Strengthening Working Families Initiative (SWFI) Child Care Learning Community

Impactful solutions to the issue of child care access for low-income parents.

COMMUNITY **COLLEGE** of AURORA

COLORADO Department of Human Services

THE CIVIC CANOPY

Identifying the most substantial barriers and impactful solutions to the issue of child care access for low-income parents.

As part of their efforts to expand entry-level education and access to specific career pathways, the Community College of Aurora, Community College of Denver, and Colorado Department of Human Services recruited a diverse group of 2Gen thought leaders to participate in a Learning Community focused on identifying the most substantial barriers and impactful solutions to the issue of child care access for low-income parents.

The Learning Community is part of a larger effort to address the child care needs of working families in East Metro Denver as they seek to advance their education and career prospects. The project includes providing direct services to families, and discovering and implementing systemic policy, program and resource solutions. This project is supported by a $3.9 million U.S. Department of Labor Strengthening Working Families Initiative grant, awarded to the Community College of Aurora and its project partners in July 2016, as well as $1 million in matching funds from Gary Community Investments/The Piton Foundation. Foundational to this project has been the Colorado Department of Human Service's significant commitment to and investment in the 2Gen approach paired with the colleges' desire to explore alternative approaches to addressing the child care needs of community college students.

 The 2Gen approach encourages serving children and their caregivers together to harness the family's full potential and to put the entire family on a path to permanent economic security. 2Gen asserts that when programs and policies are designed with the whole family's educational and economic future in mind, and families are assisted to reach the social networks and resources they need to be successful in life, opportunity becomes a family tradition. The 2Gen approach is believed to be critical to this project given that research has shown child care needs to be one of the most significant issues preventing low-income students from enrollment in college and completing their credential.

The desired outcomes of the Learning Community include:

- Development of a more complete understanding of the current landscape of child care stakeholders and partnerships in the Denver-Adams-Arapahoe region
- Identification of barriers in the alignment of early childhood education, workforce and postsecondary systems
- Consideration of child care access solutions needed to promote parents' education and professional advancement
- Acknowledgment of system-wide challenges and prioritize solutions through a two-generation approach which honors both parents' and children's well-being

Action Map 2017-2020
Strengthening Working Families Initiative (SWFI) Child Care Learning Community

RESULT	Colorado families are valued, healthy, and thriving across generations.			
INDICATORS	Post-secondary credential attainment	% of children in high quality child care settings	% of families earning a sustainable wage	4th grade reading achievement levels
STRATEGIES	Increase the affordability and financial viability of child care	Create policy solutions that expand access to quality child care	Expand availability of quality child care	Increase awareness of quality chid care options

The Learning Community is facilitated by The Civic Canopy and informed by research conducted by the Bell Policy Center, and consists of partners inclusive of workforce, community college, human services, and early childhood education systems. During the first year of meeting together, the Learning Community co-constructed an action map that provides a snapshot of the vision and framework for collective action. Through a series of four meetings, the diverse group of stakeholders were able to:

