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Community Innovation and Resilience for Care and Learning Equity (CIRCLE) Grant Program

Two Year Follow-Up

August 2025

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Prepared For

Early Milestones Colorado

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Executive Summary

In 2022, the CIRCLE Grant gave early childhood providers and community partners across Colorado the flexibility to design local solutions to persistent challenges such as workforce shortages, limited access for families, and gaps in culturally responsive care. Two years later, that one-time funding has left a lasting mark. Nearly one-half of CIRCLE-funded grantees indicated via survey that their projects are still active, many having expanded or embedded their innovations into ongoing operations.

This study combines survey data from 136 grantees, three Ripple Effect Mapping (REM) sessions, and 13 in-depth interviews. Together, the findings show that CIRCLE's most durable impacts were not just about money, but also about momentum. Projects sustained themselves by:

- **Embedding new practices** into daily routines, budgets, and staffing structures;
- **Securing follow-on support** through local, philanthropic, or braided funding;
- **Deepening partnerships** across sectors; and
- **Adapting to serve more children, families, and educators** in new communities.

> *The CIRCLE Grant has had a transformative impact on our organization,*
> *allowing us to strengthen our internal systems, expand workforce*
> *development efforts, and enhance the quality of care provided across our centers.*
>
> *– CIRCLE Grantee, ECE Program, Garfield County*

Across the board, projects demonstrated ripple effects at multiple levels:

- **85%** reported individual-level changes such as reduced staff stress, new credentials, or stronger parent confidence;
- **75%** saw changes in their organizations such as shifting mindsets, operations, or staff roles;
- **Two-thirds** observed community-level outcomes, from collaborative programs to expanded service footprints; and
- **Nearly one-half** saw system-level shifts, including new public investments, bilingual leadership pipelines, and state-level replication of successful models.

Even small grants made an observed impact. Emergency micro-loans helped educators avoid payday lenders and stay in the classroom. Outdoor learning pilots became daily routines. Internships for parents filled staffing gaps while fueling economic mobility. A quick facility audit template became the foundation for a statewide health-survey tool.

At the same time, the report surfaces persistent headwinds. Projects dependent on hard-to-fund roles, like coordinators or therapists, often paused when no bridge funding emerged. The licensing process, staffing turnover, and operational capacity remain real threats to sustainability, especially for smaller providers.

Still, the CIRCLE story is one of success. Across Colorado, children are thriving in spaces that didn't exist two years ago. Educators are more stable, more skilled, and more supported. And local systems are better prepared to sustain equity-driven innovation.

Introduction & Background

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, Colorado's Community Innovation and Resilience for Care and Learning Equity (CIRCLE) Grant invited communities to craft home-grown solutions to early-childhood challenges. Funded by the Colorado Department of Early Childhood (CDEC) and administered by Early Milestones Colorado, the initiative awarded 226 short-term, flexible grants that reached all 64 Colorado counties, giving early care and education (ECE) providers and community partners the breathing room to shore up the workforce, expand family access to child care, and pilot equity-focused learning strategies.

CIRCLE matters because it offers a replicable blueprint for durable, community-led change including:

- **Centering community voice**. Locally designed solutions that align with state priorities remain relevant and easier to institutionalize.
- **Pairing dollars with capacity support**. Technical assistance, learning communities, and flexible administration helped grantees weave new practices into daily operations, reducing dependence on future grants.
- **Investing in connective tissue**. The strategies most associated with sustainability, embedding within existing structures and formalizing partnerships, require modest funds but deliberate relationship-building.

The CIRCLE Grant was more than just financial support, it was a catalyst for permanent, systemic transformation at VFS Prep. It empowered us to move beyond survival mode during the pandemic and build an organization rooted in resilience, equity, innovation, and community leadership. CIRCLE's flexible, trust-based approach allowed us to implement bold, high-impact strategies that traditional funding streams often discourage. It validated the importance of trusting providers, especially those serving historically marginalized communities, to lead solutions from the ground up.

– CIRCLE Grantee, ECE program, Denver County

Bold, one-time investments can spark rapid change, but only if the benefits outlast the grant cycle. In this follow-up study, sustainability means the extent to which CIRCLE-funded activities, capacities, and outcomes continue after the original 9–12 month awards end. Sustainability is bigger than "replacement dollars;" it includes embedding new practices in daily routines, cementing partnerships, diversifying revenue, and aligning with supportive policies. When projects sustain, funders see a stronger return on investment, communities avoid "boom-and-bust" pilot cycles, and Colorado's early childhood system moves steadily toward equity.

