

Alum Paves Way for Early Childhood Development by Kristin Kemp



Ninety percent of human brain development occurs by age five. Children’s vocabulary at age three is strongly correlated with their literacy skills in third grade, as well as future academic and life success. Yet programs to support early childhood development are underfunded relative to other state initiatives in Colorado. Jennifer Stedron (psychology, PhD ‘04) is doing something about it.

Stedron, who received her PhD in child clinical psychology with a specialty in developmental cognitive neuroscience, has led major statewide policy initiatives to advance early childhood in Colorado, including the grant application process that secured \$45 million in funding for Colorado from the federal Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge.

“Multi-year studies tell us that investing in early childhood generates many benefits – better learning outcomes, decreased crime and incarceration rates, reduced healthcare and social welfare costs and so much more,” said Stedron. “A big part of my job is to serve as a translator. I try to make abstract research about child development and its effect on society understandable and actionable for decision makers.”

Stedron was previously the executive director of Colorado’s Early Childhood Leadership Commission (ECLC) under Lieutenant Governor Joe Garcia, where she spearheaded the ECLC’s work to establish Colorado’s new Office of Early Childhood.

The Early Learning Challenge grant from the federal government “challenged states to develop effective, innovative models that promote high standards of quality and a focus on outcomes across early learning settings,” according to the U.S. Department of Education. Under the direction of Lt. Governor Garcia and the ECLC, Stedron and her team worked with state policymakers, child development experts, front line professionals, philanthropists and more to complete Colorado’s application. The work paid off: Colorado received \$45 million.

“Jennifer is a key player in the Colorado policy arena with a special emphasis on policies impacting young children and families,” said Sarah Watamura, associate professor of psychology. “Her PhD in child clinical psychology with a specialization in developmental cognitive neuroscience coupled with her extraordinary passion for change and her gift for communicating science effectively together make her a respected, effective and highly sought after policy consultant.”

Stedron initially became interested in policy work while completing a clinical internship rotation in neurotrauma rehabilitation at Children's Hospital Colorado during her graduate studies at DU, which requires PhD candidates to complete field work. "It became clear to me that even though lots of people were working really hard to do the right thing to help children, incongruent policies were in place that hindered our success," said Stedron.

Though Stedron came to DU to become a child clinical psychologist, she ultimately felt most passionate about the public policy issues that impacted the field. "The situation was painfully unacceptable to me. I needed to do something about it," said Stedron.

And she did. As a PhD clinician and researcher, Stedron had the skills and credentials to help translate complex research into tangible information for policymakers. She has now been working on public policy issues for a decade. Her goal is to help stakeholders make better and informed decisions that will help Colorado children develop to the best of their potential.

While her work is currently focused in Colorado, Stedron has also managed bipartisan policy efforts in early childhood and K-12 education for the National Conference of State Legislatures and worked at the Aspen Institute on two-generation approaches to family economic security. She has been published nationally in a variety of formats including peer-reviewed journals and policy briefs focused on topics spanning neural network models of development, early childhood data systems and poverty.

Most recently, in partnership with several state foundations, Stedron led the design and launch of a new nonprofit, Early Milestones Colorado, where she serves as Executive Director. Milestones is an intermediary that accelerates innovative approaches and connects community and state partners to resources, best practices and systems improvements in early childhood health and well-being, learning and development and family support.

The creation of such an organization has been a longstanding goal of the Colorado early childhood community. "We have made great strides in early childhood in Colorado, but the need for an intermediary that can provide the incubation of new ideas while providing high level expertise is critical. I think Milestones is poised to help us take the early childhood system to the next level," said Elsa Holguin, Senior Program Officer, Child and Family Development at Rose Community Foundation and President of the Early Milestones Colorado Board.

With Stedron at its helm, Milestones is committed to collaborating with public and private partners to help move the needle on early childhood outcomes in the state.

In April 2015, Stedron returned to DU to share her story with current students. "We are trying to offer our graduate students in psychology more guidance in professional development. More and more we are finding that our PhD students are interested in pursuing careers outside of

academia – partly because of a strong desire to have the science that they are doing make an impact on how the world operates,” said Jan Keenan, professor of psychology. “We were delighted that Jennifer could take time out of her busy schedule to visit campus. She is a great role model for the public policy career path, having had such an impact on early childhood policy in the state of Colorado.”