

A little-known program could be a model for how to spend billions in federal money on childcare ^[1]

Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships have raised quality, increased staff salaries and supported local child care programs for years

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EXCERPTS

BRUSH, Colo. — Donna Araujo has been a fixture in this rural community for two decades. In between fixing pigtails, wiping runny noses and mediating disagreements between toddlers, she's been providing crucial child care for families in a town with such a scarcity of options it qualifies as a "child care desert."

For most of her 20 years running Nana's Kiddo Kastle out of her home in a modest neighborhood a mile off the I-76 highway, 90 miles northeast of Denver, her focus was on the basics. She spent her days teaching the ABC's, reading stories and making sure kids were safe.

Then, in March 2020, Araujo was at a meeting with other local child care owners when she heard about a program that could give her access to federal Early Head Start funds. The program promised to help her ramp up the quality of her center, at little to no cost. She would receive the federal money through a state grantee, the Colorado-based nonprofit Early Learning Ventures, which would provide additional funding for some of the lower-income kids enrolled in her program, increasing her insufficient salary. And the nonprofit would help with other quality improvement efforts, like providing funds to enable Araujo to buy a curriculum and supplies, expand her classroom and even further her education.

Araujo jumped at the opportunity. Within a year and a half, she had earned her child development credential. She started taking college classes on infant and toddler development and rolled out her first-ever curriculum for the children in her care. After 18 years of running her business out of a small, 10-foot by 12-foot room off the back of her house, she used federal funds to double the size of the classroom and add a bathroom. She was also able to pave her frequently muddy driveway, giving kids more room to play and ride bikes.

Her income nearly doubled.

"When I first signed on with them, it was like, 'Is this really too good to be true?'" Araujo said on an October afternoon as toddlers napped around her. "It's amazing."

President Joseph Biden's Build Back Better plan, which is headed to the Senate after a narrow victory in the House, would lower the amount of money families pay for childcare, raise the wages of workers, provide funding to build out the supply of child care and establish universal pre-K for all 3- and 4-year-olds, among other things. The Early Head Start partnership program has been solving many of the problems the plan is attempting to address for years.

Since 2014, the partnership program has poured federal funds into established child care programs that serve low-income children, including the most popular non-parental form of infant and toddler care: home-based care. Home providers can't always access other child care funding streams, but the Early Head Start partnership program has helped boost quality and provide stability for independent child care programs, while at the same time expanding access to high-quality child care slots for infants and toddlers even in child care deserts in places like Brush—rural, resource-deprived parts of the country.

The partnership demonstrates what is possible when child care receives adequate federal investment and multi-faceted support. Experts and educators say the Early Head Start partnership program could serve as a model, showing states how to design systems to better support child care programs and raise quality — assuming states get more funding under Biden's plan.

Child care in America has long been a fractured system, due in large part to a lack of federal investment. Programs are woefully underfunded and many child care workers live in poverty. Parents struggle to pay for care and many cannot find it, especially for the youngest children. There are only enough licensed spots for 23 percent of infants and toddlers in the country — according to data collected before the pandemic shuttered many centers.

For the past 56 years, one of the most consistent federal investments in early learning has been via the Head Start program, which was created in 1965 as part of President Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty.

Early Head Start was created under the Head Start umbrella in 1995 to expand the organization's assistance to infants, toddlers and pregnant women and expectant families. Each year, more than 1 million low-income children and their families receive free high-quality child care focused on school-readiness, health screenings, meals and comprehensive family-support services through Head Start and its affiliated programs.

While the quality of Head Start classrooms can vary, research on Head Start and Early Head Start generally shows the programs can improve cognitive and social-emotional development, kindergarten readiness and high school graduation rates. Children who attend Head Start programs are more likely to receive dental checkups, have fewer child welfare encounters during elementary school and are less likely to end up in foster care.

But in 2021, there were only enough Head Start slots for 36 percent of eligible 3- to 5-year-olds; only 11 percent of eligible infants and toddlers had access to an Early Head Start program.

Expanding access to Early Head Start was one of the original goals of the partnership program when it launched during the Obama Administration in 2014. The program has received ongoing, bipartisan support from Congress since its inception: In 2018, lawmakers increased funding for the program by \$150 million, and added another \$100 million in March 2021 to expand in 32 states and Puerto Rico. (Grant recipients must raise a 20 percent match of their award in non-federal funds.)

About 33,500 children currently receive child care funded by the partnership.

The federal funding layers on top of tuition or state subsidies for low-income children. On average, the amount Early Head Start partnership providers receive from the program is twice as much as the amount they get from the states for taking care of low-income children. Unlike some state subsidy programs, the partnership program pays providers based on enrollment numbers, not attendance, ensuring they receive steady funding even when a child is absent.

Program participants also receive substantial funding up front to pay for facility improvements, toys and supplies, as needed. And they have access to frequent coaching, wraparound services for children and families and opportunities for teacher education and training.

While some of these measures — like specific funding to boost quality and improve facilities — are included in the Build Back Better plan, others are not. States may be on their own to roll out offerings that providers say have been helpful, like coaching for infant and toddler teachers and wraparound services for enrolled families.