The urgency was clear in the first study: only 23% of grantees had secured additional funding to continue their work, leaving roughly four out of five without a clear path forward. Two years later, the picture has brightened. The follow-up survey shows that nearly one-half of CIRCLE projects (46%, 103) are still operating. Continuation rarely hinged on new money alone.

The most common strategies were folding innovations into existing programs (41%) and leveraging partnerships forged during the grant (40%), while only 11% relied solely on fresh funding. These results illuminate the long-term ripple effects of a modest, time-bound grant and demonstrate how philanthropic capital can move the early childhood system from crisis response to sustainable, equitable growth.

As part of the CIRCLE project, we developed strong data collection systems, which we have kept in place. These systems have helped us with program study, communicating to key stakeholders, and in applying for additional grants.

– CIRCLE Grantee, Community-based nonprofit organization, Jefferson County

The CIRCLE Grant has had a significant and lasting impact on our organization, particularly in how we structure provider collaboration and professional development within our Early Intervention (EI) program. Prior to receiving the grant, teaming and training opportunities were often informal or scheduled reactively. Overall, the CIRCLE Grant has allowed us to move from ad hoc collaboration to an intentional, embedded culture of teamwork, continuous learning, and mutual support. These changes have improved the quality of services we provide to families.

– CIRCLE Grantee, Community-based nonprofit organization, Las Animas County

Purpose of the Follow-Up Study

Marzano Research designed this study to determine how one-time funding can generate long-term, community-driven solutions. The study had two primary objectives:

1. Document what endured—which CIRCLE activities, programs, and impacts continued beyond June 2023.
2. Explain why—surfacing barriers and facilitators so funders and policymakers can replicate success at scale.

To meet those objectives, we ask four questions:

1. What was sustained?
2. What challenges hindered continuation?
3. What factors enabled it?
4. Who benefits now, and how—at individual, community, and system levels?

Methodology

The follow-up study used a mixed-methods design, including a grantee survey, Ripple Effect Mapping (REM) sessions, and in-depth interviews. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently, analyzed separately, and then merged to provide a comprehensive picture of what CIRCLE projects sustained, why, and with what ripple effects. Surveys were sent to all 226 original grantees. Of the grantees who did not respond, we verified that the majority still maintain a website or active Facebook presence and appear to be operating. However, seven organizations could not be located and are presumed closed. This brings our actual eligible sample to 219. A total of 136 grantees responded either fully or partially to the survey, yielding a final response rate of 62%. (Table 1).

Table 1: Data collection methods and project sample sizes

Method	Sample Size
Grantee Survey	136 projects
Interviews	13 projects
Group Ripple Mapping Sessions	14 projects

Instruments & Data Sources

All instruments were designed to align with the original theory of change (ToC) and refined in consultation with Early Milestones Colorado (EMC). In the initial study, the ToC traced short-term capacity gains to long-term system shifts. Here, it drives questions about the durability of those outcomes, the barriers grantees met, and the factors that helped them embed or scale their work.

1. **Grantee survey** – An online questionnaire administered via online survey platform was sent to project directors of all 226 CIRCLE projects. The survey collected data on:

   - status of project continuation;
   - strategies used to sustain or adapt the work;
   - perceived impacts at individual, organizational, community, and system levels; and
   - resources or partners that emerged after funding ended.

2. **Individual interviews** – 15 project directors across 13 projects participated in one-hour, semi-structured video calls that probed deeper into sustainability strategies, policy barriers, and unintended consequences surfaced during REM.

3. **Ripple Effect Mapping (REM)** – 14 project directors participated in 3 60-minute virtual REM sessions. REM is a participatory, visual technique well suited to complex, multi-actor initiatives that seek system change. Core steps include:
    - **Appreciative Inquiry** – Participants began the session sharing about notable successes or achievements since the end of the original CIRCLE award.
    - **Group mapping** – Using mind-mapping software, a facilitator charted "ripples" outward from each story, making links across social, human, cultural, and financial capitals.
    - **Reflection** – The group reflected on the most significant changes, named key enablers or constraints, and drafted a vision for the future.

See Appendix A for method instruments.

Ripple Session and Interview Sampling Strategy

Grantee survey responses were stratified to ensure balance between success and struggle:

1. **Project-continuation status** – Sustained vs. not sustained.
2. **Depth of impact** – High (3–4 levels), Medium (2 levels), Low (1 level).
3. **Representativeness** – Final invites were screened for geographic diversity, organization type (licensed center, family child care, council, nonprofit), and original learning-community affiliation.