- identify the high-level result they are seeking together
- select indicators to measure progress toward the result
- analyze historical trend data for each indicator and generate dialogue to understand the story behind the data and unearth root causes
- brainstorm and prioritize strategies, based on the identified root causes
- form action teams to make progress on the four core strategies
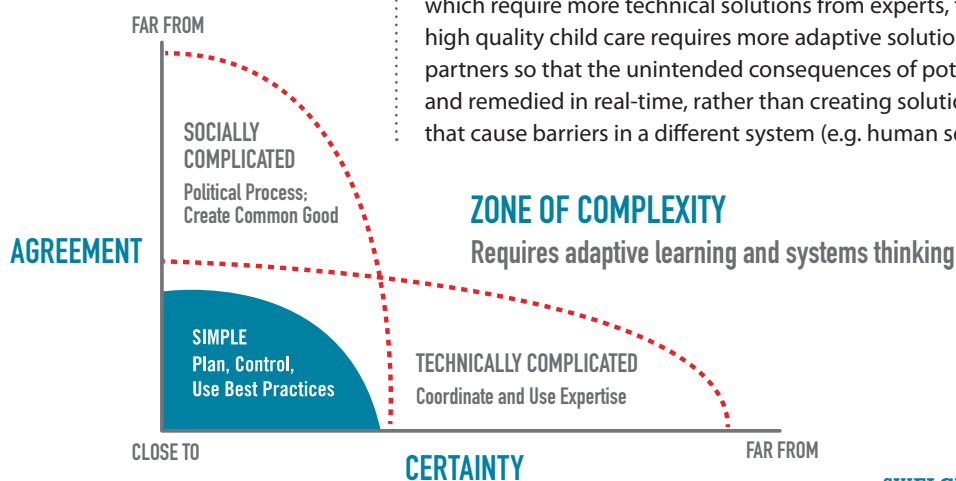
The focus of the Learning Community's first year together has been to establish a strong foundation of diverse, cross-sector partners committed to working together in different ways through the Learning Community in order to draw upon the collective knowledge of the group to understand the current landscape, significant barriers and promising opportunities so that a framework for action could be developed. In Spring 2018, during the latter half of the group's first year, Action Teams were launched and began meeting outside of the quarterly Learning Community meetings.

The focus of the Learning Community's second year together will be to leverage the connections, learning, and planning that has happened so far to implement strategies that address systemic barriers through a 2Gen approach. Over the course of the year, the four action teams will meet regularly to work on the identified strategies and track progress. The quarterly Learning Community meetings will be utilized to cross-pollinate ideas among action teams, gather feedback and input as needed, and identify areas of interconnection, and identify any opportunities for larger cross-cutting actions to be taken.

The following report chronicles in more detail the approach and evolution of the Learning Community's work during its first year, as partners worked to outline a set of strategies designed to scale systemic solutions to the challenge of promoting greater access to high quality child care options for low-income parents.

Method

The Learning Community was convened based on the belief that no single entity is positioned to address the overall challenge of ensuring adequate access to high quality child care for low-income parents seeking to advance their careers. The problem is a complex one—not merely complicated—meaning there is little agreement on the exact nature of the problem, nor agreement on the most viable solutions. Unlike simple problems, which lend themselves to best-practice applications, or complicated problems, which require more technical solutions from experts, the challenge of increasing access to high quality child care requires more adaptive solutions, tested over time among diverse partners so that the unintended consequences of potential solutions can be identified and remedied in real-time, rather than creating solutions for one system (e.g. higher ed) that cause barriers in a different system (e.g. human services).

FAR FROM

SOCIALLY COMPLICATED

Political Process; Create Common Good

AGREEMENT

ZONE OF COMPLEXITY

Requires adaptive learning and systems thinking

SIMPLE
Plan, Control, Use Best Practices

TECHNICALLY COMPLICATED
Coordinate and Use Expertise

CLOSE TO

CERTAINTY

FAR FROM

Community Learning Model

To generate complex adaptive strategies, the Learning Community has been guided by the research-based Community Learning Model (CLM) that uses a deliberate step-by-step approach and continuous improvement orientation to develop adaptive solutions. The CLM focuses on results, includes relevant and diverse stakeholders in thoughtful dialogue, and develops action plans and structures for learning from results – all within a culture of trust and collaboration. The Learning Community has spent the first year moving through the first iteration of the learning cycle to generate its initial set of strategies and will now continue the iterative cycle as it begins to implement those strategies and learns from its initial results.

Learning Community Structure

The structure during the first year has evolved into an ecosystem of three nested groups of partners participating in various ways. The Learning Community is inclusive of all relevant stakeholders participating in quarterly meetings and contributing to the initiative. Most members of the Learning Community participate on an Action Team.

Currently there are four action teams that meet routinely between Learning Community meetings to work on the specific strategies outlined in the action map. The Learning Community is guided by the Planning Team whose members serve on action teams and are active contributors to the Learning Community. The planning team is comprised of leaders from Colorado Department of Human Services, Community College of Aurora, The Bell Policy Center, The Civic Canopy, Colorado Governor's Office, Denver's Early Childhood Council, Early Childhood Partnership of Adams County, and WorkLife Partnership.

