

## **Early Childhood Policy Matters**

### **Region 8**

*Guests: Lindsey Dorneman*

Narrator:

Welcome to Early Childhood Policy Matters, a podcast for early childhood professionals and strategic partners, hoping to use research to inform policy and better serve children, families, and their communities. Today we continue our Regional Story series, looking at the innovative work being done in states and communities across the country with support from the Preschool Development Grants Birth through Five Initiative. Host Mandy Reeve takes us to Colorado, where a new department and a new approach to preschool are reimagining early care and education across the state. That's right now on early childhood policy matters.

Mandy Reeve:

Hello and welcome to Early Childhood Policy Matters, I'm Mandy Reeve senior TA specialist and education researcher with SRI Education. Today, I'm happy to be speaking with Lindsey Dorneman, the Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five Director with the Colorado Department of Human Services Office of Early Childhood. Thanks so much for joining me, Lindsey.

Lindsey Dorneman:

Hi, Mandy. It's great to be here.

Mandy Reeve:

So, in April 2022, Governor Jared Polis signed in House Bill 1295, establishing the Colorado Department of Early Childhood and a new statewide voluntary universal preschool program. When Colorado first applied for the Preschool Development Birth through Five Grant, did you have any indication that this exciting new department or the Universal Preschool Program would be coming down the road?

Lindsey Dorneman:

We did not – so when we initially applied for the preschool development grant, we were still really thinking about our current early childhood landscape and governance structure. In 2012, Colorado formed the Office of Early Childhood, which consolidated programs into the Colorado Department of Human Services. The goal was really to align and better coordinate programs serving young children and their families, as well as professionals, and increase access to those programs. We have two divisions, one focused on early care and education, and one really focused around community and family supports. In 2018, the year we applied for the initial PDG B-5, the Colorado Department of Education formed their own preschool through third grade office, which included preschool special education and the state's preschool program. When we thought about the Preschool Development Grant, what we really wanted to focus on was that alignment in coordination. Through those earlier consolidations, we were able to move around the deck chairs, but we were never really able to get to this place of true collaboration. And so the grant gave us the opportunity to start thinking about what that would look like. You may remember in 2018, the Bipartisan Policy Center put out the report around state early childhood systems and graded each state on the collaboration, the coordination, and the structures that they had in place. And Colorado - over-achievers - did not score nearly as well as we thought we would largely because we did have separation between those two agencies, as well as the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment, which has maternal wellness, as well as our child and

adult food care program. So, the PDG was that opportunity to start thinking about within that structure and, in the absence of a more unified governance structure, how do we really start to squish these pieces together? How do we think about access across agencies for families and children? And how do we better deepen those partnerships that we have but really go beyond, again, that place and maybe coordination and getting into collaboration.

Mandy Reeve:

So, Lindsey, it's interesting that even though you were able to make those big changes and move programs and people into the right places, so you thought that that true alignment and coordination and collaboration wasn't really happening naturally. Wondering if you can tell us more about how your planning for the PDG B-5 grant took that into consideration.

Lindsey Dorneman:

For us, it was really the opportunity to take a higher level look at what was going on in our early childhood system and put people in a place that could start making some of those connections and had the time and opportunities to start forming those relationships for having, you know, conversations with other programs, making those connections. That may not happen naturally as you're in your daily grind. We know coordination and collaboration aren't free, and so we really thought about PDG as being that resource that would allow for some of that work to happen. And so with the grant, we were able to hire within that first year about five staff who really were focused on not only helping us with our needs assessment and strategic plan, that were so important as we moved forward and thought about the state's vision for early childhood, but to call it out and start asking questions about what was working, what wasn't, why it wasn't working, and then again forming those relationships, making those connections, saying these folks over here are doing this really cool thing. How do we then replicate that or bring this other group in as a partner to make sure that we're working together in the interests of children and families? And so having that lens was an incredible asset to us. So, one of the really exciting things about our strategic plan is that as we received the final recommendations for the new Department of Early Childhood, as well as universal preschool, we did an assessment or an alignment with our statewide strategic plan and found that every single recommendation in those reports aligned with at least one strategy within our strategic plan. And so, it was pretty exciting for us, especially in PDG, to know that all the work, all the stakeholders and all the investments we had made up to this point were in perfect alignment with where Colorado and our governor wanted to take early childhood and are now realizing with this new legislation.

