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WORKFORCE

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Photo by Bryan Oller

Julie Lavigne and preschoolers at Manitou Springs Elementary School prepare to release butterflies.

The private side of universal preschool

By Greta Anderson

Colorado's upcoming universal preschool program will, in theory, provide families with more affordable choices for where to send their 4-year-olds for early care and education.

The intent of the program, which will go into effect in fall 2023, is to include a range of public and private Early Care and Education providers where families can use their 10 weekly hours of state-funded preschool for 4-year-olds — what's known as a "mixed delivery system."

But the availability of slots for universal preschool (dubbed "UPK" by stakeholders) and whether mixed delivery will actually be achieved, depends on how many and what types of providers decide to participate in the voluntary program.

And many Family and Child Care Home providers, which are small private ECE businesses and make up nearly half of El Paso County's overall licensed ECE providers, are uncertain of whether it will make financial and practical sense for them to provide UPK slots.

Major questions of how FCCH providers would qualify and be compensated for participating in UPK remain unanswered, as the state's new Department of Early Childhood starts to determine how the program will be regulated.

It has left FCCH providers to wonder whether UPK will be set up to accommodate them, or if it will mostly rely on school district- and center-based preschool programs, said Alma Wiley, president of the Pikes Peak Region Family Child Care Association, which currently represents 94 (or nearly half) of the FCCH

providers in El Paso and Teller counties.

"They've talked about the mixed delivery system, but they really haven't addressed the mixed delivery system enough for providers to feel comfortable that they're not going to be pushed out of business," Wiley said.

"They need to get Family Child Care involved, across the state," she added. "There's some counties that feel like Family Child Care isn't even represented at the table for UPK."

This is going to be a problem for administering UPK, Wiley asserts, as school district- and center-based providers across the state do not have the capacity alone to accommodate a potential influx of 4-year-olds.

"It's going to need to be all hands on deck for every age level," she said.

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FOCUS SMALL BIZ

SBDC and BBB host Small Business Week for the Pikes Peak region June 4-8.

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