



# How a Colorado Early Learning Center Serves a Diverse Group of Families

NOVEMBER 18, 2024 – CASEY STOCKSTILL AND HALLEY POTTER

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*This profile is part of a research project in partnership with the Trust for Learning highlighting how early childhood programs can blend and braid funding to serve diverse groups of children. The project also includes a report, “[Early Childhood Programs That Blend and Braid Funding to Achieve Diversity](#),” and an additional profile, “[Mixing Early Head Start and Private-Pay Tuition at a Wisconsin Early Childhood Program](#).”*

Most parents in the United States struggle to find high-quality, affordable child care. But child care has many positive ripple effects, especially for parenting students, who are working on higher education while raising their young children. In Denver, Colorado, the [Auraria Early Learning Center](#) (AELC) in the Auraria Higher Education Center helps students, university staff, and community members by offering excellent care and education to children. AELC thrives due to its close partnership with a consortium of three colleges and universities in downtown Denver that share the Auraria Campus: Community College of Denver, Metropolitan State University of Denver, and University of Colorado–Denver. All three schools are Hispanic Serving Institutions. AELC also uses a mixed-income model. This model requires administrators to hold firm in their commitment to diverse learning and to be knowledgeable about many types of funding. But it pays dividends for the teachers, children, and families in the building.

AELC strives to serve a socioeconomically diverse group of families, split roughly into three groups. One-third of families are parenting students, who tend to also be low-income. One-third of families are staff affiliated with the three campuses; university staff members get 15 percent of their child’s tuition subsidized by the university as a tuition benefit. The remaining third are families from the surrounding community in downtown Denver who tend to be able to privately pay tuition.

The school is passionate about this model because it creates diverse classrooms and also meets families where they are. If a family at the center were to be low-income when their child was an infant, but increase their income over time, these changes would be captured through AELC’s sliding-scale fee structure: a child can attend the center even if their family gains or loses income over the year. At most private centers, which do not offer sliding-scale fee structures, this kind of family might have to leave to find more affordable care.

Emily Nelson, the director of AELC, has been part of many families’ stories. Her first role at AELC was as a student teacher when she attended college. Emily was promoted to lead teacher and now is the director. Part of her role, along with assistant director Rachel Ruiz, is keeping on track with

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This commentary can be found online at: [tcf.org/content/commentary/how-a-colorado-early-learning-center-serves-a-diverse-group-of-families/](https://tcf.org/content/commentary/how-a-colorado-early-learning-center-serves-a-diverse-group-of-families/)

paperwork and funding for families. “Oftentimes,” Emily explained, “we’ll be processing a family’s paperwork and we realize that they are missing out on other funding streams they qualify for.” The directors of AELC make sure families have what they need to get this paper work done.

But once the directors have figured out the paperwork, a family’s funding source is not important within the school community. “When a child attends our program, they belong to our school community, not to an income tier.”

## Equity and Enrollment Challenges During COVID-19

AELC’s mixed-income model faltered during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. The program’s downtown campus location was convenient for university staff and parenting students to enroll their children, but when classes and some university work shifted online, Emily found that many of their parenting students did not need full-day child care as they once did. Enrollment from parenting students dropped, and in 2020 and 2021, AELC enrolled more community families than ever before.

But while their socioeconomically integrated model was temporarily difficult to maintain, their commitment to it did not wane. As soon as in-person classes resumed, AELC found that many parenting students again sought high-quality, on-campus child care.

## Family Engagement

Emily Nelson was glad for the return of parenting students after the height of the pandemic, and the sense of community it brings to the center. She finds that the centers’ location on campus provides organic community connections for many parents. For example, parenting students would sometimes stay and chat with others around pickup and dropoff or do homework in the lobby. Noting this, and also some of the challenges parenting students face, AELC is planning to have a food pantry and diaper bank for families. It will be located within the child care center, but will be available to all students on campus, including students without children who need food assistance.

Emily noted, “Parts of the community have organically become diverse. I love the cultural intelligence and awareness this creates among families.” She sees awareness building from casual connections within the building, but also at the family engagement events that each classroom hosts twice a year.