This three-tier procedure produced a REM cohort that could speak credibly to both bright spots and barriers across Colorado's varied early-childhood landscape.

Analytic Approach

- **Survey** – Descriptive statistics summarized continuation rates, strategies, and barriers; cross-tabs explore variation by region and organization type.

- **Interviews** – Transcripts are coded deductively to study questions and inductively for emergent themes.

- **REM maps** – Narrative statements on each map are open-coded, then recoded to the Community Capitals Framework (social, cultural, human, financial). Ripples are time-stamped in relation to proximity from CIRCLE Grant award termination.

Finally, quantitative and qualitative results are woven together to answer the four study questions and illuminate how one-time grant funding can seed durable, community-driven solutions. Please note that sample sizes vary across tables and figures due to differences in item-level response rates; not all respondents answered every question. Additionally, in some instances, percentages may exceed 100% in cases where respondents were able to select more than one answer choice or answers were coded in multiple categories.

CIRCLE Grantees Two Years Later

At the two year follow-up, 136 CIRCLE project directors completed the online survey. While respondents and non-respondents are generally similar across most dimensions, such as topic area, award size, and regional distribution, there are some notable differences in organization type. Specifically, licensed center-based providers are under-represented among respondents (38% compared to 51% of non-respondents), while community-based nonprofits are over-represented (37% versus 24%). Additionally, projects with the largest awards (over $151,000) are somewhat over-represented (+8 percentage points), and metro-area projects are modestly under-represented (-8 percentage points), with slight over-representation from the Northwest and Southwest regions (+5 percentage points each).

Projects focused on planning are also slightly under-represented (-5 percentage points), but all other topic areas show differences of 4 percentage points or less. While these variations, especially by organization type, should be considered when interpreting the results, the overall sample still reflects much of the original CIRCLE cohort's diversity in geography, funding level, and project focus.

Follow-Up Survey Respondent Characteristics

The 136 CIRCLE project directors who responded to the follow-up survey represent broad, statewide coverage. Every Colorado county had at least one project director respond to the survey two years after the grant period ended. The highest responses were in Front Range counties such as Adams (36 projects), Boulder (26), Garfield (26), and Mesa (20), but strong representation also remains in rural and frontier areas, underscoring the initiative's wide geographic reach and continued relevance across diverse communities.

Survey respondents represent seven of the eight organization types in the original CIRCLE grantee roster, with the most common being licensed center-based providers (38%) and community-based nonprofits (37%) (Figure 1). While these two groups remain the largest in both the follow-up survey and the original cohort, licensed centers are modestly under-represented (by about 5 percentage points), and nonprofits are slightly over-represented by a similar margin. Government agencies, which made up a small portion of the original cohort (≈2%), did not respond to the survey. Overall, the distribution of organization types in the survey sample is broadly like the original cohort, with minor deviations and one missing category, but no evidence of large, systematic non-response bias.

Figure 1: Organization type

Figure 1: Organization type. Horizontal bar chart showing organization type by % of Survey Sample.
- Licensed center-based care (n=51): 38%
- Community-based nonprofit organization (n=50): 37%
- Early childhood council (n=12): 9%
- School district (n=10): 7%
- Family child care (n=7): 5%
- Higher education (n=5): 4%
- License-exempt center (n=1): 1%
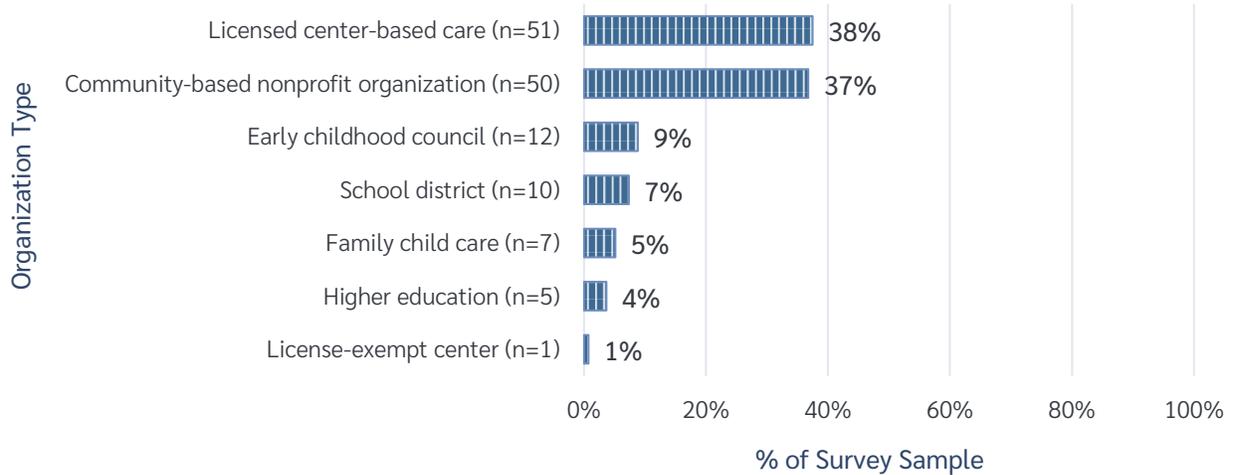
Primary Populations Reached

