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EDUCATION

The need for preschool has never been greater — and never harder — for struggling Colorado families to get

Early childhood education is a boon to kids and their parents, but who can access it depends heavily on who can pay for it, and in Colorado demand outstrips the supply of preschool facilities and workers.

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Sue Cornelius, right, the teacher for the You be You Early Learning pre-school program, teaches letters to some of the children at the day care, which is held inside of a renovated bus. (Philip B. Poston, Sentinel Colorado)



By Carina Julig, *The Sentinel*

On a cold morning in mid-November, a group of children were learning the days of the week inside a renovated bus parked in the Willow Park neighborhood of Aurora.

The brightly-decorated bus is home to You Be You Early Learning's preschool program, which began serving students in the subsidized-housing neighborhood over the summer. The program provides free preschool to two sets of children per day, and distributes food to their families once a week.

It's the type of program that is badly needed by the community, many of whom are recent immigrants, but that they rarely have access to.

Early childhood education has been proven to be a boon to both kids and their parents, but who can access it depends heavily on who can pay for it, and in Colorado demand outstrips the supply of child care facilities and workers. Since the grand days of a national push for preschool through the Head Start Program, intentions have been good. Delivery hasn't matched those intentions.

The pandemic has only exacerbated the problem.

After achieving his goal of making all-day free kindergarten a reality for Colorado's kids, Gov. Jared Polis set his sights on increasing access to preschool as well, a goal that was overshadowed for many months by the challenges of the pandemic. But a new department specifically focused

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early childhood is slated to open next year, with a universal preschool program coming in 2023.



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The Colorado Department of Early Childhood was approved by voters in 2020 with the passage of Proposition EE, a tax on nicotine and vaping products that would dedicate funding toward establishing a universal preschool program. Aurora state Sen. Rhonda Fields was one of the legislators who sponsored the bill putting Prop. EE on the ballot.

Polis held an event on Nov. 3, the first anniversary of Prop EE's passage, at the Meadowood Child Development Center in Aurora Public Schools to celebrate the progress made towards the department of education's creation.

“Access to quality education and child care is so important for families and to ensure all children have great educational opportunities,” Polis’ office said in a statement to the Sentinel. “With the creation of the Department of Early Childhood, Colorado is full steam ahead on implementing free preschool and other long-awaited innovations to make child care and education affordable for all families.

“The Department of Early Childhood is a historic step forward to provide universal, free early childhood education, make the system easier to navigate for parents and providers, and to give every child, and their



family, the opportunity to thrive. This new plan is a key step to make this a reality as we prepare for voter-approved funding for all 4-year-olds in fall of 2023.”

The state’s Early Childhood Leadership Commission formed a group that put together a transition plan for the new department, which was published and formally approved by the commission in November. It will next go to the legislature for final approval before the department formally opens on July 1.



Teacher Sue Cornelius teaches letters to the children at the You Be You Early Learning program which takes place on a fully renovated bus. The program is designed to specifically serve public housing communities. (Philip B. Poston, Sentinel Colorado)

A similar plan specifically for free preschool is also being compiled and will be published in January. The Department of Early Childhood will be responsible for overseeing the preschool program, which aims to voluntarily provide 10 hours of free, high-quality preschool every week to all 4-year-olds in the state. Preschool would be opt-in for families and would be delivered through a range of providers, including school districts, community-based centers and other facilities.



The commission, formed in 2010 for the purpose of advising the governor's office, recommended the creation of a new department after the passage of Prop EE. Pamela Harris, president and CEO of Mile High Early Learning and one of the ECLC's three co-chairs, said that the goal of the new department is to streamline services and make them as accessible as possible for Colorado's families.

"It seemed like an amazing opportunity to think about early childhood on a broader scale," she said.

There is a significant unmet need for preschool in the state, Harris said, with the majority of 3 and 4 year olds not in preschool. Many areas of the state, including much of East Colfax Avenue in Aurora and the Elyria-Swansea neighborhood in Denver are "child care deserts."

The pandemic widened the problem, with about 10% of the state's child care facilities closing since it began, she said. That means that many parents, especially mothers, are having to cut back on work hours because they don't have childcare for their kids, further straining the labor shortages prevalent in many industries today, experts say.

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The Colorado Children's Campaign estimates that about 64% of Colorado families had to alter their child care plans due to the pandemic, and one-third said that they did not have the amount of child care that they needed, a percentage that increased among low-income households.

Part of the problem is that preschool is both expensive for families but often low-paying for its employees, due to its time and labor-intensive



nature.

The U.S. Treasury Department noted in a September report that child care workers earn on average \$24,230. More than 15% of the industry's workers live below the poverty line in 41 states and half need public assistance. The sector has high levels of turnover, with 26% to 40% leaving their job each year. Nor is there much room to give among child care centers that tend to operate on profits of 1% or less.

“It’s kind of a paradox,” Harris said. “We don’t pay teachers enough but what we do pay ends up being very costly for families to access. And that’s part of why I believe the government needs to be supporting early childhood education and that’s what Gov. Polis has done.”

Cultural beliefs about families and motherhood can also act as a barrier. “Prop EE passed by a 2-to-1 ratio, but there’s still a belief in our country that moms should be home with their children,” she said.



