

## Site Visit Report: Colorado Partnership in Early Childhood Education Services (PIECES)

[https://www.childwelfare.gov/management/funding/funding\\_sources/earlyeducation.cfm](https://www.childwelfare.gov/management/funding/funding_sources/earlyeducation.cfm)

**Award #: 90CO1060**

**Cluster: Child Welfare Education/Early Education Partnerships to Expand Protective Factors for Child Welfare Involvement**

**Grantee: Colorado Department of Human Services, Division of Child Welfare**

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# Site Visit Report: Colorado Partnership in Early Childhood Education Services (PIECES)

## SUMMARY

Many young children involved with child welfare do not always receive the early care, intervention, and education services necessary to support their healthy development and well-being. The Colorado Department of Human Services (DHS) believes strengthening family-focused models of intervention across all child-serving systems will benefit families and children and increase the likelihood that maltreated children receive quality care and intervention. Using a 17-month infrastructure building grant from the Children's Bureau, DHS's Division of Child Welfare is working to increase partnerships between child welfare and early childhood education and to better identify children served by both agencies.

The project, Colorado Partnership in Early Childhood Education Services (PIECES), is a collaboration between State-level agencies and local agencies within three counties, El Paso, Fremont, and Jefferson. In addition to increasing collaboration among agencies, PIECES set out to increase child welfare and early child care professionals' knowledge of and skills in implementing protective factor strategies and increase the number of children in care who also receive developmental screening and appropriate referrals. The project also aims to change local and State policies and procedures to better serve the needs of young children who are in foster care.

To achieve these goals at the county level, the three county sites implemented the Strengthening Families protective factors framework. Representatives from each partner agency attended Strengthening Families training, either in person or online, and have trained, or are in the process of training, staff from their respective agencies. In addition, the partner agencies are incorporating the protective factors into their daily operations.

At the State level, PIECES created an Office of Early Childhood (OEC) within DHS that brought together seven programs that previously existed in four divisions. The consolidation of these offices allows the State to better administer early childhood programs, strengthen collaboration and coordination between the State and local-level programs, and ensure programs across the State provide the same level of quality care.

In addition to implementing the Strengthening Families framework in each community, the following tasks were implemented and will continue after the grant ends:

### El Paso County

- Integrated the Strengthening Families framework into parenting education classes
- Established a new referral and screening process for sharing screening results among the partner agencies
- Provided training to child welfare staff on the benefits of early childhood education and on how to read developmental screenings
- Educated the community about the child welfare system
- Educated parents on how to select quality child care

### Fremont County

- Developed a video brochure that provides information on the early childhood services available and that will play continually in early childhood family center waiting rooms
- Created and implemented a cross-agency referral and screening process for families and children involved in both child welfare and early childhood services
- Purchased tablets for child welfare staff to use in the field with families
- Developed a tracking system within each agency to capture the accurate number of children served

- Provided training to early childhood and child welfare workers on the Brazelton Touchpoints program<sup>1</sup>

### Jefferson County

- Provided training to child welfare staff on
  - Quality early learning/child care provider selection
  - Child abuse and prevention treatment act requirements
  - Early childhood education benefits
  - Child development
  - Ages and Stages Questionnaire
- Educated the public on the benefits of early childhood education
- Conducted an Early Childhood Conference for community stakeholders
- Provided coaching and support to child care providers to improve the quality of their programs
- Provided Strengthening Families training to child care providers
- Developed screening tools to be used by child welfare and early childhood providers

The 17-month infrastructure building grant was meant to build procedures and processes; therefore, not all of the expected outcomes were achieved by the end of the grant period (February 28 2013). However, the project received a no cost extension through November 30, 2013. According to project staff at both the State and county levels, the new collaborations have built the infrastructure, created processes, and formed relationships that will sustain the work.

