



Dear Colorado Universal Preschool Program families, providers, and partners:

On May 28, 2026, the Colorado Department of Early Childhood (CDEC) adopted new regulations for the Colorado Universal Preschool Program (UPK), which is also known as the UPK ‘Mega Rule’. More information regarding these rules, including a redline version of them, can be found on the [Code of Colorado Regulations eDocket](#).

We are sending this communication in order to provide a summary of the new regulations and to provide a shared understanding and clarity of what is and is not included in the rule language.

1. The new rules include a new definition of “Program Year” and clarify the number of planned teacher-pupil contact hours that a preschool provider must schedule for each of the per-child rates offered under UPK.

Providers must schedule at least the following number of instructional hours per program year:

- 10-hour-per-week rate: At least 360 instructional hours
- 15-hour-per-week rate: At least 450 instructional hours
- 30-hour-per-week rate: At least 900 instructional hours

As long as a preschool provider offers the minimum number of hours, submits a corresponding program year calendar that clearly defines its program year and service hours, has a signed contract in place, and follows the other program requirements, the provider will receive the full payment rate for each child who attends. [Rule sections 4.103.LL; 4.108.H; and 4.110.A]

2. The new rules include operational details for Income Redeterminations, School District Cut-Off Dates Impacting Eligibility, Withdrawal Procedures, and Family Acceptance Timelines.

These sections have been designed to balance the needs of both families and providers while also providing needed operational clarity. [Rule sections 4.105.C, D, and E, and 4.107.C]

3. The new rules clarify exactly when and how a provider may charge tuition for hours of services provided above and beyond the awarded, tuition-free hours that are provided by the UPK per-child rate.

These changes will give providers greater clarity while also embedding the tuition-free nature of UPK services as envisioned by the state legislature. [Rule section 4.108.G]

4. The new rules make changes to the Quality Standards requirements regarding the obligations of providers in ensuring the availability of screening services, referral services, and translation services, and regarding on-site observations.

These sections have been amended in order to ease administrative burdens on providers, while still ensuring family access to these critical and necessary services. [Rule sections 4.111 and 4.112]

5. The new rules also make changes that will ensure the program better and more effectively serves Colorado children and families.

These changes:

- Clarify language regarding how preschoolers with disabilities must be served in strict accordance with their Individualized Education Program (IEP)
- Expand the definition of “dual-language learner”
- Clarify that children who are eligible for full-day services must be offered those additional hours through the entirety of the program year
- Clarify CDEC’s ability to reallocate excess funds

6. The rules make changes to the required educator-to-child ratios and group sizes allowed for participating providers.

In addition to the foundation for quality that child care licensing regulations provide, CDEC has been charged under state law with advancing quality programming in UPK classrooms.

Previously, the UPK Quality Standards included:

- A reduction in the maximum ratio to 1:11 for the 2026-2027 program year for all programs with a Colorado Shines rating of 1, 2, or 3.
- A further reduction to 1:10 for the 2027-2028 program year for all programs with a Colorado Shines rating of 1, 2, or 3.
- A reduction in the maximum group size to 22 for the 2026-2027 program year
- A further reduction in the maximum group size to 20 in the 2027-2028 program year

Now, under the new rules, reductions to group sizes beyond what child care licensing regulations require and the 1:10 reduction for the 2027-2028 program year have been eliminated. The following requirements remain in place:

- The maximum ratio of 1:11 for the 2026-2027 program year will still go into effect on July 1, 2026, for all programs with a Colorado Shines rating of 1, 2, or 3.
- The existing exemption from the reduced 1:11 ratio requirement for providers with a Colorado Shines Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) Level 4 or 5 rating remains [Rule section 4.110.C].

Additionally, in response to significant feedback and to balance program stability with quality, the Department is **proposing a new rule to include QRIS Level 3-rated programs in the exemption from the 1:11 educator-to-child ratio requirement**. This rule will be reviewed at the July 9, 2026 Rules Advisory Council hearing and considered for promulgation by Executive Director, Dr. Lisa Roy, at the July 23, 2026 Public Rulemaking Hearing. More information on these hearings is available on the [CDEC Rulemaking website](#). Once promulgated, this rule will be in effect for the 2026-27 program year.

Regarding the changes to educator-to-child ratios and group sizes, these updates were made to reflect extensive community input and balance quality expectations that support children and families with the operational realities providers face. Additionally:

- Reduced ratios are widely recognized as one of the key foundational components of high-quality early childhood programs, based on research and national quality standards from organizations such as the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER), the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), and Head Start.
- Colorado's previous state-funded preschool model had a maximum allowable ratio of 1:8.
- These reductions, set to begin on July 1, 2026, have been included in CDEC rules since Spring 2024.
- Allowing programs that have reached a Level 3 (in addition to a Level 4 or 5) to also be exempt from the 1:11 ratio requirement provides more enrollment flexibility to programs with demonstrated quality. Additionally, it demonstrates alignment with Colorado's definition of quality programs as those that reach Colorado Shines Levels 3-5.

Also, while the QRIS is currently undergoing a 'refresh', providers can still earn or increase their rating level. For more information, please refer to the QRIS Refresh [informational document](#), [FAQ](#), and [webpage](#).

Lastly, CDEC would like to provide clarification regarding information that has been circulating about the 'UPK Mega Rule':

- CDEC is **NOT** mandating that all Lead Teachers must carry a Bachelor's degree or higher.
- CDEC is **NOT** proposing to reduce the maximum educator-to-child ratio to 1:10.
- CDEC is **NOT** proposing to reduce the maximum group size to 20.

Thank you for participating in UPK and helping to ensure the availability of a high-quality, mixed-delivery preschool model that serves all of Colorado's children and families.