



ROUTT COUNTY

# EARLY CHILDHOOD STRATEGIC INVESTMENT PLAN

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Developed by **First Impressions, The Buell Foundation, Boettcher Foundation, Craig-Scheckman Family Foundation (CSFF), Family Development Center, United Way of the Yampa Valley and Routt County.**

The plan incorporates extensive market research and input from the business and childcare communities.






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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## THE CRISIS: Economic Impact of Childcare Issues

Routt County currently faces a fundamental mismatch between the supply of childcare, family demand, and the actual cost of high-quality care. Needs assessments found that as many as **seven children compete for every available infant slot**, resulting in extended waitlists and forcing parents to miss work, reduce hours, or delay returning to the workforce altogether. This shortfall results in up to **\$10 million in annual unrealized economic potential** for the county, contributing to broader statewide losses in productivity and tax revenue. The crisis is defined by three critical financial pressures:

-  **Significant Household Strain:** Families in Routt County currently spend up to **25–30% of their income** on childcare, far exceeding the federal affordability benchmark of 7%.
-  **The Tuition vs. Cost Gap:** While annual tuition ranges from \$15,000 to \$22,000 per child, the true cost of providing high-quality care is estimated between **\$25,000 to \$35,000**.
-  **Systemic Deficit:** This creates a **\$13,000–\$20,000 per-child** deficit that providers are forced to bridge by suppressing staff wages, delaying facility improvements, and relying on unstable grant funding.

## THE SOLUTION: Strategic Investment Framework

To address these challenges, the Routt County Early Childhood Strategic Investment Plan proposes the establishment of the Early Childhood Investment Fund. This unified structure will consolidate resources to move the community toward a sustainable childcare ecosystem. The framework is rooted in a powerful economic reality: each dollar spent can yield up to nine dollars in improved workforce participation and long-term child development outcomes.



## With a \$8.5M annual investment, the framework will deploy resources across three core pillars.



### CAPACITY

Expanding physical infrastructure and licensed capacity, particularly for infant and toddler care.



### ACCESS

Ensuring care is affordable for working families through expanded tuition assistance and nontraditional hour options.



### PEOPLE

Strengthening the workforce with wage supplements, housing assistance, and professional development to ensure consistent, high-quality care.

## IMPLEMENTATION: Overall impact of investment

The implementation of this plan will follow a phased approach through 2030, transforming the childcare landscape from a crisis into an engine for economic growth.



Increase the number of available licensed childcare slots by **approximately 270+ spaces**.



Eliminate the critical infant and toddler care gap **by expanding licensed capacity** across the county.



Support an estimated **398 additional workers** to enter the local labor force by reducing childcare barriers.



Move the community from a **70% access** rate to near-universal access (90%+) by 2030.

### The time for action is now.

Through public-sector leadership and private-sector investment, we can turn our childcare crisis into an engine for economic growth.

# COMMUNITY-DRIVEN PROCESS

Since 2023, Routt County has engaged in a robust, community-driven process to understand the scope of local child care challenges and identify practical, long-term solutions. More than 300 community members—including licensed child care providers, major employers, and families with young children across Steamboat Springs, Hayden, Oak Creek, and South Routt—have shaped this strategy through surveys, focus groups, interviews, and facilitated discussions. This extensive collaboration ensures that proposed solutions are both ambitious and grounded in the realities of Routt County’s rural resort economy.



## Business community insights

Surveys and interviews with more than **30 local employers and business leaders**, representing key sectors provided critical insights into the impact of childcare shortages on workforce stability. Employers consistently identified childcare access as a limiting factor in labor force participation and economic growth.



## Childcare provider expertise

Engagement with the majority of Routt County’s licensed child care providers and Family, Friend, and Neighbor (FFN) caregivers highlighted the realities of delivering care in a high-cost community. Providers provided information about staffing shortages, compensation challenges, rising operating costs, and the financial fragility of the system. This was further reinforced through cost models and data analysis.



## Family Perspectives

Surveys and focus groups with over **150 families**, including bilingual and Spanish-speaking households, emphasized the urgent need for affordable, reliable care—particularly for infants and toddlers. Families reported long waitlists, limited choices, high out-of-pocket costs, and difficult trade-offs between employment, income, and caregiving responsibilities.



## Public Sector and Nonprofit Participation

Interviews and collaborative working sessions with **city and county officials, school districts, public agencies, and key nonprofit partners ensured** that recommendations are aligned with existing policies, funding streams, and implementation capacity. This cross-sector engagement strengthened the feasibility of proposed investments and reinforced the need for coordinated, long-term solutions.

This community-informed process—supported by local data, the Routt County Child Care Needs Assessment<sup>1</sup> and Early Childhood Education and Care Opportunities and Considerations Report<sup>2</sup>—forms the foundation of this Strategic Investment Plan. It reflects not only what the data show, but what Routt County families, providers, employers, and leaders experience every day.