Projects most commonly serve early-childhood professionals (63%), infants and toddlers from birth to age three (43%), preschoolers (38%), and parents/caregivers (32%) (Figure 2). About one-third target pre-kindergarteners (31%), while smaller segments focus on dual-language learners (9%), immigrant and refugee families (4%), and children with special needs (<4%) (Figure 2). Respondents span all eight topical "learning communities" established during implementation with "Improving Systems" (21%) and "Workforce Development & Retention" (19%) most frequently represented (Figure 3).

Figure 2: Primary populations served

Primary Population Served	% of Survey Sample
Early childhood professionals (n=86)	63%
Birth to three-year-olds (n=58)	43%
Preschool (3 years) (n=52)	38%
Parents / caregivers (n=43)	32%
Pre Kindergarten (4 years) (n=42)	31%
Dual language learners (n=12)	9%
Kindergarten (n=6)	4%
Immigrant and refugee families (n=5)	4%
Children enrolled in Early Head Start/HS (n=5)	4%
Children receiving CCCAP (n=4)	3%
Receiving preschool SPED service through IEP (n=4)	3%
Community members (n=3)	2%

Figure 3: Project topic area (learning community)

Project Topic Area	% of Survey Sample
Improving Systems (n=29)	21%
Workforce Development & Retention (n=26)	19%
Training & Materials (n=25)	18%
Engaging Partnerships (n=19)	14%
Expanding Access (n=14)	10%
Family Child Care Home Mentorship (n=12)	9%
Outdoor Learning (n=10)	7%
Planning (n=5)	4%
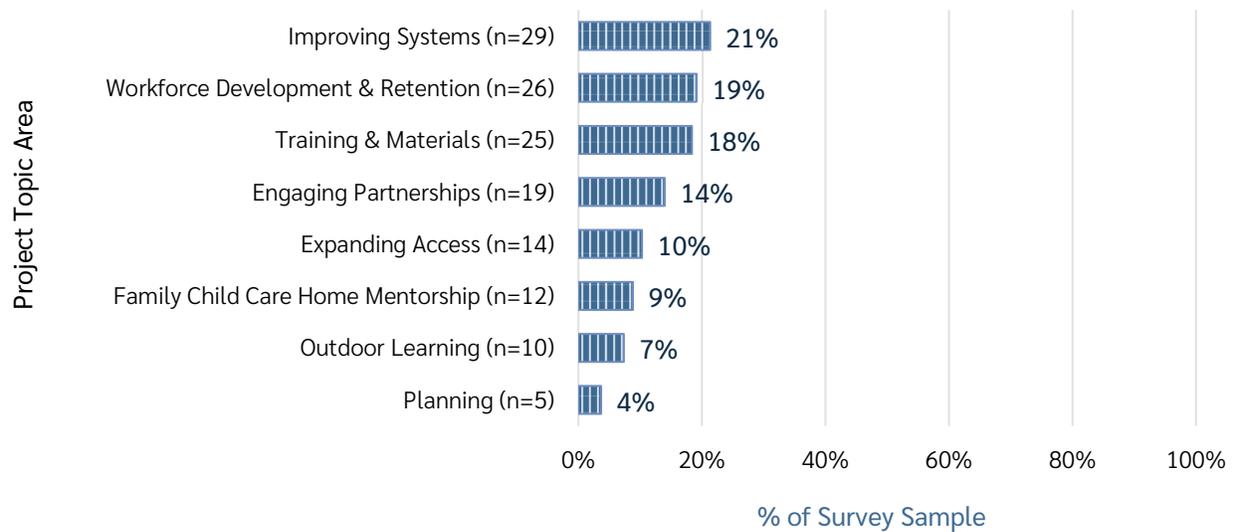
Award Size

Survey respondent award size ranged from micro-awards under $25,000 (18%) to large awards over $151,000 (21%), with the remaining 61% spread evenly across $26,000–$150,000 (Figure 4). Because award-size distributions for respondents and non-respondents differ by less than five percentage points in any band, survey results are unlikely to be skewed by funding level.