The planning team meets monthly to support planning and preparation for Learning Community meetings, strengthen the design and implementation of the effort by bringing content expertise, relevant research, and connections in the field, and generally to move work forward between the larger quarterly Learning Community meetings.

New members were added to the planning team when Action Teams were launched to ensure at least one leader from each action team was present on the planning team. In addition to the planning team functions described above, the planning team now spends time at each meeting providing updates on action team progress and thinking together about how the action teams are intentionally working in concert toward SWFI goals to create systemic change.
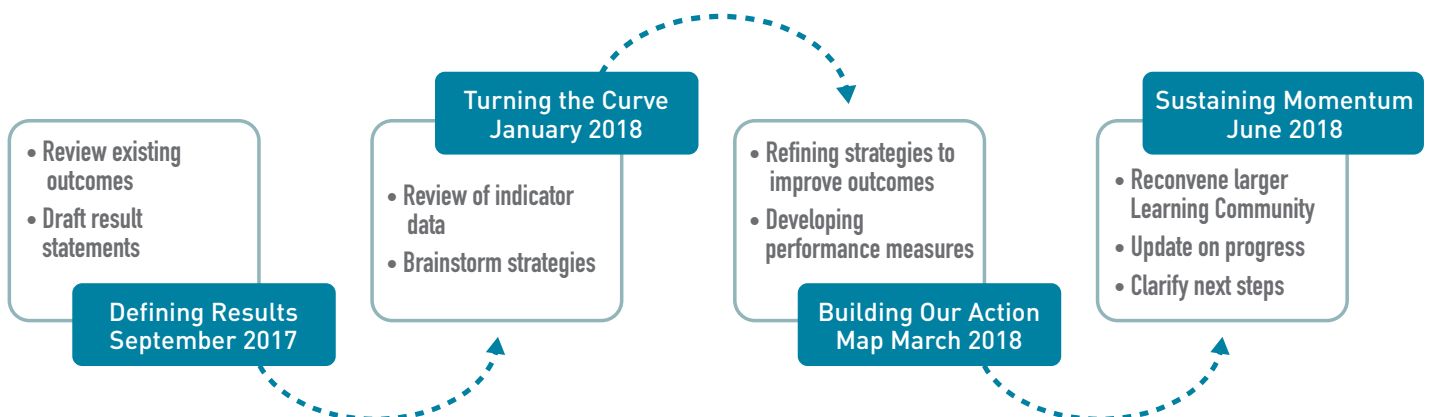
The Learning Community met five times between June 2017 to June 2018. Each meeting was two hours and was hosted on the campus of Community College of Aurora (CCA). The meetings were designed and facilitated by The Civic Canopy and members of the planning team. Below is a brief recap of each meeting which provides the objective details of what occurred at the meeting. Following each recap is a reflection that captures what we now can see more clearly than we could at that time regarding the dynamics at play and the influence of that meeting on the overall process during the first year.

June 2017 - Learning Community Kick-Off Meeting

- *At the time...* Approximately 50 leaders from higher education, workforce, early childhood, human services agencies as well as community stakeholder groups attended the kick-off meeting on June 12, 2017 hosted by Betsy Oudenhoven, CCA President; Reggie Bicha, CDHS Executive Director, and Everette Freeman, CCD President. Goals of the kick-off meeting were to: 1) introduce stakeholders to the SWFI project and research by the Bell Policy Center, 2) introduce a common approach and language for working together through the Learning Community, and engagement expectations, and 3) solicit commitments for ongoing participation. The meeting incorporated many voices with executive leadership speaking to the importance of the work of SWFI. A panel of students from CCA shared their lived experiences as students and parents. Research was shared by Bell Policy Center and Civic Canopy. All attendees participated in lively small group discussions about the possibilities and promise of the Learning Community, the potential strategies that could produce results, the ways their organizations could contribute to the partnership of the Learning Community, and the key people, organizations that will need to be involved.