These supports can have the greatest impact for family child care providers, many of whom are isolated, said Cara Sklar, deputy director of early and elementary policy at the nonprofit New America.

"It's often a woman in her own home, operating almost completely on her own, aside from a few monitoring visits from her state that are about health and safety," Sklar said. The Early Head Start-Child Care partnerships "brought all of these supports to family child care."

In Colorado, most of the child care programs working with Early Learning Ventures have almost doubled their revenue since joining the partnership, said Sue Renner, executive director of the David & Laura Merage Foundation, which launched Early Learning Ventures in 2008 and became an Early Head Start-Child Care partnership grantee in 2015. The nonprofit has received two financial grants from the federal government for the partnership program, and funded 489 infants and toddlers Early Head Start spots across Colorado in 2020.

"You watch this and I'm thinking, this is a no brainer," Renner said. "Why aren't we doing way more of this?"

On a windy October morning inside her cinderblock house in Pueblo, Colorado, child care provider Erica Cisneros was playing with three toddlers in a large classroom stocked with toys while waiting for a dental hygienist to arrive to conduct oral screenings. Cisneros, who joined the partnership program two years ago, said the services available through Early Head Start have helped families who otherwise might not have access to medical care and have provided information to parents who didn't know their child should see a dentist at a young age.

Cisneros has run a child care program out of her home by herself for 12 years. It's a job that is also a family tradition: Her mother ran several child care centers when Cisneros was growing up, and her sister works for the state's child care rating system.

It hasn't been easy, though. Before joining the partnership, life was hectic. "It was 24/7. I was either cleaning on weekends or trying to catch up. There was no break," she said. "Before, you always felt like you're alone and like, you're really just treading water to keep going."

In her first 12 years, Cisneros didn't make enough money to pay herself for her work. After paying her bills and buying items for her program, there was often little to nothing left over. Now, with more financial support and a dedicated coach through Early Learning Ventures, Cisneros feels she has the guidance needed to help navigate state and Head Start requirements. The program also serves as a financial "buffer." Cisneros is finally able to afford more than just the bare necessities.

"I think it is one of the most promising things we have done in taking something to scale in this country."

Linda Smith, the director of the Bipartisan Policy Center's Early Childhood Development Initiative

The partnership pays for diapers and wipes for her Early Head Start children. It enabled her to add a diaper changing station and pave her backyard to make more space for riding bikes and scooters. Soon after she joined the partnership, she received enough funding to hire an assistant and finally give herself a salary.

The benefits of bringing Early Head Start to child care programs nationwide have been marked: A 2019 report found more than 80 percent of child care programs participating in the partnership offered children developmental assessments and other screenings, which can be critical for catching disabilities and developmental delays at an early age. About three quarters of the programs referred children to services like medical and dental care. More than half of partnership programs offered mental health or health services for families of enrolled children.

In Colorado, research shows, teachers improved in their ability to support early language development and learning in young children. A national study found nearly 80 percent of participating providers said they were offered the opportunity to obtain a child development associate credential and nearly 20 percent had a chance to earn a bachelor's degree. Some providers have seen an increase in pay and reported higher language and literacy scores among children in their centers.

"I think it is one of the most promising things we have done in taking something to scale in this country," said Linda Smith, the director of the Bipartisan Policy Center's Early Childhood Development Initiative. "If child care providers have the resources and support, then they can produce high-quality care," said Smith, who also helped develop the Early Head Start-Child Care Partnership program when it launched seven years ago. "For the most part, they just lack the money to do things that need to be done for infants and toddlers."

In Brush, Araujo now focuses her days around lessons from a research-based curriculum provided by Early Learning Ventures. She teaches units based on items children are familiar with, like balls and clothes. Her young charges toddle around the room playing in carefully curated centers stocked with toys and books.

In order to receive federal Early Head Start funds, Araujo and other directors of child care programs must meet the national Early Head Start program's rigorous standards, which often go beyond those required by the states.

Meeting the Head Start standards is "really hard," said Shantel Meek, founding director of the Children's Equity Project at Arizona State University. Meek, who worked on early development of the Early Head Start Child Care Partnership program, acknowledged that the standards are expensive to roll out. "But they are really good for kids," she said.

For instance, the standards require lower ratios and group sizes than are mandated in many states. In center-based classrooms with children under the age of 3, for example, there must be two teachers for a class of eight children, or three teachers in the room for a class of nine children. Class sizes are capped at nine.

"Is this really too good to be true?"

Donna Araujo, an Early Head Start partnership child care provider

This can be a sticking point for programs hoping to participate in the partnership. A 2019 report found about one-third of grantees terminated a partnership within a year. The most common reason was that a provider had trouble meeting the Head Start program standards, especially around staff-child ratio and health and safety requirements.

Just a few blocks away from Cisneros' center in Pueblo, Dana Richardson, owner of the Life Center Academy, said elements of the partnership weren't always easy. But with the additional funding, she was able to raise salaries for all teachers and now provides medical and mental health benefits to all staff.

This year, the center became one of only a few in the area to receive the state's highest rating. This was Richardson's main goal when she learned about the partnership program. "We were like, you know what, this sounds like quality," she said. "Because in our community, we had not seen it."

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