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(<https://cbexpress.acf.hhs.gov>)

## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

### Abstract

In October 2011, the Colorado Department of Human Services, Division of Child Welfare (DCW), was awarded a 17-month infrastructure building grant to increase partnerships between child welfare and early childhood education and to better identify children served by both agencies. The project, Colorado Partnership in Early Childhood Education Services (PIECES), is a collaboration between State-level agencies and local agencies within three counties, El Paso, Fremont, and Jefferson. The counties were chosen based on their interest in the grant, as well as the fact that the child welfare agency and the early childhood councils in the counties had established relationships prior to the grant being awarded. The State-level leadership team includes members from DCW, the Office of Early Childhood Education, the Division of Child Care, the Butler Institute for Families, the Department of Public Health and Environment, and the Early Childhood Council. While the partners at the local level vary by location, all local leadership teams include the Early Childhood Council and DCW. The State-level leadership team provides overall project planning, administration, and coordination. The counties receive resources to support the implementation of their individual project goals.

The goals for PIECES include the following:

- Increase State-level coordination and collaboration to promote child welfare/early childhood partnerships
- Build capacity in three local communities to increase children's access to early intervention, Head Start, Early Head Start, and quality child care
- Develop model programs of child welfare and early childhood partnerships around the Strengthening Families framework, early childhood mental health consultation, and the Colorado practice model

The expected outcomes for the project include the following:

- More partnerships between child welfare and early care and education programs

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<sup>1</sup> The BrazeltonTouchpoints program is an evidence-based theory of child development that provides ongoing opportunities for parents and providers to help each other understand children's behaviors, strengths, and growing capacities.

- More staff knowledge about implementing protective factor strategies
- More children in foster care who also receive developmental screening and appropriate referral/follow up
- More foster children in care who also are enrolled in high-quality early care and education settings and who stay for at least 1 year
- More families reporting increased protective factors
- New local and State policies and procedures to better serve the needs of young children in care

Because this project is the result of an infrastructure building grant designed to build procedures and processes, not all of the outcomes were achieved and/or measurable by the end of the grant period that with the provision of a no cost extension will end on November 30, 2013. However, the project has increased partnerships between child welfare and early care and education programs at the State level and in the three local areas; has increased, and will continue to increase, the knowledge of early learning/child care staff and child welfare staff about the protective factors; and has educated community partners on the benefits of early childhood education.

### **Need for This Service**

Based on information provided by the project, young children involved with the child welfare system do not always receive the early care, intervention, and education services needed to support their healthy development and well-being. The Colorado Department of Human Services believes strengthening family-focused models of intervention across all child-serving systems will benefit the families and children of the State and increase the likelihood that maltreated children receive quality care and intervention.

### **VIRTUAL SITE VISIT HIGHLIGHTS**

The virtual site visit occurred between February 11, 2013, and April 17, 2013 via telephone interviews. The interviews included several members of the State-level leadership team, including the project evaluator, and members of the local site leadership teams. The following is the date that each interview occurred:

- February 11, 2013: Patricia Bolton, Director, Child Care Innovations, Red Rocks Community College and Executive Director, Triad Early Childhood Council; Tim Young, Program Manager, Child Protection Team, Jefferson County Human Services; Jefferson County PIECES Co-Leaders
- February 15, 2013: Jill Jordan, Promoting Safe and Stable Families Program Manager, Department of Human Services
- February 25, 2013: Kristi Glasper, El Paso County Alliance for Kids Coordinator; El Paso County PIECES Project Leader
- February 28, 2013: Collette Solano, Training and Project Specialist, Butler Institute for Families, PIECES Project Coordinator
- March 4, 2013: Pamela Walker, Early Childhood Manager, Canon City Schools (Fremont County PIECES Co-Leader); Stacy Kwitek-Russell, Fremont County Human Services (Fremont County PIECES Co-Leader); Kathleen S. Kennedy, Home Visitation Coordinator, Fremont County Family Center; Mieke Davis, Fremont County Court Appointed Special Advocates; Justin Gutierrez, Starpoint Early Intervention; Sandy Vickerman, Fremont County Head Start; Bill Summers, Fremont County PIECES Project Evaluator
- April 17, 2013: Julie McCrae, Butler Institute for Families, PIECES Project Evaluator

The interviews lasted between 30 minutes and 1 ½ hours. Topics discussed included the following:

- Impetus
- Successes
- Challenges
- Early results
- Evaluation process
- Sustainability

In addition, information was obtained from documents provided by the grantee.