- *Reflecting Back...* This meeting was really about getting buy-in from and generating momentum among key partners, which was accomplished. There was energy in the room and a common sentiment that "this is the time." Many people commented that this effort can be different because of the cross-sector partners coming together to think systemically about barriers and solutions from a 2Gen perspective. During the small group conversations and share outs, participants emphatically expressed that this initiative should be about promoting partnership and collaboration to develop sustainable, scalable, systemic solutions that address root causes and barriers and respond to and honor students' lived experiences, goals, and personal choices. This meeting set the stage by providing the Learning Community a clear charge and the credence to pursue it.

Defining Results September 2017
- Review existing outcomes
- Draft result statements

Turning the Curve January 2018
- Review of indicator data
- Brainstorm strategies

Building Our Action Map March 2018
- Refining strategies to improve outcomes
- Developing performance measures

Sustaining Momentum June 2018
- Reconvene larger Learning Community
- Update on progress
- Clarify next steps

September 2017 – "Defining Results"

- ***At the time…*** The second Learning Community meeting was held on September 11, 2017 and focused on introducing the Action Map, a tool that will be used to delineate the results, indicators, strategies, and performance measures for the project. The September meeting resulted in agreement on the results and indicators to be used for the Learning Community that define an overall vision of success for the effort and how that vision should be measured.

  - ***Result:*** "Colorado families are valued, healthy, and thriving across generations."
  - ***Indicators:*** 1) post-secondary credential attainment 2) percentage of children in high-quality child care settings 3) percentage of families earning a sustainable wage 4) fourth grade reading achievement levels

- ***Reflecting Back…*** People walked away from this meeting with a better understanding of the Learning Community approach. In the span of the two- hour meeting, the group reached agreement on a single result statement: "Colorado families are valued, healthy, and thriving across generations." Having begun with the assumption of multiple results statements, they argued that a single statement applying to multiple generations at once would provide a powerful, unifying statement for the diverse group. The action map with its 2Gen focus can now help to keep the group from getting drawn into an effort focused only on access to high-quality child care, which would likely dissolve to only early childhood players and lose the power of having cross sector partners at the table. It will serve the group to create routines and rituals that bring them back to this overarching vision and framework that prioritizes 2Gen results.

January 2018 – "Turning the Curve"

- ***At the time…*** The third meeting on January 8, 2018 gave the Learning Community partners a chance to review data on the current state of access to high quality child care, discuss "the story behind the data," and conduct a root cause analysis of what might be producing the current patterns. They then began to brainstorm potential strategies for addressing those root causes that would form the basis for action teams going forward.

- ***Reflecting Back…*** The types of root causes identified for the lack of high quality child care options were largely familiar to the group—e.g. high cost of care, transportation issues, lack of qualified staff, etc. They were useful in helping to generate strategies for action, which evolved into specific action teams. Only later in the process did the group probe deeper into these root causes to realize they are symptoms of the deepest root cause: a fundamental lack of funding of the early childhood system. That will likely prove to be a greater point of focus going forward into year two.

March 2018 – "Building Our Action Map"

- ***At the time…*** At the fourth meeting on March 12, 2018, the group formed action teams to work on child care access solutions that were generated at the previous Learning Community meeting, drawing on the initial set of potential strategies. Action teams engaged in dialogue to deepen their understanding of the context in which they are acting, identify crucial partners to be included, create an action plan of how the group will accomplish key objectives, and established routines of accountability and learning to guide their work going forward. Four action teams were launched at this meeting: 1) Child Care Economics 2) Public Policy 3) Expanding Availability of Quality Care 4) Increasing Awareness of Quality Care Options.

