

About the Early Childhood Health Outdoors (ECHO) Initiative

Healthy. Natural. Affordable.

These are the foundations of Colorado's new Early Childhood Health Outdoors (ECHO) initiative. And this is what ECHO is designed to accomplish:

All young children in Colorado have daily access to quality outdoor learning environments where play and learning support development across all domains— cognitive, physical, social, and emotional.

ECHO is based on a decade of research on the Preventing Obesity by Design model showing that by improving the design of outdoor spaces through affordable interventions and training early childhood professionals, young children and early childhood programs enjoy substantial benefits:

- Children are more physically active in the outdoors and engage in social interactions more often.
- Children and providers enjoy naturalized outdoor spaces and spend more time outside, supporting healthy behaviors.
- Hands-on gardening encourages the consumption of fresh fruit and vegetables.
- Parents are more likely to linger at child care programs improving community experience.

The ECHO Initiative is a partnership between [The National Wildlife Federation](#), [Qualistar Colorado](#), and [North Carolina State University's Natural Learning Initiative](#).

To learn more about the ECHO Initiative, please visit <http://www.nwf.org/echo>.



This opportunity is generously supported by [The Colorado Health Foundation](#) and the [Gates Family Foundation](#).



Demonstration Sites: Before and After

Both of these child care center Demonstration Sites worked with the Natural Learning Initiative and local technical assistance staff in North Carolina to create schematic design plans for renovated, naturalized outdoor learning environments, based on input from staff, children, and parents. Over several years, the centers have been working to implement their landscape plans with assistance from parent and community volunteers, making changes incrementally to improve the quality of their outdoor environments by adding play settings, edible gardens, plants, and loose parts. Shown below are the changes made to their outdoor learning environments after Phase One, roughly one year, of renovation efforts. All photos courtesy of the Natural Learning Initiative.

Johnson Pond Learning Center, Fuquay-Varina, NC

Before renovation: Lack of play setting variety in this outdoor environment gave children little free choice in choosing play and learning activities, and a lack of shade reduced the amount of time spent outdoors during warmer months. (Johnson Pond Learning Center, Fuquay-Varina, NC)



After Phase One installation of a looping, curvy wheeled toy pathway, raised garden beds, shade trees, shrubs, and seating areas, children and teachers are drawn outdoors for longer periods of time in all seasons of the year.



Beginning and Beyond, Raleigh, NC



Before renovation: A steep slope, drainage issues, and non-functional play equipment left a large portion of the outdoor environment off-limits to children. (Beginning and Beyond, Raleigh, NC)



After Phase One installation of terraced garden beds, crushed stone pathways, fruit trees, outdoor storage, and other play and learning settings throughout the space, this outdoor learning environment has been transformed into a dynamic extension of the indoor classroom.

How can you participate in the ECHO Initiative?

There are various levels and ways to become involved in the ECHO Initiative. Details are outlined below.

Demonstration Sites

Over the course of the next three years, Demonstration Sites will be developed at 10 sites across Colorado that serve children under the age of five. Licensed child care centers and preschools and publicly accessible spaces that become Demonstration Sites will receive design and planning assistance and \$10,000 to complete the installation of an outdoor learning environment (OLE) that features outdoor learning environment best practice indicators as outlined in the Natural Learning Initiative OLE Toolkit. In return, the Demonstration Sites will host biannual educational visits from other early childhood professionals and landscape designers, and will participate in evaluation of the project through surveys of parents and teachers. The ECHO Initiative will utilize research-based best practices to achieve statewide adoption of high-quality outdoor learning environments at early childhood education (ECE) sites throughout Colorado. Through a competitive process, sites will be selected as follows: a) two licensed child care center and preschool sites will be selected in Fall 2017; b) four sites (licensed child care centers and preschool sites and publicly-accessible sites serving Family, Friend, and Neighbor caregivers) will be selected in Spring 2018; and c) four sites (licensed child care centers and preschool sites and publicly-accessible sites serving Family, Friend, and Neighbor caregivers) will be selected in early Fall 2018.

Required dates and commitments for Demonstration Sites selected in Fall 2017:

- Utilize \$10,000 (to be split into two payments) to enhance the outdoor learning environment based on designs provided by ECHO Partners.
- Send two sponsored representatives to Annual ECHO Summit in Denver hosted on October 14, 2017.
- Participate in a full-day Interactive Design Workshop led by ECHO Partners in Denver on August 23, 2017.
- Identify representative(s) (e.g., coach, child care health consultant, etc.) to participate in a Technical Assistance Provider Workshop in Denver in late fall 2017 (date TBD).
- Be available for on-site consultation from National Wildlife Federation ECHO landscape design team (e.g., site measurements, pictures, etc.) the first two weeks of August and ongoing as needed.
- Host two on-site training events in both 2018 and 2019 with support from ECHO Partners to share experiences with fellow early childhood professionals.
- Continue to participate in Annual ECHO Summit and training in years 2018 and 2019.
- Engage in program evaluation with instruments (e.g., surveys, etc.) furnished by ECHO Partners.

ECHO Demonstration Site grants are open to for-profit and non-profit licensed child care centers and preschools serving children under the age of five that meet the following minimum criteria:

1. A minimum Colorado Shines Level 2 rating, with preference for sites with higher rating levels.
2. Willing to serve as a demonstration site for other early childhood professionals and programs.
3. Own or lease current space for at least five years into the future.
4. Commit to naturalizing the outdoor learning environment, including edible species.
5. Commit to gardening on-site.
6. Commit to serving local, fresh food for meals and snacks, either produced in on-site gardens or procured from external food suppliers.
7. Demonstrate interest in and capacity to serve in a leadership role.
8. Serve vulnerable families and children, which can be demonstrated by meeting any of the following criteria:
 - Demonstration of economic need for population served (e.g., percent of families eligible for need-based child care subsidies in the county, level of participation in Colorado Child Care Assistance Program (CCCAP), number of low-income families that may be experiencing housing or food insecurity)
 - Serving a diverse population, including a high percentage of ethnic and racial diversity
 - Serving children who are English language learners
 - Serving children with disabilities or special health care needs

Preference will be given to programs that:

1. Prepare food for snacks or meals in an approved, functional on-site kitchen.
2. Operate on a year-round calendar.
3. Demonstrate previous experience with family and community engagement.