## Challenges to the Model

Like most child care centers, AELC has experienced rising operating costs. The center has increased wages due to the rising cost of living for teachers and a rising minimum wage in Denver. Their affiliation with three universities does help to cover the costs of the building and to help somewhat with maintenance costs and repairs. But still, the administrators at AELC work hard to get grants to fill the gaps.

In the past few years, AELC has received government and private foundation grants, which they have used to offer scholarships to families. This support is critical, because neither the subsidy funding nor the staff discount helps pay for the true cost of providing high-quality child care. When asked what she would do if grants like this were not available, Emily responded, “We would not shift to all community/private pay. We are committed to this work and I’d find a way, probably starting with the university partners that we have.” Despite her commitment to the model, she does worry sometimes. She continued, “I don’t want to sound dramatic and like I am ringing the alarm bells, but it does feel like we’ve been plugging holes with funding. And I don’t know if that funding will keep coming.” The [American Rescue Plan funding](#) was incredibly helpful for AELC, and they felt the negative impact when it [ended](#).

Denver has seen exciting expansions to funding preschool education, but this has not necessarily translated to support for programs like AELC. Since 2007, families with four-year-old children have had access to funding through the Denver Preschool Program (DPP), which is funded by a city sales tax. In 2023, Colorado launched Universal Preschool, which offers fifteen free hours of preschool per week to four-year-old children. Both programs support a mixed-delivery model, which means that children attend preschool in either a public school or a private program. Many private programs,

including AELC, participate in both programs. At the same time, in recent years, Denver Public Schools has offered increasing full-day and part-day options for three- and four-year-old children. Altogether, this creates many competing options for Denver families with preschoolers.

Denver's expanding preschool options have resulted in something new for AELC, a program that was always running a lottery and turning families away: empty classrooms. During a tour of the building, Emily pointed out two classrooms, ready and waiting. "These are for four-year-olds," she said, "We even have a teacher ready on stand-by, if, somehow, multiple families had a need for preschool mid-year."

What seemed like a post-pandemic blip in lower four-year-old enrollment has continued, leading the center to consider shifting its model to serve more toddlers than preschoolers. This is a familiar story in places like New York City and Washington, D.C., which have expanded access to preschool with the [unintended consequence](#) of making it challenging for private centers to continue offering birth-to-five care. Some of these centers are forced to close. Other centers shift to infant and toddler care only, which can increase costs for families, due to the need for higher staff-to-child ratios. Many birth-to-five centers subsidize the cost of infant and toddler care, with some of their tuition funds from preschool, where licensing requirements allow for a lower staff-to-child ratio; however, this is not an option for centers that serve infants and toddlers only.

Whatever the future holds for the center, Emily continues to value being part of parenting students' stories. She shared, "I love when parenting students graduate and that we were part of their story. The impact we have is incredible. But it is layered work and has some emotional challenges. Some of our families have navigated so much."

## How to Support Inclusive Campus Child Care Centers

AELC provides a promising example of how campus child care centers can promote diverse early learning settings that benefit children and families from across the socioeconomic spectrum. Programs, funders, and policymakers can derive

lessons from AELC's experience:

1. Center administrators need time and knowledge of different funding streams and the requirements for each one. One-stop enrollment, where administrators try to help parents access all funding for which they qualify at the point of enrollment, may be especially helpful to families.
2. Foundations can offer funding pathways for centers to offer child care with a mixed income model. At AELC and other centers, external funding is critical to close the gap in operating costs. Foundations can consider the research evidence that economically integrated spaces contribute to growth and learning for all, and prioritize this funding.
3. State and local policymakers should carefully consider universal preschool policies and include safeguards to promote the thriving of early learning in a variety of settings, and to ensure they retain, and ideally enhance, the availability of infant and toddler child care. Implementing a more comprehensive birth-to-five early care and education strategy can help to address some of these tensions. Colorado is making some progress in this direction through steps outlined in a [2020–2025 strategic plan](#) supported by a federal Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five, including the creation of a new Department of Early Childhood [in 2022](#) to better coordinate across the early childhood system, but much work [remains](#).
4. Campus child care centers should take advantage of the [Child Care Access Means Parents in Schools \(CCAMPIS\)](#) grants, a federal grant program that funds institutions of higher education to subsidize child care costs for low-income students receiving Pell Grants. Unfortunately, it is a competitive program with [limited funding](#) that does not currently serve all centers and families who would benefit from it.