- *Reflecting Back...* It's now clear that the emphasis on "systems change" rather than "one-off solutions" meant different things to different action teams. For some it meant the need to start with community wide efforts, like public information campaigns to inform people of the importance of early care and options for finding it. For others, it meant beginning with the full SWFI "system"—the set of relationships surrounding the SWFI students and their children—and understanding those interdependencies first, then applying them at scale. This prompted the need at the subsequent meeting to clarify the overall approach and to work to create shared understanding among the group.
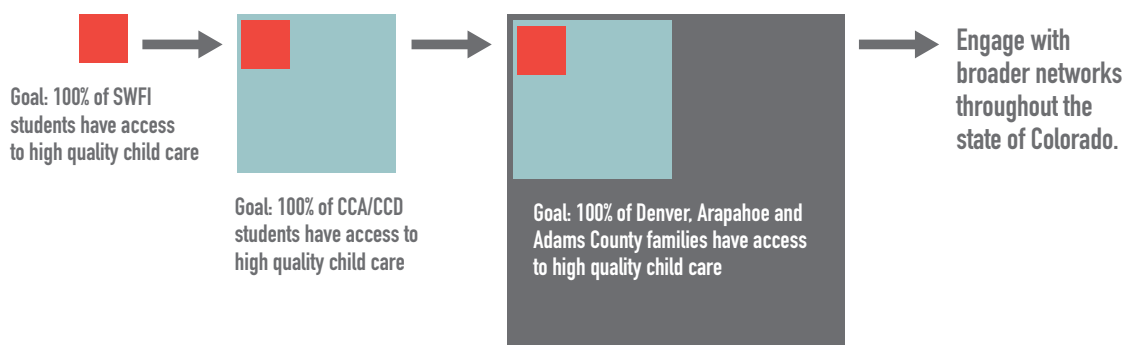
June 2018 – "Sustaining Momentum"

- *At the time...* A year into the work, on June 11, 2018 the Learning Community came together to review its progress to date and establish next steps. A significant portion of the meeting was spent clarifying the meaning of systems change as a cascade of changes that begins with the SWFI Learning Community itself, then impacting CCA and CCD, then the Colorado Community College System as a whole, and ultimately the broader statewide efforts in Colorado. Each action team shared its progress, and the group identified connections among action teams and explored the implications of each group's efforts as part of an interdependent overall effort.

- *Reflecting Back...* This marked a significant shift for the Learning Community, bringing to light the importance of each action team becoming clear about its unique focus and purpose, while at the time understanding how interdependent the action teams are in terms of creating true systemic change. Given their interdependence, the need for consistent routines to share knowledge and insights across the groups became increasingly clear.

Taking Systems Change to Scale

As the Learning Community began to develop its initial strategies and work in action teams, it became clear that there was some confusion about the meaning of "systems change." For some groups, that suggested the need to look beyond the confines of the SWFI programs at CCA and CCD and focus on larger solutions across the early childhood system. For others, it suggested thinking systematically about our approach with an eye toward scaling it beyond the SWFI program. From those divergent approaches came a shared understanding that both aspects are necessary for success: taking advantage of the close connections with students, child care providers, and the challenge of access within the laboratory of the SWFI program itself so that larger solutions can scale more broadly.

The following visual was introduced as a way to suggest the iterative nature of systems change carried out over a series of successive goals the Learning Community can focus on to guide its work, using the iterative cycles of the Learning Community Model to adapt and scale its work over time.

Goal: 100% of SWFI students have access to high quality child care

Goal: 100% of CCA/CCD students have access to high quality child care

Goal: 100% of Denver, Arapahoe and Adams County families have access to high quality child care

Engage with broader networks throughout the state of Colorado.

SWFI Child Care Economics Action Team

The purpose of the SWFI Child Care Economics Action Team is to identify specific, actionable solutions to increase the affordability of quality care for parents while also ensuring the financial viability of care provision for center, home-based and informal care providers. Solutions to be explored for providers include: how to extend the benefits of child care tax breaks to broader array of care providers; expansion of public and private subsidies to underwrite business costs; new business models or structures to create more sustainable child care businesses that offer high quality care and livable wages for employees. Potential solutions for parents include: expansion of and/or re-prioritization of CCAP funds to address areas of most acute need; expansion of savings plan options and employer subsidies.