Figure 4: Original award amount – full sample

Profile of a "Sustainer" – What an Ongoing CIRCLE Project Looks Like in 2025

Three-quarters of survey respondents (76%, 103 of 136) report that their CIRCLE-funded activities are still operating nearly two years after the grant closed. This represents nearly one-half (46% of the original CIRCLE Grant cohort). Examining this group reveals a consistent pattern of who sustains, where they operate, and how they kept momentum alive (Table 2). See Appendix B for full data.

Table 2. Profile of a CIRCLE "Sustainer"

Sustained-Grantee Characteristic	At Two Years
Moderate-sized awards	Projects that received $26k–$50k (84% sustained) or $101k–$150k (81% sustained) are most likely to remain active.
Community-rooted organizations	40% are licensed child care centers and 36% are community-based nonprofits; Early Childhood Councils (9%) and school districts (7%) round out the mix.
Metro-area or Southwest hubs—but statewide reach	Metro Denver counties account for the highest raw counts (e.g., Denver 33 projects, Arapahoe 33, Adams 29), yet robust clusters persist in rural Southwest counties such as Garfield (20) and Mesa (14) (Figure 5).
Workforce and access focus	The largest share of sustainers originally addressed Workforce Development & Retention or Expanding Access; 73% of ongoing projects still advance CDEC's workforce goal and 62% expand access for families.
Populations served	Sustainers most often reach preschoolers/Pre-K (77%), ECE professionals (62%), and infants & toddlers (42%)—frequently with a multilingual or immigrant/refugee lens.
