

Colorado Universal Pre-K Students Show Accelerated Growth, Surpassing Peers by Kindergarten Entry

The Colorado Department of Early Childhood (CDEC) is proud to collaborate with Kidsights Data at the University of Nebraska Medical Center (UNMC). This project marks Colorado as the first state to leverage groundbreaking research on early childhood development for children enrolled in a state program by leveraging the Kidsights Measurement Tool—the nation’s first population-based measurement system tracking core developmental skills of children from birth to age five. Through this collaboration, CDEC is furthering its commitment to high-quality, data-driven early childhood programs, such as Colorado’s Universal Preschool program, which ensures voluntary, high-quality preschool access for families across Colorado.

By utilizing the Kidsights Measurement Tool, this study delivers new insights into key developmental trends among young children enrolled in the Colorado Universal Preschool program. These findings offer a first-of-its-kind opportunity to shape policy, refine program quality and improve outcomes for Colorado’s youngest learners and their families. This brief highlights the unique data collected, the partnership’s significance and the key findings that have not previously been explored at this scale.

Kidsights Data is housed in the College of Public Health at the University of Nebraska Medical Center.

INTRODUCTION

A strong body of evidence demonstrates that access to quality preschool programs can positively impact young children's learning and development. At the same time, many families struggle to afford high-quality childcare. Financial support for high-quality childcare increases preschool enrollment rates and drives positive developmental outcomes for young children.

The Colorado Department of Early Childhood (CDEC) is the cabinet level agency responsible for coordinating and implementing the state's early childhood system. CDEC's mission is to deliver a comprehensive, community-informed, data-driven, high quality, and equitable system that supports the care, education and well-being of all Colorado's young children, their families and early childhood professionals in all settings. CDEC provides a comprehensive suite of programs and services supporting young children, families and early childhood professionals, including: child care licensing, community and family support programs (home visiting, family resource centers, Imagination Library), Early Intervention, initiatives to support the early childhood workforce, and universal preschool. In 2022, Colorado legislators approved a universal pre-K program (UPK) to offer high-quality preschool to every Colorado child. In 2024, nearly 60% of Colorado families opted to enroll their children in the Universal Preschool program.

Access to quality preschool programs can positively impact young children's learning and development.

In 2024, Kidsights partnered with CDEC to assess child development outcomes among Universal Preschool participants. We were able to compare the development of children in Colorado who participated in the program with the overall population of children in Nebraska of the same age, where a Universal Preschool program is not available.

Data was collected via an online survey sent to parents of children who participated in the 2023-2024 Universal Preschool program. We included questions on demographics of children and families. Parents were asked to describe children's development using the Kidsights Measurement Tool, an online questionnaire of children's achievement of basic developmental milestones.

A total of 1,407 parents responded to the survey, with 1,306 completing the Kidsights Measurement Tool to assess their child's development. About 35% of respondents could be considered low-income, as they indicated their household income was below 270% of the federal poverty line.

Children whose caregivers completed the assessment represent a subset of the broader Colorado Universal Preschool population. The majority of respondents identified as White, not of Hispanic, Latino or Spanish origin (54.6%), while 11.8% identified as BIPOC, not of Hispanic, Latino or Spanish origin. In total, 25.9% identified as Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin, and the remaining 7.7% of respondents did not disclose race or ethnicity. More respondents came from households with higher incomes than the UPK population overall. In future work using this survey, CDEC will continue to encourage all parents to participate to gain a broad view of the Colorado Universal Preschool Program's population.

Our analyses focused on describing the development of children enrolled in the program. To explore this question, we looked at the overall development of children using the Kidsights Measurement Tool. We compared the development and learning of Colorado Universal Preschool-enrolled preschool-aged children (48-71 months old) to the development and learning of their peers in the general Nebraska population where data had been collected using the Kidsights Measurement Tool in 2023. Although the average four-year-old in Colorado Universal Preschool started three months behind their Nebraskan peers, they were estimated to be up to nine months ahead by kindergarten entry.

Findings indicate that Colorado Universal Preschool students demonstrate significantly greater developmental growth compared to their Nebraska peers. Longitudinal studies tracking individual children over time are needed to confirm these findings.