Public Policy Action Group

The Public Policy Action Group will review current public policies governing child care and early childhood education services and identify those that create barriers for expanding families' access to these services. It will also develop public policy proposals to expand access to affordable quality child care and early childhood education services for more Colorado families.

Expanding Availability of Quality Care Action Team

This team will work to expand the availability of quality care especially in areas where there is most need. Discussions will include both formal/licensed care as well as informal/unlicensed care. Strategies used will consist of, but are not limited to, increasing training/education, access to resources, technology support and pre-licensing support to those that serve children.

Increasing Awareness of Quality Care Options Action Team

This team will work towards bringing awareness to the different types of available, affordable quality child care options in the Denver-Adams-Arapahoe region. Possible strategies include public service announcements or partnering with public facilities that surround the community.

Civic Network (www.civicnetwork.io)

Civic Network is a technology tool that the group is utilizing to help strengthen connections among partners and teams within the Learning Community, store and share relevant documents, and track actions. Initially the web-based online platform was primarily used to support members to access materials such as meeting agenda, notes and presentations from the quarterly meetings. As the first year progressed and action teams launched, more moving pieces developed, which created the need to foster ongoing communication and awareness between the various teams. Ideally, Civic Network will serve as an online tool to help foster connection and communication between quarterly meetings so that the interconnections between the action teams can be identified, coordinated, and leveraged.

Additionally, Civic Network is a dynamic chronicle of the work in the sense that it catalogs members, meeting agendas and notes, other documents and actions. This information is organized on the site at an Action Team level and Learning Community level, which helps the groups to organize their work and understand who is doing what across the entire network. The SWFI Child Care Learning Community Network can be found at Civic Network at this address:
https://www.civicnetwork.io/network/strengthening-working-families-initiative-swfi-child-care-learning-community

Part of the Learning Community's adaptive approach to problem solving involves taking time to reflect on the lessons learned along the way and applying those lessons to the next steps in the process. Following are some of the most important insights the group gained along the way, and the implications they have for the design of Year 2 activities.

INSIGHTS	IMPLICATIONS
The project has been explicitly focused on systemic solutions, but the exact meaning of this has been difficult to pin down for the group. Thinking systemically has generally been understood as something different than "programmatic solutions," implying a larger scale and more far-reaching impact. At the same time, it has become clear that even the SWFI program can be understood as a system itself, with interdependent relationships between parents, caregivers, the college, and employers. There are times when working at a programmatic level can still be a form of systems change.	We will continue to emphasize the various layers of systems involved in this work, and the path to scale the impact over time. By being more explicit that there is a systemic nature of the SWFI program, and an advantage to drawing upon the close relationships that the program allows us to tap into—with informal care givers in particular—we will be able to learn from the more immediate impact at this level and then apply those lessons to successive levels of systems at the community college and community-wide levels.
It's easy to continually get drawn back into silos of talking and working with partners in the same sectors or focus areas even within a cross-sector group.	We will continue to emphasize the value of diverse perspectives, encourage people to seek them out whenever they can, and Intentionally mix people up during meetings and have teams cross pollinate frequently, reporting back to each other and leaving time for discussion across groups.
Through Bell Policy Center's interviews with students, it became clear that child care is one of many challenges that low-income students often experience in trying to obtain higher education. Students spoke to how impactful it was, "making all the difference at times" when SWFI child care navigators would help them navigate other challenges such as finding affordable housing, reliable transportation, English language tutoring, or even appropriate clothes for work such as scrubs.	We will emphasize the interconnected nature of the systemic problems that low-income individuals face as the Learning Community continues to understand the barriers to child care and developing effective solutions. We will also encourage the Learning Community to think holistically about families and the broader challenges they face, without trying to "boil the ocean" by getting too broad in the group's focus and goals.
Children are often characterized as barriers to parents obtaining higher education, but Bell heard through their interviews with students that students more often speak about how their children are "motivators" for them to go back to school.	We will be sure to remember the importance of framing this process of providing a way for everyone to thrive—parents, children, and the broader community—and tap into the motivation that parents have for providing for their children. We will also seek to avoid framing child care as a barrier, as if children only stand in the way of working.
There can be a perceived tension between process and results in a learning community model, leaving those who feel more action oriented to feel slowed down by the overall process. The time spent building a shared understanding of the process can feel to some like it is taking away from the time for action and runs the risk of people losing interest.	The "act" stage in the Community Learning Model, which the group reached at its March meeting, helped participants pivot into defining concrete action steps involved in reaching their larger goals for the project. It will be important to emphasize this iterative cycle going forward so that people understand the importance of action and reflection as interrelated steps.