Flexible staffing model	Staffing data show comparable full-time cores but roughly twice as many part-time or hourly staff—giving sustainers breathing room to adapt to enrollment swings (Figure 7).
Embedded and diversified	Two dominant sustainability strategies are *folding the work into existing structures* and *securing follow-on dollars*; 37% have already expanded scale or scope, 26% now serve new populations, and 16% operate in new locations.
Growing footprint	Four grantees supplied concrete numbers: one scaled from 21 counties to statewide coverage, while three others added 1, 7, and 9 counties, respectively. Overall, 83 sustainers have served an additional 53,213 participants since the grant closed.
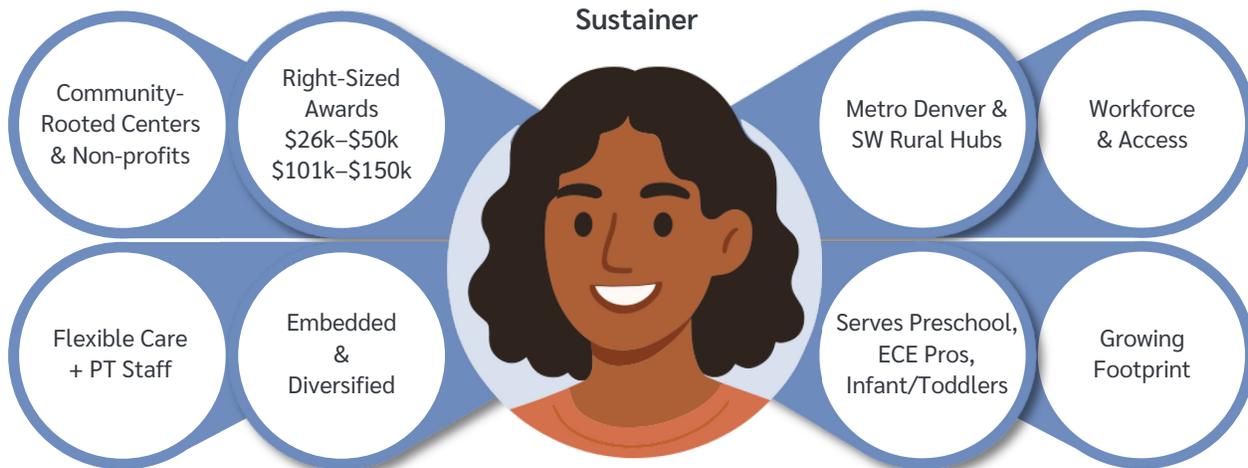
Figure 5. Geographic representation for sustained CIRCLE projects
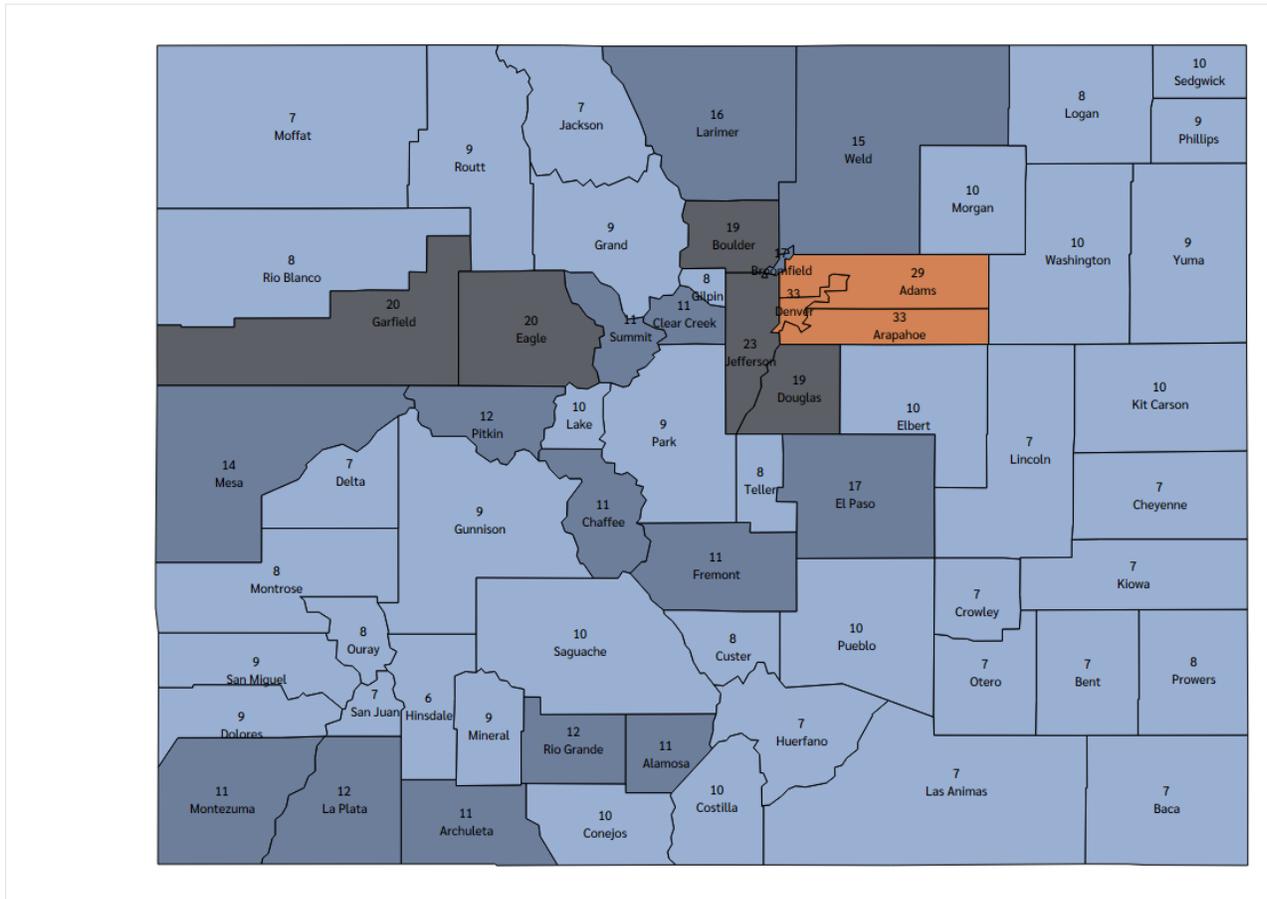
Number of Sustained Projects Serving County (n=103)
- 6 – 10
- 11 – 17
- 18 – 24
- 25 – 33

In short, a typical sustainer is a community-anchored provider (often a licensed center or nonprofit located in Metro Denver or a rural hub), awarded a mid-range CIRCLE Grant to strengthen the workforce or widen access. By weaving the innovation into existing operations, leveraging new partnerships, and keeping a flexible staffing pool, these grantees have extended their reach to thousands more children, families, and educators well beyond the original funding window.