<sup>1</sup> Shields, L. and Franko, M. (2023). Routt County child care needs assessment. Butler Institute for Families, Graduate School of Social Work, University of Denver

<sup>2</sup> Coombe, A. and Brodsky, A. (2025) Early Childhood Education and Care Opportunities and Considerations: Analysis of Community Insights and Investment Options in Routt County, Colorado. Brodsky Research and Consulting, Longmont, Colorado.



## Community Goals

Our research and community feedback guided us to identify three interlocking goals to guide all recommended strategies:



- 1. Expand high-quality infant and toddler care capacity** by investing in the growth of licensed home-based and center-based programs. Over the next five years, the County will support the creation or expansion of 10–15 licensed programs, prioritizing rural areas. We will actively support pathways for FFN care to become licensed and create partnerships that ensure safe, developmentally appropriate care for young children.



- 2. Expand access to child care** that meets the needs of working families by increasing the availability of full-day, year-round, and nontraditional-hour care. At the same time, the County will expand tuition assistance and fill gaps not covered by existing public funding. By expanding availability and accessibility, it is the long-term goal that families spend no more than **7-10% of household income** on childcare.



- 3. Strengthen the early childhood workforce** with strategic investments in compensation, benefits, housing supports, and professional development. As the workforce stabilizes and educators receive stronger supports, this will elevate the quality of our programs. More providers will be able to achieve a high-quality rating, ensuring that more children in Routt County benefit from high-quality early learning environments that prepare them for kindergarten and beyond.

# THE CRISIS:

## Market Analysis & Economic Impact

Due to child care shortfalls, Routt County **loses up to \$10 million annually** in unrealized economic potential, representing our share of Colorado's staggering \$2.2 billion annual loss. These deficits have immediate, measurable impacts on business operations, talent retention, and growth potential across all sectors, including healthcare, education, and small businesses. Employers pointed out that increasing the child care capacity could help the County retain more of the income commuting workers earn and reduce income outflow to other areas. The Bureau of Economic Analysis indicates a loss of \$27.6 million in Routt County in 2023 due to the adjustment for place of residence.<sup>3</sup>



**Half of Colorado parents report** making sacrifices that affect their employment, including reducing work hours, taking unpaid leave, or entirely leaving their jobs due to lack of affordable childcare options.<sup>4</sup>



The Healthier Colorado 2023 Voter Opinion Survey revealed that **one-third of respondents limited their work hours** because of the high costs of childcare.<sup>4</sup>



**Colorado would realize over \$700 million in lost wages** if the estimated 10,200 Colorado parents could secure childcare and re-enter the workforce. If this occurred, it would generate over \$3.7 billion in GDP and create 29,000 new jobs.<sup>6</sup>



To replace an employee costs companies up to 2x an employee's salary<sup>7</sup>, and productivity problems cause **Colorado employers to lose \$780 million annually** due to childcare challenges their workforce faces.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Coombe, A. and Brodsky, A. (2025) Early Childhood Education and Care Opportunities and Considerations: Analysis of Community Insights and Investment Options in Routt County, Colorado. Brodsky Research and Consulting, Longmont, Colorado.

<sup>4</sup> [ReadNationCouncilForaStrongAmerica\\_WanttoGrowColorado'sEconomy?FixtheChildCareCrisis](#)

<sup>3</sup> [HealthierColorado.org](#)

<sup>4</sup> [ReadNationCouncilForaStrongAmerica\\_WanttoGrowColorado'sEconomy?FixtheChildCareCrisis](#)

<sup>5</sup> [https://momsfirst.us/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/The-Employee-Benefit-That-Pays-for-Itself\\_March-2024-2.pdf](https://momsfirst.us/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/The-Employee-Benefit-That-Pays-for-Itself_March-2024-2.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> [ReadNationCouncilForaStrongAmerica\\_WanttoGrowColorado'sEconomy?FixtheChildCareCrisis](#)



# Business Impact Analysis

Child care shortfalls disrupt Routt County's business ecosystem in several critical ways, directly affecting productivity, workforce stability, and long-term economic growth. Employers across sectors consistently identified access to reliable child care as a limiting factor in their ability to operate efficiently and compete in an increasingly tight labor market.

## 1. Operational Disruption (Productivity & Efficiency)

Child care shortages create ongoing operational challenges that ripple across workplaces, increasing costs and reducing efficiency. Employers reported increased absenteeism and schedule instability as employees manage long waitlists, limited infant and toddler options, and last-minute care breakdowns. These disruptions reduce productivity, require managers to cover shifts or pay overtime, and make it difficult to maintain consistent staffing levels—particularly in service, hospitality, health care, and education sectors.

