

BRIEFED BY THE BELL: TWO-GENERATION SOLUTIONS

The Issue

Too often, policymakers fail to consider the role circumstances affecting the entire family play in an individual's success or failure. That's why two-generation approaches to economic security put the well-being of the entire family at the center of economic mobility strategies. They focus on asking new questions, identifying intersecting systems, and breaking down silos.

[Research](#) from the National Head Start Association shows "interventions in both the quality and quantity of low-income children's early learning experiences and their parents' increases in education, employment, and income can contribute to strengthening children's outcomes — particularly when those interventions are integrated."

The easiest way to understand two-generation strategies is through the problems they work to solve. Some examples include the following:

- A mother cannot get a better paying job because she doesn't have the right credentials, but she cannot go back to school because there is no available child care or it's too expensive.
- A father will frustrate efforts to recover child support for fear of how it will strain his relationship with his child and the larger family.
- A mother tries to go through drug rehabilitation to address significant trauma in the family, but there isn't an opportunity for the child to get the support he or she needs to overcome his or her own trauma.
- A child's literacy education is impeded by his or her parent's discomfort with or lack of time to read to him or her at home.

These are real challenges and we need to rethink how we help families in a more complete way.

The Solutions

It can be difficult to imagine wholesale solutions to these issues, but it isn't difficult to point out some of the two-generation approaches working well.

The Facts

- Over the past 20 years, the proportion of college students who are single parents increased from 7 percent to 13 percent.
- In all of Colorado, there are only 24 recognized family resource centers to help families navigate the complexities of economic mobility.
- In Mesa County, only 21 percent of children aged 0-5 can access licensed child care.
- By 2020, 74 percent of all jobs in Colorado will require some level of postsecondary education and training.

Understanding these approaches can encourage policymakers and leaders to use them on a larger scale going forward. Below are some prominent examples of two-generation policies in Colorado and ways we can continue to build on them.

Expand Model of Strengthening Working Families Initiative (SWFI)

Grants from the Department of Labor to the Community Colleges of Aurora and Denver have unlocked real progress in applying two-generation strategies. The Strengthening Working Families Initiative (SWFI) grants have helped these community colleges provide adult education while ensuring early childhood education for children.

Students who are parents can receive training and accreditation for jobs in health care, information technology, or advanced manufacturing — three growing fields in need of educated workers that also pay family-supporting wages — while knowing their children are learning in a quality environment.

While this particular grant comes from a federal government program and runs through 2020, Colorado could expand similar programs more broadly throughout the community college system. Becoming a model for these types of two-generation strategies would position Colorado as a leader and set Coloradans up for greater success, ultimately helping the state.

Grow Grants for Child Support Services

In the recent past, penalizing parents who owe child support has been a priority, with enforcement and punishment as the preferred methods. With the help of federal government grants, Colorado pioneered a different way of handling this issue. Instead of jailing parents who owed child support payments or garnishing wages that go directly to the state, Colorado worked with these parents to get them on their feet and get jobs to pay down these debts.

Many of the parents who owed money were either out of a job, needed mental health treatment, didn't have a fixed place to live, or one of a multitude of other problems that precluded them from paying. Helping provide these parents with a more sustainable living situation, as well as parenting education, was crucial in helping them pay their child support debt. These programs also aided parents in establishing a relationship with their children, leading to them being better parents and providers overall.

Even prior to these grants, Colorado made progress on this issue by passing legislation in 2015 — the child support “pass-through” law — to direct child support payments to the actual children instead of human services programs that had grown reliant on the money from the payments. As the sponsoring senator of the bill, John Kefalas, said at the time: “The two-generation model for breaking the cycle of poverty supports the ability of children and their parents to be successful in school and at work... A full pass-through of child support will supplement the family’s financial resources leading to more financial security.”

Another approach might be found in eligibility criteria for the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). Recently expanded in Colorado, EITC helps low- to middle-income families keep more of their money. However, non-custodial parents aren't currently entitled to EITC. As a result, many parents who owe child support cannot claim this tax credit, hurting their ability to keep their earnings, as well as have enough money to ensure their child or children receive support. Expanding this tax credit for non-custodial parents would help parents and children alike.

Whole Family Education

The Center for Family Opportunity in Southwest Denver at College View Elementary School is a great example of a two-generation approach. The Center for Family Opportunity is a family resource center at an elementary school, which offers children the ability to get a quality education while their parents also receive assistance.

The focus of the Center is to ensure parents get the support they need. Parents have access to GED classes, English as a second language courses, financial management learning, workforce development, and a whole host of other necessary skills and learning opportunities that help them move forward and gain a real chance at economic mobility. Also, there is an Education to Workforce program that allows parents to gain job opportunities in the Denver Public School system in a variety of capacities.

These types of family resource centers allow entire families to learn in important areas, and then use those skills to further their own well-being. It's a beneficial two-generation approach that can be replicated across Colorado to help more families thrive.

The Takeaways

- Two-generation approaches will take a philosophical shift in how we think about moving families out of poverty
- Taking a holistic approach toward families, or two generations, provides better educational and workforce outcomes for both parents and kids
- In order to help families solve human services issues — from education to health care to mental health and everything in between — applying a two-generation lens to these problems is best for everyone, regardless of generation
- Colorado should think about more ways to link social services and/or education to ensure children get a quality education early in life

The Bottom Line

While education and job training are obvious application areas for a two-generation lens, there are many other opportunities to implement these types of approaches.

For example, setting up health and dental clinics at Colorado schools is a great way to connect parental needs with education for children. Working to partner affordable housing agencies and organizations with early childhood education or child care centers would help families stay in a stable environment, while helping children achieve more educational opportunities.

Too many families in Colorado lack the opportunity to achieve the economic opportunities necessary to live a stable life in this state. To truly combat our state's dwindling economic mobility, we should find ways to engage entire families to ensure a Colorado is a state where everyone thrives. It will take a shift in how we think about these challenges, but in order to keep up with the changing landscape of our state and economy, it's necessary.

Working with parents and children together means Colorado can help both generations attain skills and knowledge to set them up for success throughout their lives. This will make a huge difference for Colorado families and the state writ large. We have the opportunity to create more holistic approaches and put many Coloradans on their way to live the life they desire.