## **LESSONS LEARNED**

### **Unique and Innovative Features**

The project activities occurred at the State level and at three county-level sites. Project staff from all four areas reported that a highlight of PIECES is that it has improved relationships and bridged gaps between child welfare and early learning/child care providers. The project also informed the various disciplines about the responsibilities of partner agencies, which promoted understanding and furthered collaboration among agencies. In order to inform the field about PIECES, a bulletin was developed and sent to local Early Childhood Councils and State and local offices of the Division of Child Welfare (DCW). Two of the bulletins are attached to this report.

In addition to improved partnerships, the three county project sites implemented the Strengthening Families protective factors framework. Representatives from each partner agency attended Strengthening Families training, either in person or online, and have trained, or are in the process of training, staff from their agencies on the protective factors. In addition, the partner agencies are incorporating the protective factors into their daily operations and into their new staff training.

At the State level, PIECES created an Office of Early Childhood (OEC) in the Department of Human Services (DHS). The OEC was created in January 2013 and brought together seven programs that previously existed in four divisions within DHS including the following:

- Child Care Licensing
- Child Care Quality Initiatives
- Colorado Child Care Assistance Program
- Early Childhood Councils
- Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation
- Early Intervention Colorado Program
- Promoting Safe and Stable Families

The consolidation of these offices allows the State to better administer early childhood programs and strengthen collaboration and coordination between the State and local-level programs, as well as ensure that programs across the State provide the same level of quality care.

Although the State-level leadership team provided overall project planning, administration, and coordination, the local sites established and implemented individual project goals. In addition to implementing the Strengthening Families framework in each community, the following tasks also were implemented and will continue after the grant period ends:

### **EI Paso County**

- Integrated the Strengthening Families framework into parenting education classes
- Established a new referral and screening process that will allow screening results to be shared among the partner agencies, as opposed to children being screened by each agency
- Provided training to child welfare staff on the benefits of early childhood education and on how to read developmental screenings
- Educated the community about the child welfare system
- Educated parents on how to select quality child care

### **Fremont County**

- Purchased flat-screen televisions for the waiting rooms of child welfare and the early childhood family center
- Developed a video brochure that provides information on the early childhood services available and that will play continually in the waiting rooms

- Created and implemented a cross-agency referral and screening process for families and children involved in both child welfare and early childhood services
- Purchased tablets for child welfare staff to use in the field with families—to make referrals for various services
- Developed a tracking system within each agency to capture the accurate number of children served
- Provided training to early childhood and child welfare workers on the Brazelton Touchpoints program<sup>2</sup>

### Jefferson County

- Provided training to child welfare staff on
  - Quality early learning/child care provider selection
  - Child abuse and prevention treatment act requirements
  - Early childhood education benefits
  - Child development
  - Ages and Stages Questionnaire
- Educated the public on the benefits of early childhood education
- Conducted an Early Childhood Conference for community stakeholders
- Provided coaching and support to child care providers to improve the quality of their programs
- Provided Strengthening Families training to child care providers
- Developed screening tools to be used by child welfare and early childhood providers

### Challenges

Project staff at the State level reported that maintaining the commitment of other State-level agencies has been a challenge. They reported that other State-level agencies were involved with the project directly after the grant was awarded but did not continue their involvement for the entire grant period. Project staff at the State and county level reported that one of the biggest challenges for the county-level sites was a delay in receiving the grant money from the State. However, everyone interviewed agreed that this did not impede the planning or the implementation of some processes. Planning and implementing processes and programs within the 17-month grant period, which was extended to 26 months with the no-cost extension, also was identified as a challenge at the county level.

