s how we can communicate with each other so that it becomes that the wheels are turning in the background and not noticeable to families. And then I would really like to see that all families and children have access to what they need when they need it without the parents having to do the legwork and the coordination to figure it out.”

— Early Childhood Systems Leader

**If all outcomes are achieved, it would have a great IMPACT and lead to important benefits for families, communities, and the state as a whole . . .**



### CHILD

Young children reach their developmental potential and are ready to succeed in school and in life.



### RELATIONSHIPS

Adults are knowledgeable and responsive, and they interact effectively with and on behalf of children.



### ENVIRONMENTS

Environments that impact children are safe, stable, and supportive.



### COLORADO

Localities and the state attain economic and social benefits by prioritizing children and families.

# APPRECIATION FOR THE EARLY CHILDHOOD COMMUNITY PARTICIPATING IN THE FRAMEWORK REFRESH

The *Early Childhood Colorado Framework* refresh was a collaborative effort guided by hundreds of leaders from across the state. The Early Childhood Leadership Commission, the Colorado Department of Early Childhood, and their partners at School Readiness Consulting acknowledge the considerable time, talent, and expertise of the early childhood community, who generously shared their perspectives in a variety of ways to create this unifying vision.

A tremendous appreciation to the *Colorado Early Childhood Framework Refresh Steering Committee*, whose insights, guidance, and thought partnership was integral to shaping the vision and realization of this effort.

- **Niki Adams**, Institute for Racial Equity & Excellence
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Finally, this effort would have been impossible without the many families, providers, community leaders, and other partners across the early childhood community who participated in listening sessions and surveys to reimagine the newly revised *Framework*. **We thank you.** We appreciated your willingness to share deep truths and wisdom about what the state’s early childhood system is and what it can be. Your voices were the driver to shape this important vision and will be a catalyst for change to ensure all Colorado’s young children are able to reach their fullest potential.

This work was supported by School Readiness Consulting. Authors and contributors are listed in alphabetical order.

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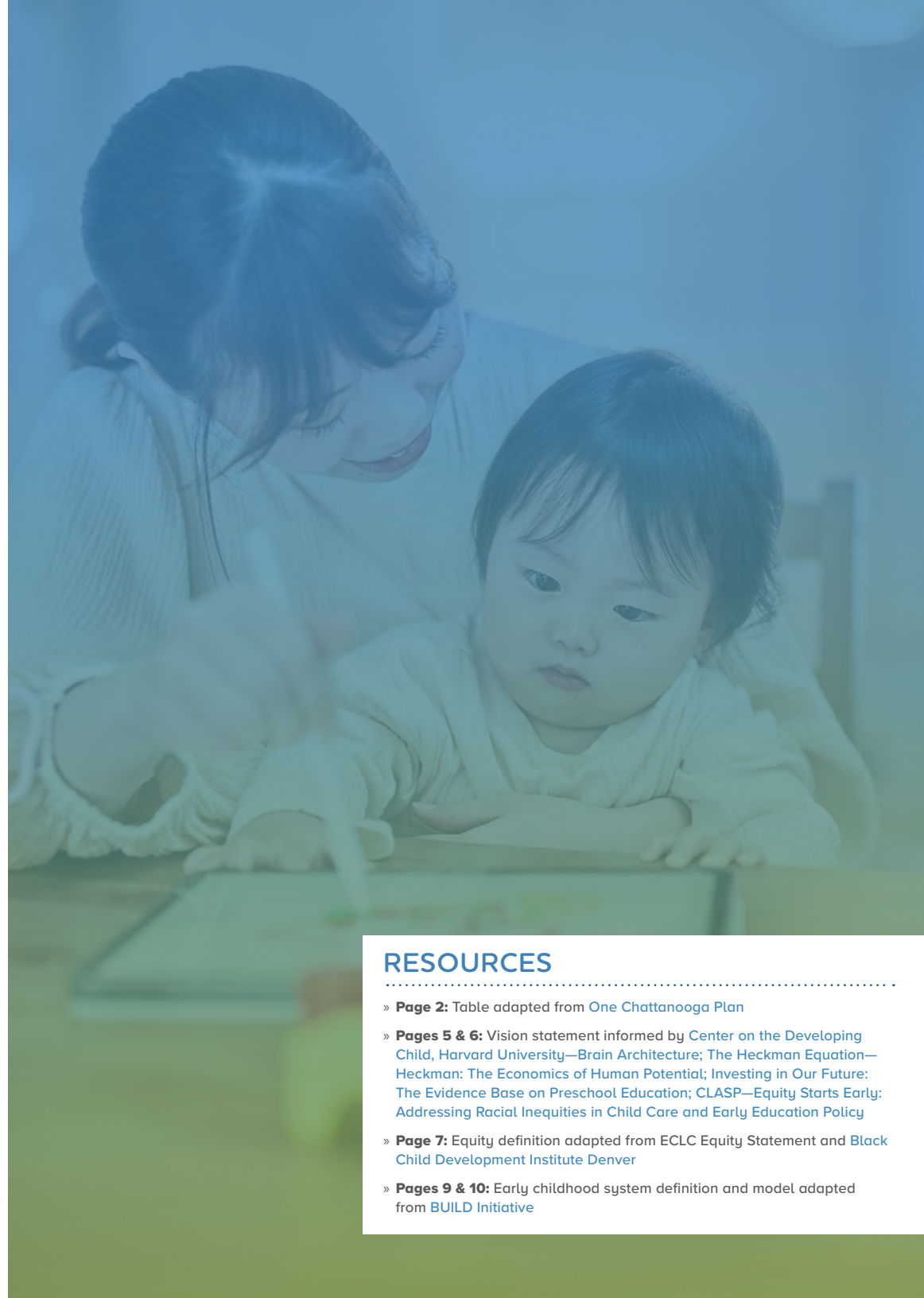
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## RESOURCES

- » **Page 2:** Table adapted from [One Chattanooga Plan](#)
- » **Pages 5 & 6:** Vision statement informed by [Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University—Brain Architecture](#); [The Heckman Equation—Heckman: The Economics of Human Potential](#); [Investing in Our Future: The Evidence Base on Preschool Education](#); [CLASP—Equity Starts Early: Addressing Racial Inequities in Child Care and Early Education Policy](#)
- » **Page 7:** Equity definition adapted from [ECLC Equity Statement](#) and [Black Child Development Institute Denver](#)
- » **Pages 9 & 10:** Early childhood system definition and model adapted from [BUILD Initiative](#)