These challenges are most acute for families with infants and toddlers. The Routt County Child Care Needs Assessment found that as many as seven children compete for every available infant slot, resulting in extended waitlists and forcing parents to miss work, reduce hours, or delay returning to the workforce altogether. Employers emphasized that these disruptions are not isolated incidents, but persistent conditions affecting day-to-day business operations.

Seasonal gaps in care further compound these challenges. Nearly 60% of preschool programs in Routt County close during the summer months, while most summer camp options do not begin until around age five. This creates a significant gap for families with younger children, leaving many without consistent care during the summer. As a result, parents often face disrupted work schedules, reduced hours, or the need to piece together short-term care arrangements, adding additional strain on both families and employers.

## 2. Talent Management Crisis (Recruitment, Retention & Well-being)

The lack of accessible child care has become a significant barrier to effective talent management in Routt County. Employers reported difficulty recruiting qualified candidates—particularly working parents—due to limited availability of infant and toddler care and a lack of full-day, year-round options. Even when positions are filled, businesses experience higher turnover as employees leave jobs or the local workforce entirely when child care needs cannot be met.

Employer feedback and economic analysis indicate that an estimated 398 additional workers could enter Routt County's labor force if reliable child care were available, highlighting the direct link between child care access and workforce participation. Employers also noted increased stress, burnout, and reduced job satisfaction among employees juggling unstable care arrangements, further undermining retention and well-being.

### 3. Growth Constraints (Expansion and Scaling)

Child care shortages are also limiting business growth and long-term economic development across Routt County. Employers shared that staffing challenges constrain their ability to expand services, extend operating hours, open new locations, or scale operations during peak seasons. Businesses incur significant costs when investments in recruitment, onboarding, and training are lost due to turnover driven by child care barriers.

In a rural resort economy that depends on a stable, year-round workforce, the lack of reliable child care creates a competitive disadvantage compared to communities with stronger child care infrastructure. Without strategic investment, these constraints will continue to limit business expansion, reduce economic resilience, and hinder the county's ability to sustain a diverse and thriving local economy.

“My team, who provides laundry services for Steamboat restaurants and hotels, is comprised of over 50% parents. If they do not have care, we don't have napkins for restaurants or towels and sheets for hotels.”

— Participating Employer

## Current Market Status

Routt County's child care market is constrained by a fundamental mismatch between supply, demand, and the true cost of providing high-quality care. Licensed child care capacity—particularly for infants and toddlers—falls well short of family needs, with long waitlists and limited options across both center-based and home-based settings. While recent public investments have expanded access for four-year-olds, they have also unintentionally shifted provider capacity away from younger children, further straining the most limited segment of the market. At the same time, tuition rates that families can afford do not reflect the actual cost of quality care, leaving providers unable to offer competitive wages, expand capacity, or invest in program quality. These pressures are compounded by housing costs and workforce shortages, creating a fragile system that cannot self-correct through market forces alone.

Without coordinated public and private investment, the child care market in Routt County will continue to constrain workforce participation, limit economic growth, and leave hundreds of families without care.

Age Group	Current Licensed Capacity	Need	Gap
Infants (0-18 months)	51	300	-249
Toddlers (18-36 months)	98	318	-385
Preschool (36-60 months)	498	391	+107
<b>Total Licensed Care</b>	<b>647</b>	<b>916</b>	<b>-269</b>

# Childcare Workforce Stability Analysis



A stable and well-supported workforce is the backbone of Routt County's child care sector. However, significant economic and operational challenges threaten this stability, creating a precarious environment for educators, child care businesses, and the wider community. Addressing these issues is crucial for retaining qualified staff and ensuring high-quality care for our children, which supports our region's broader economic health.

## Current Workforce Economics

Local early childhood educators face substantial economic hardships that undermine workforce stability:

- Early childhood educators in Colorado earn 26.5% less than K-8 teachers, making it difficult to attract and retain qualified staff.<sup>9</sup>
- 15.1% of early childhood educators live below the poverty line, compared to 8.6% of the state's general workforce. This economic strain contributes to high turnover rates and workforce instability.<sup>10</sup>
- High housing costs significantly destabilize the early childhood workforce, with many educators commuting long distances or leaving the field altogether because they cannot afford to live in the communities where they work.

## Routt County Educator Wage Analysis

Understanding the wage structure is key to addressing workforce stability:

ROLE	WAGE RANGE	
Assistant Teachers	\$18.00 - \$24.00/hr	\$37,000-\$49,000/yr
Lead Teachers	\$21.50 - \$27.00/hr	\$43,600-\$56,100/yr
Assistant Directors	\$25.96 - \$35.00/hr	\$54,00-\$72,800/yr
Directors	\$36.54 - \$62.50/hr	\$76,000-\$130,000/yr

\*\*\*The median household income in Routt County is \$104,804  
A livable household income for a family of four in Routt County is \$161,908.

Early childhood educator wages in Routt County typically range from \$21 - \$27 per hour (\$43,680- \$56,160 annual). While this represents progress, it remains below the living wage for a single adult in Routt County, estimated at approximately \$29 per hour, and far below what is needed for educators supporting families.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> <https://cscce.berkeley.edu/workforce-index-2020/states/colorado/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://cscce.berkeley.edu/workforce-index-2020/states/colorado/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://livingwage.mit.edu>



## Turnover Impact

Routt County child care center directors report an average annual turnover rate of 30%. High turnover rates for educators in the child care sector have far-reaching consequences that extend beyond staffing issues:

- **High turnover is a persistent challenge across Routt County's early childhood system**, with providers reporting frequent staff departures driven by low wages, housing costs, and competition from higher-paying sectors.
- **Staff turnover directly reduces licensed child care capacity**, as providers are forced to close classrooms or limit enrollment when they cannot meet staffing ratio requirements.
- **Recruitment and onboarding costs are repeatedly incurred due to turnover**, placing additional financial strain on providers already operating on thin margins.
- **Workforce instability disproportionately affects infant and toddler classrooms**, where higher staffing ratios and specialized qualifications make vacancies harder to fill and more costly to sustain.
- **Turnover is a primary barrier to quality improvement**, as frequent staff changes undermine continuity of care, staff morale, and progress toward high-quality ratings.
- Constant workforce churn leads to inconsistencies in child care quality, affecting child development outcomes and parental satisfaction.
- Children in unstable care environments experience developmental setbacks, which can lead to long-term academic and employment challenges, perpetuating cycles of economic instability within the community.

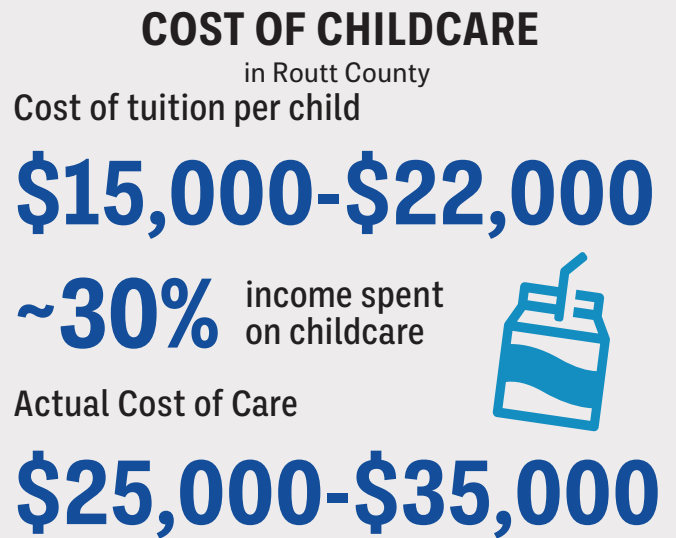
These challenges create a self-reinforcing cycle that ultimately affects our community's long-term economic vitality. **Addressing workforce stability is crucial to breaking this cycle and fostering a thriving child care system.**

# Affordability Analysis & the True Cost of Childcare

Child care affordability remains a critical barrier for Colorado and Routt County families. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, child care is considered affordable when it does not exceed 7% of household income. In Routt County, families spend up to 25–30% of their income on child care, placing a significant financial strain on working households.

Annual child care tuition in Routt County ranges from approximately **\$15,000 to \$22,000 per child**, depending on age and program type. However, the true cost of providing high-quality care—when accounting for livable wages, benefits, required staffing ratios, and operating overhead—is estimated to be **between \$25,000 and \$35,000 per child per year**. Providers are forced to absorb this gap by suppressing wages, delaying facility improvements, limiting benefits, or relying on short-term and unstable grant funding.

Without targeted public and private investment, these affordability challenges will continue to affect families, educators, and the broader economy, reducing workforce participation, destabilizing the child care system, and increasing economic strain on Routt County households.



# Current Market Solutions & Limitations

Local businesses recognize the economic imperative of addressing childcare gaps—each dollar spent can yield up to \$9 in improved workforce participation and child development outcomes<sup>12</sup>. While the child care market in Routt County is largely privately operated, several efforts have emerged to help address workforce needs and support working families. These efforts are summarized below.

## Employer-Supported Child Care Centers

A small number of employers and community partners have supported the development of employer-based or employer-supported child care programs. These programs provide reliable care options for employees and help stabilize staffing within participating businesses.

However, these models require significant capital investment and operational support, making them difficult to replicate widely across the community.

## First Impressions Tuition Assistance Program

First Impressions of Routt County administers a local tuition assistance program that helps working families access licensed child care. The program supports families earning up to 400% of the Federal Poverty Level and ensures families pay no more than a manageable portion of their income toward child care costs.

The program helps bridge affordability gaps not covered by state subsidies and has become an important tool for supporting workforce participation among local families. In 2025, the program supported 26 working families across 11 child care providers, often layering with Universal Preschool (UPK) and CCCAP to help families fully cover the cost of care.

However, participation in the program is not limited by demand—it is limited by available child care capacity. Many families who would qualify for assistance are unable to access the program because there are no open child care slots, particularly for infants and toddlers. As child care costs rise and capacity remains constrained, the gap between families needing support and those able to access care continues to grow.

While these efforts demonstrate real commitment, individual solutions have not produced the systemic change needed. Key barriers remain unaddressed: **lack of affordable facilities, unsustainable operating costs, and limited qualified staff.**

“In an ideal world we want a licensed provider who is [CPR certified], available all the hours we want, affordable, and where our kid is happy. But, when we were in the chaos of trying to find care, we didn’t have the luxury of even thinking about those things because there weren’t options.”

— Routt County Parent

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<sup>1</sup>[ReadNationCouncilForaStrongAmerica\\_WanttoGrowColorado'sEconomy?FixtheChildCareCrisis](#)

# ECOSYSTEM SOLUTIONS

## Levers for Change

Through extensive community engagement and research, we've identified three interconnected areas to drive economic prosperity and build a thriving childcare system, emphasizing increasing care for 0–3-year-olds. The Strategic Investment Framework Strategy will support the implementation of the following identified priorities and levers for change.



## CAPACITY: Expand Child Care Space

### Levers for Change

1. Reduce barriers to facility development
2. Increase licensed family child care homes
3. Leverage housing and real estate solutions
4. Support sustainable business models for providers

### Recommended Actions:

1. **Expand Licensed Family Child Care Homes**
  - Launch start-up grants for new home-based providers
  - Support Family, Friend, and Neighbor (FFN) providers in becoming licensed
  - Provide mentorship and business supports for home-based programs
2. **Invest in Facility Development and Child Care Infrastructure**
  - Provide capital grants for infant and toddler classroom expansion
  - Renovate or adapt existing community spaces for licensed child care
  - Partner with developers to integrate child care into new developments
3. **Creating Licensing and Business Navigation Supports**
  - Provide technical assistance for licensing, zoning, and quality rating requirements
  - Support providers in developing sustainable business models
  - Offer shared resources and administrative supports for new programs





## ACCESS: Increase Affordable Child Care for Families

### Levers for Change

- Reduce barriers to facility development
- Increase licensed family child care homes
- Leverage housing and real estate solutions
- Support sustainable business models for providers

### Recommended Actions:

#### 1. Expand Nontraditional and Extended-Hour Care

- Provide operating grants for evening, weekend, and early morning care
- Pilot seasonal child care programs during peak workforce periods
- Support staffing models that allow programs to extend hours

#### 2. Increase Affordability for Working Families

- Expand local tuition assistance programs
- Fill funding gaps not covered by existing public programs
- Work toward a long-term goal of families spending no more than 7-10% of income on child care

#### 3. Strengthen Employer and Community Partnerships

- Launch employer-matched child care scholarship programs
- Encourage businesses to participate in child care solutions for employees
- Coordinate employer, public, and philanthropic investments



## PEOPLE: Strengthen the Childcare Workforce

### Levers for Change

- Increase educator compensation and benefits to match school districts
- Address housing and cost-of-living barriers for educators
- Expand professional development and career pathways
- Strengthen retention supports that promote program quality and workforce stability

### Recommended Actions:

#### 1. Improve Compensation and Retention for Early Childhood Educators

- Implement wage supplement programs to increase educator compensation
- Provide retention bonuses and longevity incentives for experienced educators
- Move toward wage parity with school district educators in Routt County

#### 2. Address Housing and Cost-of-Living Barriers

- Develop housing stipends or rental assistance for early childhood educators
- Partner with local housing organizations to prioritize workforce housing opportunities
- Explore housing models that support family child care home providers

#### 3. Expand Professional Development and Leadership Supports

- Invest in coaching, training, and credential pathways for educators
- Support programs in achieving higher quality levels
- Provide leadership and business training for program directors and owners

# THE SOLUTION:

## The Strategic Investment Framework

Routt County's early childhood system requires coordinated investment to address the interconnected challenges of child care capacity, affordability, and workforce stability.

The **Routt County Early Childhood Investment Fund** will deploy resources across three interconnected pillars designed to expand capacity, improve access for families, and strengthen the early childhood workforce. These pillars reflect the most significant barriers identified through community engagement, economic analysis, and provider feedback. The fund will require \$4.8-8.5M annually to achieve our goals.

The Early Childhood Investment Fund will provide a unified structure for directing community investments into the most critical areas of the child care system. Rather than creating multiple separate programs, this approach consolidates resources into a single fund that can strategically deploy investments across three priority areas. This structure allows Routt County to respond to evolving community needs while ensuring funding remains aligned with long-term economic and workforce goals.