### Successful Strategies/Keys to Success

Project staff from the State and county levels reported that PIECES has improved relationships and bridged gaps between child welfare staff and early education services staff. The project also informed the various disciplines involved about the responsibilities of each of the partner agencies, which has promoted understanding and furthered collaboration among the agencies. Child welfare staff and community partners' understanding of the benefits of early learning/child care for children were also enhanced as a result of the project. In order to accomplish these milestones, project partners identified the following keys to success:

- **Ensuring the right people and right agencies are part of the leadership team.** Including those people who can make decisions on behalf of their agency/organization, as well as those who can determine if the processes will work, is paramount to achieving project goals.
- **Having commitment and respect of all involved agencies.** All of the partner agencies who have remained involved throughout the grant period are committed to the project and respect the work of each agency involved.

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<sup>2</sup> The Brazelton Touchpoints program is an evidence-based theory of child development that provides ongoing opportunities for parents and providers to help each other understand children's behaviors, strengths, and growing capacities.

## OUTCOMES

PIECES set out to increase the partnership between child welfare and early childhood education and to better identify children served by both agencies. In addition, PIECES expected the outcomes of the project to include the increased knowledge/skills in implementing protective factor strategies by both child welfare and early learning/child care; increase the number of children in foster care who also receive developmental screening and appropriate referral/follow up; and changes in local and State policy and procedures to better serve the needs of young children in foster care.

Based on the fact that this project is the result of a 17-month infrastructure building grant meant to build procedures and processes, not all of the outcomes were achieved by the end of the grant period, February 28 2013<sup>3</sup>. However, as a result of the PIECES project, the Office of Early Childhood was created within the Colorado Department of Human Services (DHS), which will allow the State to better administer early childhood programs and strengthen collaboration and coordination between the State and local level programs. Creating the Office of Early Childhood also will help DHS ensure early learning and child care programs across the State provide the same level of high-quality care. Training and implementation of the Strengthening Families protective factors framework was completed in the three counties, and the partner agencies in the counties have incorporated the protective factors into their daily operations and into new staff training. In addition, some child care providers have been trained on the protective factors. Each participating county developed referral and screening tools to be used by child welfare and the early childhood services in their counties.

## Evaluation

An external evaluation of PIECES is being conducted by Julie McCrae with The Butler Institute for Families. The evaluation process began with a statewide needs assessment to determine the existing collaborations of child welfare and early childhood services across the State (a copy of the PIECES needs assessment report is attached to this report). Surveys were sent to all directors of child welfare, Early Intervention (Community Centered Boards), Head Start/Early Head Start, and Early Childhood Councils across the State. Of the 154 Directors, 92 (60 percent) completed the surveys. The assessment process sought to answer the following questions:

- What formal collaboration mechanisms exist?
- What are the referral mechanisms for child welfare-involved children to access Head Start and Early Intervention, including screening and capacity?
- To what extent is there collaborative service planning at the family level?
- What do results suggest about training and professional development needs?

The results of the assessment indicated that although there was some collaboration occurring between child welfare and early childhood services, there was still a need for consistent service coordination and communication. The assessment results suggested the following strengths existed in the collaboration process:

- Children involved with child welfare receive priority enrollment to Head Start and Early Head Start.
- Referral processes between child welfare and early intervention services are standardized and coordinated.
- Memorandums of Understanding are sometimes used to coordinate services and processes among child welfare, early intervention services/agencies, and other community partners.
- Child welfare and early intervention services participate in local interagency groups.

The assessment findings also indicated that the mandated referral policy established by the Child Abuse and Prevention Treatment Act and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act increased the number of children receiving early intervention services.

Some challenges and areas for improvement in collaboration also were identified by the assessment results. The challenges included the need for more staff development in the areas of understanding each

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<sup>3</sup> The grantee received a no cost-extension through November 30, 2013.

agency's values, roles, and goals, as well as the services that can be provided or facilitated by each agency. Early intervention staff reported significant challenges in engaging families for timely completion of developmental evaluations. Head Start directors reported wanting more information sharing when the families are involved with child welfare. Data indicate that only 15 percent of Head Start directors reported policy or protocol on joint family service planning. In some communities, ongoing, coordinated service planning may not occur consistently for children involved with both child welfare and early childhood systems. For example, 39 percent of early childhood directors reported "sometimes" knowing when major events occur in children's lives, such as reuniting with their families.