Seed Grant

Seed Grants supplemented with technical assistance will be offered to child care centers and preschools and publicly accessible sites to improve their outdoor learning environments. Through a competitive application process, Seed Grantees will receive design assistance via a full-day, hands-on Interactive Design Workshop, resulting in a schematic plan. Each awarded site will receive a \$5,000 grant and technical assistance to aid in naturalizing their outdoor learning environments. Through a competitive process, Seed Grant sites will be selected as follows: a) 25 sites will be selected in Spring 2018; and b) 35 sites will be selected in Spring 2019.

ECHO Seed Grants are open to for-profit and non-profit licensed child care program sites serving children under the age of five that meet the following minimum criteria:

1. A minimum Colorado Shines Level 1 rating.
2. Commit to naturalizing the outdoor learning environment, including conducting gardening on-site.

Preference will be given to programs that serve vulnerable families and children, which can be demonstrated by meeting any of the following criteria:

- Demonstration of economic need for population served (e.g., percent of families eligible for need-based child care subsidies in the county, level of participation in Colorado Child Care Assistance Program (CCCAP), number of low-income families that may be experiencing housing or food insecurity)
- Serving a diverse population, including a high percentage of ethnic and racial diversity
- Serving children who are English language learners
- Serving children with disabilities or special health care needs

Required Commitments for Seed Grantees:

- Attend full-day Interactive Design Workshop led by ECHO Partners.
- Send representative(s) to Annual ECHO Summit in 2018 and 2019.
- Be available for consultation from National Wildlife Federation ECHO landscape designers (e.g., measurements, pictures, etc.).
- Identify representative(s) (e.g., coach, child care health consultant, etc.) to participate in a Technical Assistance Provider Workshop.
- Participate in evaluation in partnership with ECHO Partners.
- Send representative(s) to Demonstration Site workshops as applicable.

Publicly-Accessible Sites used by Family, Friend, and Neighbor Care

To ensure the ECHO Initiative reaches all young children in Colorado, we are encouraging community sites such as community centers, nature centers, public parks, and community playgrounds to apply to be either a Demonstration Site or Seed Grantee in 2018 and 2019. Programs and locations that provide outdoor space for unlicensed Family, Friend, and Neighbor care are welcome to apply.

In 2018, ECHO Demonstration Site grants will also be open to publicly accessible sites that serve or attract families with young children, if they meet the following minimum criteria:

1. Evidence of serving or potential to attract families with young children, including unlicensed Family, Friend, and Neighbor (FFN) child care providers.
2. Evidence of serving or potential to serve vulnerable children and their families and care providers, demonstrated by providing documentation of demographic and economic makeup of the surrounding community.
3. Have a designated entity such as an agency, business, non-profit, dedicated staff, or established volunteers that will serve as the primary caretaker and community connector for the outdoor learning environment.
4. Own or lease current space for at least 5 years into the future.
5. Commit to creating and/or enhancing an outdoor learning environment, including naturalization of the site and gardening on-site.
6. Willing to serve as a demonstration site for others interested in learning about ECHO practices.

Preference will be given to sites that:

1. Demonstrate a commitment from a community connector or partner agency that will seek to activate and encourage use of the site by the targeted population. If a language other than English is predominately spoken in the area, the agency should preferably

demonstrate expertise in communicating with community members in the predominate language.

2. Are accessible to the populations served on a year-round calendar.
3. Are located within walking or biking distance of low-income neighborhoods.
4. Are at or near places that are perceived as safe, or welcoming to, mixed documentation status families.

In 2018 and 2019, ECHO Seed Grants are also open to publicly accessible sites that serve or attract families with young children, if they meet the following minimum criteria:

1. Evidence of serving or potential to attract families with young children, including Family, Friend, and Neighbor (FFN) child care providers.
2. Evidence of serving or potential to serve vulnerable children and their families and care providers, demonstrated by providing documentation of demographic makeup of the surrounding community.
3. Have a designated entity such as an agency, business, non-profit, dedicated staff, or volunteers that will serve as the primary caretaker and community connector for the outdoor learning environment.
4. Commit to creating and/or enhancing an outdoor learning environment, including naturalization of the site and gardening on-site.

Required Commitments for Publicly-Accessible Sites:

- Same as Demonstration Site or Seed Grantee Requirements.
- Ensure there is a committed entity or organization of individuals to ensure implementation and care of the site.

Family Child Care Providers

While Demonstration Site Grants and Seed Grants are not available to family child care providers, we are offering free training and incentives for family care providers to participate in the ECHO Initiative. In 2017, 20 family child care providers will be chosen through a competitive application process to receive a \$75 support stipend to attend the Annual ECHO Summit on October 14, 2017. The stipend can be used to assist with costs for travel to the Summit or to pay a substitute provider. In addition, each of the 20 selected family child care providers will attend a specialized breakout session at the Annual Summit to learn about naturalizing the outdoor learning environment in the home child care setting and will then be eligible to receive a \$200 incentive to implement ideas learned in the session. In 2018 and 2019, a similar offering of free training and incentives to participate in the ECHO Initiative will be available to 40 family child care providers each year.

Contact Information

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