Mandy Reeve:

Well, it's so exciting to hear that all of the strategies from your strategic plan are aligning with your recommendations for the new department. It's also great to hear you call your strategic plan the statewide strategic plan and not the specific PDG B-5 strategic plan, because it means that Colorado has really taken it and incorporated into its overall early childhood care and education system. Can you tell us a couple of specific strategies that you would like to highlight?

Lindsey Dorneman:

Definitely. So, one is a little more tangible, and that is work that we've done around coordinated application, eligibility, and enrollment. When we originally initiated the strategy in 2020, what we had planned to do and ended up doing was surveying and researching the work that was happening at the local level in Colorado. Colorado is a local control state and so we do know that a lot of the

administration, preschool programming, child care assistance programs and other programming is driven by local decision making and local coordination. So, following that exercise, we were able to develop some resources, including a local toolkit highlighting best practices, put that out to stakeholders and said, what's missing or where is there an opportunity for us to take this work into the next phase? And what those stakeholders requested was the identification of a state role in the CAE work. So, they really wanted us to think about where we, as the Department of Human Services, Office at Early Childhood and other state agencies, had a leadership role and fit into that space. So, in the summer of 2021, we launched a workgroup with the support of the National PDG B-5 Center.

Lindsey Dorneman:

So a lot of credit to SRI and their partners in supporting us in this. But we're able to bring together stakeholders representing parents, providers, program administrators at the state and local level, advocates, and others to really inform what the role of the state should look like as we envision an ideal system of coordinated application, enrollment, and eligibility. And so we ended up coming up with a set of recommendations which we published in December of 2021. So, this was all happening concurrent to planning activities for the new Department of Early Childhood, as well as the Universal Preschool Program. So, this was not an intentional activity for this future state. However, it is playing a pretty significant role as we now consider what a unified application may look like as we move into universal preschool and then expand that application in the future. So, I'm really excited that PDG gave us the opportunity to bring stakeholders together to intentionally plan and come up with a set of recommendations that now will be used to inform the work happening under the department.

Mandy Reeve:

Thanks so much, Lindsey. I know all the work you all have been putting in is going to result in meaningful differences for children and their families using access, removing barriers. So, I'd love to hear more about the ways you think the new department is going to support sustainability for PDG activities after the grant time is over.

Lindsey Dorneman:

Absolutely. So, with this new department, one of the messages that you'll hear is that, you know, they're really unifying early childhood. They're really working to reimagine the system in Colorado. And they really want this to be family focused. And so, one of the things that I'm particularly excited about is the work that we've done around family engagement and family leadership and seeing that carry into the new department. Through PDG, we were able to form an early childhood family voice council that's advisory to the Office of Early Childhood, as well as our other state departments. We've had local partners actually come to present to that group and then we leverage that group to identify other families to participate in activities such as focus groups, recruitment for new OEC staff, solicitation review, and the list goes on. So, we've really kind of transformed the way that the OEC is engaging families in our work, and we're going to see that in the new department. So - super pleased to see that one of the recommendations for that department was to use this Family Voice Council as an advisory body - so part of that governance structure for that department. So that's promising, meaning that they will continue that investment and continue to engage families in that way. Another piece of work that's really exciting, and that we're still kind of figuring out where we go from here with it, is our transitions roadmap.

Lindsey Dorneman:

So, Colorado went a little in a little different direction than maybe some other states with our transitions work, and in December of 21, we released a Transitions Roadmap that focuses more on the systems that support transitions and the policy levers that could be pulled to improve those transitions for young children. And so, within that roadmap, we were very intentional to think about how we write it in a way that will reflect the role of the new department, even though it had not been established at that time. So again, that was shared in December 21. We're now kind of waiting to see, you know, what's going to be the best way to roll that out. But it does tie in deeply with the charge of the new department, especially the recommendations for universal preschool, which do discuss, in detail, supporting the transitions of children as they enter kindergarten. So I think the value in that roadmap really is that it's prescriptive, so the department itself is not going to have to do a lot of work to really understand where it fits into this landscape, but can instead take this resource and really try to consume it and figure out, you know, what's going to be the strategy that we want to tackle first, and then what are those pieces within that strategy that the department can then own and act on?

Mandy Reeve:

Thanks so much, Lindsey. I could really just let you keep listing off all the great projects and activities all afternoon, but I think I'd like to take a pause from that and think about a way for you to reflect a little, and if you have any advice for other states, who are working on incorporating their PDG B-5 strategic plans into their state, early childhood care and education systems. It seems so natural for you to refer to it that way, and I'm wondering if you have any thoughts for others.

Lindsey Dorneman:

Yeah. As we're in our third year, I have a lot of thoughts, and I would say I wouldn't do anything differently, which I think says a lot given how challenging this time has been. But, you know, we've just had so much opportunity and I'm so grateful for that. So, as I think about what I would tell other states, especially those who are just embarking on this journey, I think one of the first things, and you referenced this earlier is to really go broad and deep with your plan. And by that, I mean be very inclusive of all aspects of your early childhood system. Don't just focus on early care and education, really think outside the box and about everyone who's involved and may have influence on that system. By doing that within our own plan, we were able to really reflect on and think about the work that may not be within our authority as a state agency to do, but other partners may have the opportunity to jump in and do or may already be doing. And so that really broadened the scope of who's playing in the space and working towards the goals that are within that plan. In that same vein, think about the timing of your plan. We intentionally developed a plan for about five or six years - so 2020 to 2025 is our plan timeline. And the reason we did that is that we did want to keep an eye on sustainability and make sure that these strategies didn't just end or this work didn't just end once PDG did.

Lindsey Dorneman:

And so allowing for that plan to evolve and to grow and change and to continue on so that there's always going to be an eye on that work. Now, none of that's successful unless you have really good champions. So, in Colorado, I have been very lucky to have our State Advisory Council, the Early Childhood Leadership Commission, be very hands on in our work. And so each year they're the ones who lead the revisions to the strategic plan. They often invite us to speak and share. They endorse the products that we create under PDG, and they really are our voice at a higher level and just have that great opportunity to elevate the work, to maybe help us form some connections or bring aboard

partners that we may not have on our own. So having those champions is incredibly important. Finally, I think it's important to really share my appreciation for the Administration for Children and Families and the way that they've administered this grant. You know, they - it's kind of funny because you'll ask questions and then they'll say, well, whatever makes sense for your state. And sometimes that kind of feels like a non-answer, but it's actually the best answer you can get because we really have taken that to heart and really have been able to, not only through the initial development, but as we've evolved, made sure that PDG is responsive to the needs in our state.

Lindsey Dorneman:

So, after COVID happened and we were able to see that, you know, this strategy is not going to work as we intended it, we then had that flexibility to really shift gears and engage in strategies that would be meaningful in that time. So, I just really appreciate that with that charge of making this really about you and your state, that you have a lot of flexibility to do some cool things. And then I guess with that too, PDG is all about innovation, but you cannot innovate unless you have a safe space to make some mistakes and potentially fail. And I am just so grateful to Richard and his team for creating that safe space for us and to tell us that it's important to try those things, and it's important to learn not only for ourselves, but for those states, our colleagues. And so we've had so much freedom, and with that has come a lot of fun, a lot of energy, a lot of excitement. And again, it's been really hard, but so rewarding, and I think that it's allowed us to just really do some great, hard focused work. It got us to that point of being able to do some real collaboration as we prepare to enter this new phase of early childhood for Colorado with our universal preschool program and new department.

Mandy Reeve:

I'm sure that the staff at ACF and the Department of ED would echo their appreciation to you and the Colorado team in taking the vision and mission for the PDG B-5 to heart and truly trying to create deep and meaningful collaboration and alignment to help improve access and remove barriers for children and families. Lindsey, this has been a wonderful conversation and a valuable look into the work you and your great team and so many others have been doing in Colorado. Thank you so much for joining me today.

Lindsey Dorneman:

Thanks again, Mandy. It's been fun to take a look back and continue to think about what's coming next.

Narrator:

Thanks for listening to Early Childhood Policy Matters produced by the National Technical Assistance Center for Preschool Development Grants Birth through Five. Find more episodes by going to [childcareta.acf.hhs.gov](http://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov) and searching for early childhood policy matters. You can also find us on your favorite podcast app or on SoundCloud at EC Policy Matters.