Sue Cornelius, left, squirts hand sanitizer into children’s hands after they had a brief moment of playtime between learning days of the week and letters. Cornelius is the teacher at the You Be You Early Learning program which is held on a renovated bus in the Willow Park neighborhood in Aurora (Philip B. Poston, Sentinel Colorado)



The pandemic has both laid bare the disproportionate burdens many women shoulder in caring for children or aging parents and highlighted the vital roles they have long played in America's labor force. The U.S. bled tens of millions of jobs when COVID-19 erupted and temporarily shut down several sectors of the economy. But as business has rebounded and employers have posted record-high job openings, many women have delayed a return to the workplace, willingly or otherwise.

For parents of young children, the male-female disparities are stark. Among mothers of children 13 or younger, the proportion who were employed in September was nearly 4% below pre-pandemic levels, according to Nick Bunker, director of economic research at the Indeed job listings website. For fathers with young children, the decline was just 1%.

“A lot of women have left the labor force — the question is, how permanent will it be?” said Janet Currie, a professor of economics and public affairs at Princeton University and co-director of the Program on Families and Children at the National Bureau of Economic Research. “And if they're going to come back, when will we see them come back? I don't know the answers to any of that.”

A major reason, Currie noted, is the worsening difficulty of finding reliable and affordable child care.





Sue Cornelius, the teacher for the You be You Early Learning preschool program, goes over colors with some of the children at the day care, which is held inside of a renovated bus. (Philip B. Poston, Sentinel Colorado)

That crisis, Currie suggested, is “probably making some people’s minds up for them, because if you can’t get child care and you have young children, somebody has to look after them.”

And if the cost of child care and preschool is about the same or less than a paycheck, the decision is made for many struggling families.

Along with Colorado’s efforts to ameliorate the crisis, help is on the horizon at the federal level with the passage of President Biden’s Build Back Better Bill, which will expand access to free preschool for over 6 million children, extend the current expanded child tax credit for another year for 35 million households and create a program limiting child care costs to no more than 7% of a family’s income for qualifying households.

The bill will phase in the new child care entitlement program over three years, starting immediately for prekindergarten for families who earn state’s median income. Enrolled families would receive subsidies to use at



participating facilities, which could range from child care centers to home day cares.

The program would eventually expand to families that earn 250% of that median income by 2025, giving the child care industry time to build up after the pandemic forced many layoffs and closures.

States would decide whether they want to participate in the program. Some advocates for the child care policy have concerns that Republican states will opt out of it for political reasons, meaning fewer Americans will have access to it.

The child care provision is closely tied to the universal preschool option, and states would be encouraged to enroll in both.

The bill will expand preschool access to 86,000 3- and 4-year-olds a year in Colorado, and provide access to affordable child care for 330,000 young children in the state, according to Aurora Congressman Jason Crow's office.

“This package will not only give a boost to our economy and working families, it pays for these benefits by closing loopholes and making sure big corporations pay their fair share in taxes,” Crow said in a statement.

More attention to the importance of early childhood education is burgeoning at the local level as well. You Be You Early Learning, the mobile preschool program, is supported in part by the Aurora Housing Authority, the entity's first partnership with an early childhood program.

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Melinda Townsend, deputy executive director of housing and family services at the Aurora Housing Authority, said that the department first heard about You Be You from incoming city council member Ruben Medina during a staff training.

The authority recently shifted to a resident services model, which is focused on finding better ways to serve residents in ways they have traditionally been underserved. Education and health are the authority's two main targets.

Medina made the introduction to the You Be You, which quickly seemed like a perfect fit, Townsend said.

The lack of affordable early childhood resources for low-income families paves the way for ongoing inequalities.

“Schools do what they can but there's just not enough funding and not enough availability,” Townsend said. “Kids that have that opportunity get springboarded into the educational system and those that don't don't have the same toolbox when they start.”

You Be You is a nonprofit teacher cooperative. Executive director Roya Brown said that it had been looking into creating an early childhood program for some time, but the demand really exploded during the pandemic.

“The need for this type of program has increased tremendously,” she said.





Some of the children in the You Be You Early Learning preschool program look out the window of the fully renovated bus, which houses the pre-school, to check the day's weather. (Philip B. Poston, Sentinel Colorado)

In-person education is crucial for this demographic because many of the skills taught to young children are more about how to interact with other people and control their own behavior than about academics, Brown said — not the kind of thing easily taught through a screen.

The nonprofit purchased a bus that had been used as a mobile library in Ohio and spent \$6,000 on upgrades, including installing a bathroom, so it could be turned into a mobile preschool. After partnering with AHA it chose Willow Park for its location because it's the authority's lowest-income neighborhood. Residents there make about 30% of the median average income.

Most of the parents work all day and many don't own cars, making traveling to and from a day care each day prohibitive. Bringing the program to them removes a barrier, Brown said. Eventually she said she would like to purchase a second bus and operate in more parts of the city.



Brown said she was excited about the creation of the Early Childhood Department, and believes that it will help improve the standard of care in the state, especially in terms of staff quality.



“Many people talk about ‘high quality’ early childhood education and I feel like the number one component of that is high quality staff,” she said. “People who are competent and caring.”

She strongly believes that students who get a good education in their earliest years will go on to have more success in school. That’s part of what AHA’s hopes for the program are too, Townsend said. Partnering with You Be You works towards its long-term goal of helping people be self-sufficient.

“We can say that it’s for the parents but in truth, unless we get to the youth, sometimes the trajectories are already too set as we become adults — not always, but oftentimes,” Townsend said. “But if we can give resources to kids right out of the gate at their youngest possible age, I think we can make a difference.”



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HOUSING

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Tamara Chuang 5:01 AM MST



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