Also for the evaluation, the three county sites documented their activities on an online Early Childhood-Child Welfare Contact Form. The form asked about the topics and progress of meetings in three areas: content, process, and barriers and challenges to project implementation. The documented responses were reviewed and analyzed by the evaluator. Results showed that PIECES teams at the county level regularly discussed the following topics more than others:

- System integration topics, specifically resource identification or sharing
- Lines of communication
- Role clarification
- Finances
- Implementation of Strengthening Families

In addition, PIECES staff reported that, in most meetings, members were on board with the agenda and were actively engaged in working on short-term projects. Data did show, however, that PIECES staff were less certain that communication was always effective and that community partners were actively engaged in working on long-term projects.

Twenty-four county-level PIECES members completed the Wilder Collaboration Factors Inventory, which examines 20 success factors of a project. The four primary strengths identified by the inventory included, collaborating partners' belief that they will benefit from their involvement in the collaboration; partners' ability to compromise; the group's unique purpose; and the skilled leadership of the group. More information on the results of the Early Childhood-Child Welfare Contact Form and the Wilder Collaboration Factors Inventory are available in *The Collaborative Teams Report 2012*, which is included in the attachments to this report.

The evaluation also included attending project meetings at the State and county level, as well as the evaluation of the processes implemented by each county site and at the State level, as discussed under the Lessons Learned section of this report. Data collection associated with the new processes is occurring at the county level and will continue after the grant period ends. Pre- and post-training evaluations were conducted as part of the Strengthening Families training. In addition, the evaluator created a newsletter that was sent to partner agencies across the State, as well as posted on the Butler Institute's website. The newsletter provided information about the PIECES project in the three counties, as well as the findings of the statewide needs assessment.

Bill Summers, an independent evaluator, is also conducting an evaluation of the PIECES project within Fremont County (a copy of his findings is attached to this report). As part of the Fremont County evaluation, Mr. Summers established four evaluation questions that will be addressed. The questions and a short summary of the findings to date are as follows:

- Has the Strengthening Families framework increased the knowledge and skills of those participants completing the program?
  - The results of the Strengthening Families pre- and post-test data suggested that both the Department of Human Services (DHS) and Early Childhood Health Outreach (ECHO) groups made progress following their respective online training experiences.
- What new systems and procedures have been implemented to support the Colorado PIECES program, and how are they working?
  - As a component of the PIECES project, ECHO, Starpoint,<sup>4</sup> and DHS each created new procedures to identify and track children involved with child welfare services to help determine if these children are being provided access to Fremont County early

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<sup>4</sup> Early intervention service provider

- childhood services, and if so, which services. Children cross-enrolled in child welfare and other Fremont County early childhood services are being identified and entered into data banks at both DHS and ECHO.
- How accurate is the improved interagency tracking and referral system in identifying children who are conjointly served by child welfare and other Fremont County early childhood services?
    - This information is not yet available
  - How have new technological supports improved the effectiveness and efficiency of staff in providing child services?
    - This information is not yet available

### Sustainability

The PIECES project plans to continue its efforts after the grant period ends November 30, 2013. According to project staff at the State level and the three county sites, the collaborations have built the infrastructure, created processes, and formed relationships that will sustain the work. Furthermore, there are more issues related to early childhood and child welfare that the project wants to address.

### ATTACHMENTS

#### Project information/public relations:

- [PIECES Bulletin Issue 1](#)
- [PIECES Bulletin Issue 2](#)

#### Assessment and evaluation results:

- [2012–2013 Fremont Community Partnerships in Early Childhood Education and Services \(PIECES\): Preliminary Evaluation](#)
- [Collaborative Team Reports October 2012](#)
- [PIECES Needs Assessment Report](#)



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