A vivid example is Caring Kids Preschool (Garfield County). Originally awarded $76k, the center embedded an apprenticeship pipeline, partnered with high schools and colleges, and now operates a "grow-your-own" staffing model while expanding services into four neighboring counties. Its story mirrors the broader data: moderate funding, intentional partnerships, and integration into core operations are the hallmarks of sustainability.

*We've shifted to a "grow-your-own" staffing model, recognizing that
the most effective way to build a sustainable workforce is by supporting entry-level
employees from the ground up. This means providing intentional mentorship,
on-the-job coaching, and hands-on training to individuals who may not have formal
early childhood experience but demonstrate a passion for the work. Our team
of experienced mentors plays a critical role in guiding new staff, modeling best practices,
and supporting them through the credentialing and licensing process. We've also
learned that success is not achieved in isolation. Partnerships with local high schools, community
colleges, and universities, especially those with early childhood education programs,
have become an essential part of our strategy. These partnerships help us create a pipeline
of future educators, offer practicum opportunities, and allow us to engage students
early in their career journey.*

– Caring Kids Preschool, LLC

Sustained Projects: Workforce & Access Lead the Way

Most projects that kept going are the ones shoring up staff pipelines and opening more seats for children—exactly where Colorado set its top priorities. Our survey confirms this: Workforce and Access projects were the most likely to rely on embedding practices into existing programs and forming new partnerships. Given this alignment, future grants could deepen impact by pairing workforce dollars with targeted family-support or systems-level pilots. When we map those 103 ongoing projects against CDEC's four strategic goals, the strongest alignment is with Workforce (73%) and Access (62%). Roughly one-third now focus on Families, while a smaller but important set (8%) is driving Systems-Level Change (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Sustainers are aligned with CDEC strategic goals
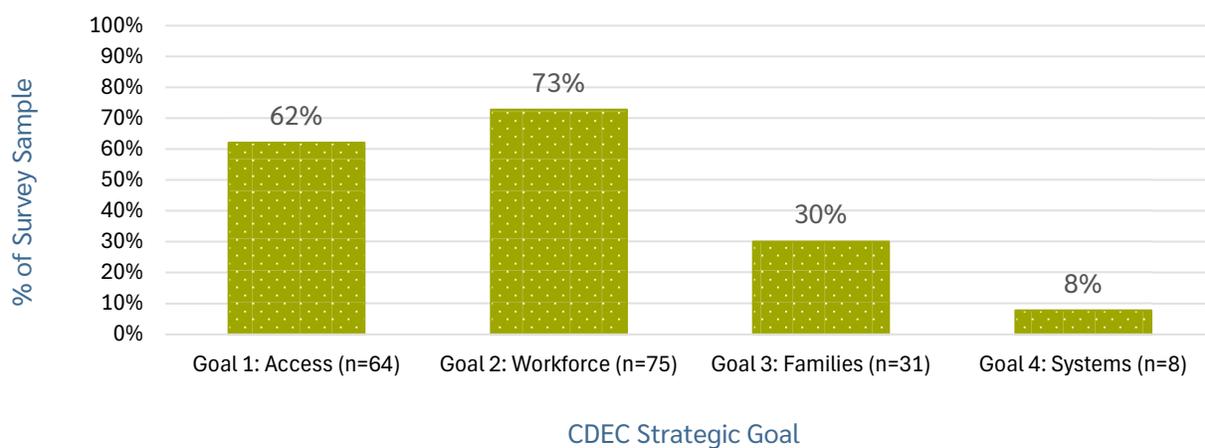
How Grantees Kept the Work Going:
Four Core Strategies—and One Clear Front-Runner

Each organization that sustained its CIRCLE project was asked to identify which strategies they used to keep the work going after the grant period ended. Four core tactics emerged.

Embedding Within Existing Structures

The most common approach, used by 68% of sustainers, involved folding CIRCLE activities into regular budgets, staffing plans, or service routines.

Securing Additional Funding

Used by 40%, this included bringing in new grants or revenue streams.

Establishing Formal Partnerships

Selected by 35%, often through memorandums of understanding (MOUs) or joint ventures that helped share resources or responsibility.

Leveraging Community Support

22% of sustainers tapped in-kind help, volunteers, or local fundraising efforts.

While some projects relied on a single approach, many used a combination. As shown in Figure 7, 56% of sustainers used just one strategy, most often embedding, while 44% layered two or more:

- 26% used any two strategies,
- 13% used three,
- and a nimble 5% deployed all four.

