



# BRIGHT SPOTS

## EARLY LEARNING VENTURES

At Early Learning Ventures, child care is serious business. After looking at the child care market through a business lens, venture philanthropists David and Laura Merage saw that child care teachers and administrators were spending a lot of time on burdensome administrative functions, such as record keeping, supply purchasing, and financial operations, detracting from time they could have been spending with the kids.

Believing that all children deserve access to high-quality care and education — and a strong foundation for learning — the Merages founded Early Learning Ventures in 2008 through the Merage Foundation. Early Learning Ventures takes a slightly different approach than other organizations working toward helping children attain grade-level reading proficiency by third grade.

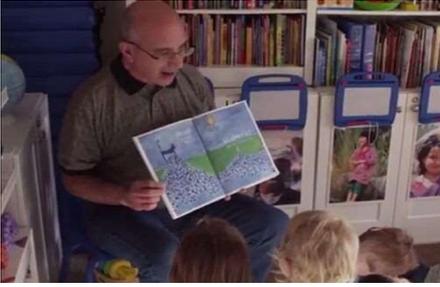
The Colorado nonprofit strengthens the early childhood education and care industry in two ways. First, by providing child care providers with stronger business practices and technologies that increase efficiencies, cost savings and regulation compliance, the organization enables providers to focus on what matters most — improving their quality of care and educational services for children. Second, Early Learning Ventures delivers educational resources to providers and families that directly impact the early learning environment.

In 2010, Early Learning Ventures began implementing a shared services business technology platform with a network of child care providers throughout Colorado, including licensed family child care homes, preschools and child care centers. This program gave clients access to nationally vetted resources and cost savings on supplies, says Early Learning Ventures Executive Director Judy Williams.

Early Learning Ventures also saw a need for quality initiatives and services for children and families. Additional funders joined forces to help build Early Learning Ventures' family services arm, and a 2014 federal government Early Head Start grant allowed the organization to build a network for these services that are intended to close the achievement gap between low-income children and their more affluent peers.

The blended model is now embedded in 31 child care programs, including 17 centers and 15 home-based programs. In total, Early Learning Ventures is reaching nearly 500 child care businesses and 1,700 children in the state. Half of Early Learning Ventures' clients serve low-income families that qualify for free and reduced meals and state tuition assistance. The organization's reach extends from the Denver metro area to rural counties throughout Colorado, including Pueblo, Mesa and Garfield Counties, where a lack of Early Head Start services creates a high need.

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Bright Spots showcase the work that GLR Campaign communities are doing to make progress on school readiness, school attendance and summer learning.

On the family services side, Early Learning Ventures' child management system helps with compliance and can monitor teacher-to-child ratios, group sizes and school attendance, among other metrics. Through the Teaching Strategies GOLD system, child care programs can track data from pre-enrollment through an 18-month follow-up observation to gauge parents' engagement and students' school readiness. Early Learning Ventures' latest outcomes show that 75 percent of participating children were meeting expectations on the assessment. The program also helps participants to identify families' needs and connect them with appropriate resources.

"Our approach is with the whole family, working with the family as well as the program delivering services to the child, so that everyone works together as a unit," Williams says.

She says third-grade reading is where the bar is set for predicting future academic and social achievement, but it's important to intervene in the early years, from birth through age 3, for the best results later in life.

"It's a great place to measure, but if you get the right start in early childhood, things are much easier."

"Lots of people think child care is just a place for babysitting children, that they're not doing early education, but by being able to put systems and supports in place as educational tools, and by helping with assessments, we want to start as early as possible to strengthen the system children are in before they get to school," Williams says. "We want to provide opportunities to all children, regardless of who or where they come from."

Williams says that Early Learning Ventures' goal is to expand nationally, and that the key to success will be leveraging what's working in Colorado to bring their system to other states without having to reinvent the wheel.

"As a shared services model improving the field by finding appropriate ways to support both center-based care and family, friend and neighbor care, they are improving the effectiveness outcomes of hundreds of programs affecting thousands of kids in Colorado," says Ralph Smith, managing director of the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading. "And with their grant with Early Head Start, they are modeling the kind of innovation that's going to transform the field."

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Photos: Early Learning Ventures