Next Steps

Utilize the Working Together Survey as a way to evaluate the quality of collaboration among the group at the end of the first year, as well as over time. The survey, based on David Chrislip and Carl Larson's extensive research on what conditions create highly effective teams, will help to identify strengths and limitations of the collaborative effort. Insights garnered from the survey results will be utilized to inform the collaboration design in Year 2.

Intentionally design quarterly meetings to connect action teams work together.

Planning team will continue to as a means of ensuring the alignment of the action teams.

The Canopy team will support action team leaders to develop action team agendas and synthesize the work they are doing into short report outs at the quarterly meetings.

The planning team will begin broadening its focus beyond just the students currently enrolled in the SWFI program—who have largely already figured out how to find child care—and now take into account the broader population of Denver and Aurora parents who might be eligible for the SWFI program but who lack access to high quality child care.

Bell Policy Center will assist in analyzing the baseline for access to care in a defined geography (e.g. Northeast Denver and Northwest Aurora) and the Learning Community will monitor progress as it seeks to make impact at a larger scale—much like the Child Care 8000 project in Mesa County.

In the coming year, the planning team will share insights that are surfaced during planning team meetings back with the full Learning Community more frequently, keeping a constant flow of communication rather than just quarterly updates. Sharing insights, learnings, interconnections among the work and the teams is a way to continue building understanding of how to bring systems change to scale and reinforces a continuous cycle of learning.

Guiding Principles

During the initial meeting of the SWFI Child Care Learning Community on June 12, 2017, the group discussed what they believed to be possible through the efforts of the Learning Community. Specifically, they were asked to discuss the results they hoped to accomplish together and strategies they thought could produce those results. While some concrete strategies and outcomes were identified, the majority of the conversation was about the nature, characteristics, qualities, and values that they hoped would be true of the process and outcomes. There were common themes that emerged from the small groups conversations. These themes revealed the collective values of the group and serve as principles to guide the Learning Community's decisions and efforts.

The Learning Community commits to using the following guiding principles as a checklist to filter ideas and solutions during decision-making processes.

- **Solutions are sustainable**
- **Solutions are scalable**
- **Solutions improve systems**
- **Solutions address root causes and barriers**
- **Solutions respond to students' lived experiences and goals**
- **Solutions consider a variety of care models to honor student choice**
- **Solutions promotes partnership and collaboration**

Key Partners

1. Adams County Human Services
2. Arapahoe County Early Childhood Council
3. Arapahoe County Human Services
4. Arapahoe/Douglas Works! Workforce Center
5. Colorado Department of Education
6. Colorado Department of Higher Education
7. Colorado Department of Human Services
8. Colorado Department of Labor & Employment
9. Colorado Governor's Office
10. Colorado Workforce Development Council
11. Community College of Aurora
12. Community College of Denver
13. Denver's Early Childhood Council
14. Denver Public Library
15. Early Childhood Partnership of Adams County
16. Executives Partnering to Invest in Children (EPIC)
17. Gary Community Investments/The Piton Foundation
18. Mile High United Way
19. The Bell Policy Center
20. The Civic Canopy
21. The Women's Foundation of Colorado
22. WorkLife Partnership

Learning Community Documents

Relevant materials such as meeting agendas, meeting notes, PowerPoint presentations and related documents from each of the Learning Community's Quarterly Meetings are stored and can be publicly accessed on Civic Network at: **http://www.civicnetwork.io/node/227/documents**

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