This pattern suggests that embedding provides a strong foundation, while additional funding, partnerships, and community support add flexibility and resilience. These findings suggest that embedding programming early into budgets, staffing, and daily operations creates stability that allows grantees to pursue new grants or partnerships down the line. Investments in technical assistance (TA) that help organizations build this internal alignment may offer the highest long-term return. Supporting grantees to layer strategies as capacity grows can increase the likelihood that innovative programs persist, and even expand, long after initial funding ends.

Figure 7: Sustaining strategy combinations

1 Strategy (55%)

2 Strategies (25%)

Legend

Embedding within existing structures

Securing additional funding

Establishing formal partnerships

Leveraging community support

3 Strategies (13%)

All 4 Strategies (5%)
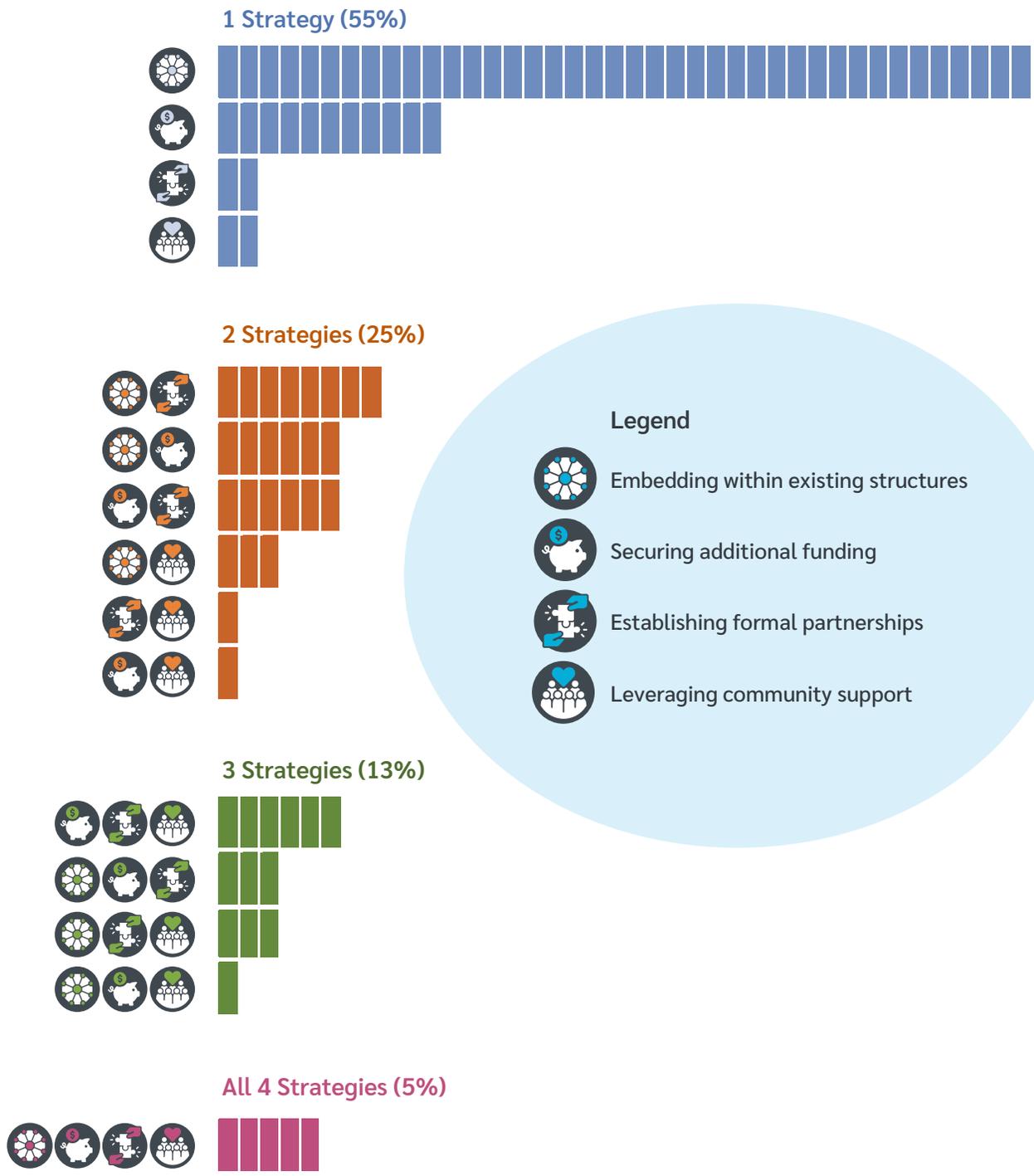
1. