



## Colorado special session: Lawmakers approve millions to support child care providers and remote learners

By Jason Gonzales on December 2, 2020 3:19 pm

Colorado lawmakers on Wednesday approved more than \$65 million for one-time aid to child care providers and for internet connections for remote learners.

Lawmakers approved the two bills as part of a three-day special session to infuse over \$300 million to support those hard hit by the coronavirus pandemic. The one-time money to help small businesses and families draws on unexpected additional tax revenue.

The priority for the special session called by Gov. Jared Polis was to help Coloradans in areas that also included funds for small business, housing, rental and utility assistance.

Altogether, legislators introduced five education-related bills, but approved only a broadband expansion and child care relief measures.

The \$45 million for child care providers would support both existing and new programs.

The bulk of the grants, \$34.8 million, would help existing child care providers to manage during the pandemic.

Sponsor Rep. Cathy Kipp, a Fort Collins Democrat, said many are struggling to stay afloat amid the pandemic.

For existing providers, Kipp said the state will distribute funds quickly via the framework it used earlier to share \$9 million in federal stimulus funds. Rather than calling for applications, the state will identify providers by Jan. 31 and distribute money by Feb. 28, Kipp said.



*The Colorado General Assembly during a special session focused on coronavirus relief passed help for child care providers and money to expand broadband for remote learners. Helen H. Richardson/The Denver Post*

About \$8.8 million will help expand child care. Bill advocates told the committee Wednesday that the virus has exacerbated the difficulty of finding care for kids.

Sponsor Sen. Brittany Pettersen, a Lakewood Democrat, said in a statement that even before the pandemic parents faced yearslong waiting lists.

The expansion program will provide grants to eligible licensed providers or those actively pursuing a license, the bill says. The goal is to help businesses expand or for new child care providers to come online. Providers will need to apply and can be awarded between \$3,000 to \$50,000 to help with a range of costs.

“With the COVID crisis forcing 10% of child care centers to close, parents are facing even more dire shortages,” Pettersen said. “These closures have been especially hard on frontline workers and women.”

The broadband bill approved Wednesday will allocate \$20 million to help remote learners struggling with internet access. The Colorado Department of Education will distribute grants by early February to school districts that apply.

School districts will use the grants to help secure reliable internet access for their students, teachers and staff. The bill seeks to increase collaboration between districts and broadband service providers to find solutions.

Lawmakers estimate as many as 64,000 public school students, particularly in rural districts, do not have access to the internet. During committee testimony in favor of the bill, Colorado Education Association President Amie Baca-Oehler, a high school counselor, applauded the bill, which could help low-income families.

At a forum Wednesday on internet access problems in northern Colorado, teachers and district leaders described families struggling to connect to online lessons and teachers struggling to keep students on track as they dropped in and out of video calls with shaky connections.

Even districts that got hot spots into the hands of remote learners found they didn't have enough of them to support students who were learning at school but then had to quarantine. And some families can't use hot spots because cell service is limited at their homes.

While educators welcome additional money, Superintendent Deirdre Pilch of the Greeley-Evans district said it won't solve all the problems, especially in many regions of Colorado with no internet provider at all or no high-speed service.

“A lot of people are trying to solve this problem, but we don’t have the big solutions,” she said at the forum, which was sponsored by **Coloradans for the Common Good**. “It is a state issue. The grant is not going to be enough. Even if you say \$1 million a district, you’re nowhere close.”

Sponsor Rep. Mary Young, a Greeley Democrat, said the grant program allows school districts to make local decisions about what their families need and gets the state closer to ensuring every Coloradan has access to an essential service.

“We have to really recognize that without internet access, you’re really isolating and really disenfranchising rural areas and people who are low income,” Young said.

And sponsor Sen. Kerry Donovan, a Vail Democrat, said in a statement that families across the state are frustrated that they’re not able to connect to their classrooms.

“This bill ensures that COVID-19 won’t rob a child of their education or a teacher of their vocation,” Donovan said.

Lawmakers also heard three Republican-sponsored bills that would have sent money to parents to help with remote learning costs, sent money to districts to hire a physician to help consult on school closure and student health decisions, and to ensure school funding doesn’t dip next year.

Ultimately, the Democratic lawmakers who control the state legislature either rejected those bills or determined they did not fit with the orders of the special session