PILLAR 1

### CAPACITY

Expanding physical infrastructure and licensed capacity, particularly for infant and toddler care.



PILLAR 2

### ACCESS

Ensuring care is affordable for working families through expanded tuition assistance and nontraditional hour options.



PILLAR 3

### PEOPLE

Strengthening the workforce with wage supplements, housing assistance, and professional development to ensure consistent, high-quality care.

## Governance

The Early Childhood Investment Fund will be administered through **First Impressions of Routt County**, the county's designated Early Childhood Council.

First Impressions' council is a coalition of diverse stakeholders, including child care providers, local governments, businesses, health systems, and families. Leveraging this existing infrastructure for fund governance allows Routt County to build on established relationships, avoid duplicating administrative structures, and ensure investments are aligned with community priorities.

The council will work in partnership with community stakeholders and public partners to guide funding decisions, monitor outcomes, and ensure transparency and accountability.

# 1. CAPACITY: Expanding Childcare Space

Investments in this pillar will focus on expanding the physical infrastructure needed to increase licensed child care capacity, particularly for infants and toddlers.

Funding may support:

- Development or renovation of child care facilities
- Expansion of infant and toddler classrooms
- Start-up grants for family child care homes
- Licensing and business navigation supports
- Partnerships that integrate child care into housing or community facilities

These investments will directly increase the number of available child care slots and reduce waitlists for families seeking care.

Program	Investment	Outcomes
Family Child Care Home Development Supports	\$300K-\$600K	Support <b>3-5 new family child care homes</b> annually (15 over five years)
Child Care Capital & Facility Development	\$1.45M – \$2.45M	Support development or expansion of <b>10 new infant/toddler classrooms</b>
Licensing Pathway Technical Assistance	\$150K-\$250K	Support new provider licensing and business development
Program Administration, Technical Assistance, and Project Management	\$125K-\$200K	Coordination of capital projects and provider supports
<b>Total Priority Area Investment</b>		<b>\$2.0M - \$3.5M</b>

Investments in the Space pillar represent the most significant upfront costs in the Strategic Investment Framework because expanding child care capacity requires capital investments in facilities, infrastructure, and new program development.

These investments are designed to build the foundation of the child care system by creating new infant and toddler classrooms and supporting the development of additional family child care homes. As capacity increases and the community approaches its target number of child care slots, the need for large-scale capital investments is expected to decrease.

## 2. ACCESS: Expanding Affordable Child Care Options for Families

Investments in this pillar will focus on ensuring families can access child care that meets their schedules and financial realities.

Funding may support:

- Tuition assistance for working families
- Employer-supported child care initiatives
- Expanded full-day, year-round, and nontraditional-hour care
- Seasonal child care options for peak workforce periods
- Simplified systems that help families navigate child care options and financial supports

These investments will help ensure that child care is available and affordable for working families in Routt County.

Program	Investment	Outcomes
Expanded Local Tuition Access	\$800K – \$1.3M	Supports <b>125–200 families annually</b> up to 450% FPL, helping families spend no more than 10% of income on child care
Extended Hours and Nontradition Care Pilot Programs	\$250K – \$400K	Supports 1–2 pilot programs during the first three years to expand evening, early morning, or weekend care
Summer and Seasonal Childcare	\$200–\$350K	Supports 4–6 summer programs serving children ages 3–10 for 6–10 weeks of programming
Family Navigation and Shared Application System	\$125K – \$200K	Supports staff and systems that help families navigate eligibility, find available care, and enroll in programs more efficiently
<b>Total Priority Area Investment</b>		<b>\$1.8M – \$2.9M</b>

Access investments will grow alongside increases in child care capacity. As new family child care homes open and additional classrooms come online through the Space pillar, more families will be able to enroll in licensed programs.

As capacity expands, funding for tuition assistance and other access supports will scale to ensure families can afford and utilize the available child care slots. This phased approach allows Routt County to first build the supply of care and then expand affordability supports so that new capacity can be fully utilized by working families.



### 3. PEOPLE: Strengthening the Childcare Workforce

Investments in this pillar will focus on stabilizing and growing the early childhood workforce so programs can deliver consistent, high-quality care.

Funding may support:

- Wage supplements and compensation supports for educators
- Housing assistance for early childhood professionals
- Professional development and coaching opportunities
- Leadership development for program directors and providers
- Retention incentives that support workforce stability

A strong early childhood workforce is the foundation of high-quality early learning environments that support children's development and school readiness.

Program	Investment	Outcomes
<b>Early Childhood Workforce Stabilization</b>	\$1M – \$1.5M	Provides tiered compensation supports based on credential levels and continuing education for approximately <b>140 early childhood educators</b> , helping programs recruit and retain staff while moving toward long-term wage parity with school district educators
<b>Housing Supports for Educators</b>	\$300K – \$650K	Provides housing assistance for approximately 60–100 educators, helping stabilize the workforce in a high-cost housing market
<b>Professional Development, Coaching, and Career Pathways</b>	\$400K–\$650K	Provides training, coaching, EC mental health consultant and career pathway opportunities for approximately <b>200–260 early childhood educators</b>
<b>Shared Service Hub for Child Care Providers</b>	\$500K – \$800K	Reduces administrative burden and operating costs (Shared benefits supports, HR, enrollment and waitlist management, etc.)
<b>Family Navigation and Shared Application System</b>	\$125K – \$200K	Provides staffing and systems needed to coordinate workforce supports and track outcomes
<b>Total Priority Area Investment</b>		<b>\$2.3M – \$3.8M</b>

While investments in the Space pillar expand physical capacity and the Access pillar helps families afford care, the People pillar ensures programs have the qualified educators needed to operate classrooms and support children's development. These investments support early childhood educators through compensation, housing stability, and professional development, helping programs recruit and retain the skilled professionals who care for Routt County's youngest residents.

# Proposed Funding Approach

Creating a sustainable Early Childhood Investment Fund will require a coordinated, multi-sector approach that reflects Routt County's unique economy and community values.

Rather than relying on a single funding source, this strategy brings together public investment, business engagement, and philanthropic support to build a stable and flexible funding model over time. This approach allows the community to respond to changing needs while ensuring long-term sustainability.

Across Colorado and nationally, communities have successfully supported early childhood systems through a combination of local funding, employer participation, and private investment. Routt County is well positioned to build on this model.



## Public Investment

Local public investment may play a role in supporting long-term sustainability, with options that could include:

- Dedicating a portion of existing or future local revenue streams
- Exploring mechanisms used successfully in similar Colorado communities
- Aligning funding strategies with broader community priorities such as workforce and housing

## Business Contributions

Local businesses have a strong interest in reliable child care as a critical workforce support. Employer participation can take many forms, including:

- Voluntary contributions to a community early childhood fund
- Industry partnerships that support workforce-specific child care needs
- In-kind contributions such as space, equipment, or operational support

## Philanthropic Donations

Philanthropic organizations and private donors have already demonstrated a strong commitment to early childhood in Routt County and will continue to play an important role in supporting and accelerating this work. Opportunities may include:

- Contributions to a dedicated Early Childhood Investment Fund
- Matching funds to leverage public or employer investment
- Support for pilot programs and innovative solutions

## Existing State and Federal Funds

Aligning local investments with existing state and federal funding ensures that resources are used efficiently and strategically. This includes:

- Coordinating with programs such as Universal Preschool and CCCAP
- Filling gaps not addressed by existing funding streams
- Maximizing the impact of combined public and private investments

# IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY

Our four-phase implementation plan ensures measurable progress toward economic impact goals.

## Phase 1: Market Foundation 2026

The first phase focuses on building the foundation for long-term early childhood investment through community engagement, economic analysis, and strategic planning.

- Conducting market analysis and cost modeling to understand the true cost of care and system gaps
- Engaging community stakeholders including families, child care providers, employers, and local governments
- Identifying priority investment strategies that address capacity, affordability, workforce, and nontraditional care needs
- Building a coalition of community partners to support sustainable early childhood funding solutions

This phase ensures that proposed investments reflect local needs and are grounded in strong economic data.

## Phase 2: Fund Development & Launch

Fall 2026-Winter 2027

The second phase focuses on establishing the Early Childhood Investment Fund and securing sustainable local funding.

- Finalizing the governance and administrative structure for the investment fund
- Identifying and securing funding sources including public funding, employer participation, and philanthropy
- Establishing investment guidelines and funding criteria aligned with the strategic investment framework
- Building community awareness and support for long-term early childhood investment

This phase positions the community to move from planning to action.



## Phase 3: Deploy Fund and System Stabilization

**2027-2029**

The third phase focuses on implementing the strategic investments that expand child care capacity and stabilize the early childhood workforce.

- Launching grant and investment programs that support child care expansion, workforce recruitment, and affordability
- Supporting providers in opening new classrooms and expanding infant and toddler care capacity
- Implementing workforce supports including wage supplements, professional development, and retention incentives
- Expanding tuition assistance and employer-supported child care initiatives

These investments will directly increase available child care slots and strengthen the sustainability of local programs.

## Phase 4: Evaluation and Next Steps

**2030 and Beyond**

The final phase focuses on assessing the outcomes of the strategic investment framework and identifying opportunities for continued system growth.

- Conducting a comprehensive evaluation of the early childhood system's impact on workforce stability, business growth, and child care capacity
- Monitoring key indicators such as child care availability, workforce retention, and family affordability
- Identifying additional supports needed to maintain and expand progress
- Developing the next-phase investment strategy in collaboration with community partners

This phase ensures that Routt County continues to adapt its approach as the early childhood system evolves and community needs change.

# EXPECTED OUTCOMES & ECONOMIC IMPACT

We project significant growth in Routt County's childcare capacity through strategic investment and coordinated action.

## Outcomes Include:



Increase the number of available licensed child care slots by approximately 270+ spaces and closing the infant and toddler care gap.



Stabilize and grow the early childhood educator workforce and reduce turnover rate to less than 20% annually.



Expand summer and hour options for families working non-traditional schedules



Improve affordability for middle-income working families to pay no more than 7-10% of their monthly



Increase workforce participation by reducing child care barriers



Strengthen the local economy by supporting working families and businesses





# CONCLUSION:

## A Call to Action

**Routt County is at a crossroads.** Our workforce, local economy, and children's futures depend on access to affordable, high-quality child care.

The Early Childhood Strategic Investment Plan outlines immediate solutions to stabilize the early childhood workforce and strengthen the local economy while laying the foundation for long-term community prosperity. By acting now, Routt County can build a child care system that supports working families, helps businesses retain employees, and ensures children have strong early learning experiences.

The return on investment is clear.

**Investments in early childhood are not only a social priority—they are a critical economic strategy.** This plan provides a structured roadmap to address the county's most pressing child care challenges through innovative, data-driven solutions.

These efforts will:

- Expand licensed child care capacity to better meet community demand
- Close the largest gaps in infant and toddler care
- Improve affordability for working families
- Strengthen the early childhood workforce through wage and housing supports
- Increase workforce participation by reducing child care barriers
- Support local businesses by helping employees access reliable care
- Build a sustainable early childhood system that grows with the community

### Leadership and Implementation

The success of this effort will depend on coordinated leadership across the community. First Impressions of Routt County will play a central role in convening partners, coordinating implementation, and ensuring accountability for outcomes. As the county's designated Early Childhood Council, First Impressions already brings together representatives from local government, business, education, health care, child care providers, and families to guide early childhood initiatives.

By leveraging this existing infrastructure, Routt County can move quickly from planning to implementation while ensuring investments remain aligned with community priorities.

Success will require continued collaboration among local governments, employers, philanthropic partners, and community organizations.

### Join the Effort

We invite business leaders, policymakers, and community members to join us in this transformative effort.

Together, we can ensure Routt County builds a child care system that strengthens our economy, supports families, and creates opportunity for the next generation.

***The time to act is now.***

## How You Can Help

**Employers:** Partner in employer-supported child care initiatives, offer flexible workplace policies for working parents, and support local efforts to expand child care access.

**Municipal Leaders:** Prioritize early childhood investments in local policy decisions and support sustainable funding solutions that strengthen the workforce and economy.

**Philanthropic Partners:** Invest in innovative child care solutions that expand access, support educators, and strengthen the early childhood system.

**Community Members:** Advocate for child care solutions, share personal experiences with local leaders, and champion early childhood as a priority for Routt County's future.



# Key Partners

We developed this Strategic Investment Plan through collaboration with key organizations across our community. We thank our partners for their contributions and continued commitment to implementation:

## Childcare Plan Leaders

- Alexis Wolf, City of Steamboat Springs
- Amory Donohue, Community Member
- Angelica Salinas, Routt County Commissioner
- Colleen Miller, Family Development Center
- Erin Ax, Parent of Young Child
- Janessa Rinaker, Parent of Young Child
- Karen Schneider, Yampa Valley Medical Center Foundation
- Meg Franges, First Impressions of Routt County

## Supporting Partners

- Boettcher Foundation
- Boys and Girls Club
- Buell Foundation
- Craig-Scheckman Family Foundation
- Family Development Center
- Routt County
- Routt County Economic Development Partnership
- Steamboat For All
- United Way of the Yampa Valley
- Yampa Valley Community Foundation

# Licensed Childcare Facilities in Routt County

This comprehensive list includes all licensed providers in Routt County. Facilities marked with an asterisk (\*) actively participated in the community engagement process for this strategic plan.

## Independent Providers

1. Jennifer Creagan
2. Katina's Wee Care Center - Katina Kline
3. Monica Sevenski
4. Nature and Nurture - Lenah Wingard\*

## School District Programs

13. Hayden Valley Preschool\*
14. North Routt Community Charter School ECC\*
15. Sleeping Giant Preschool\*
16. Soda Creek Preschool\*
17. South Routt Preschool\*
18. Strawberry Park Preschool\*

## Early Childhood Centers

5. Discovery Learning Center\*
6. Grand Kids Day Care Center\*
7. Holy Name Preschool\*
8. Kids Play Garden
9. Ski Town Early Learning Center\*
10. Steamboat Child Care Center\*
11. Steamboat Montessori\*
12. Totally Tots



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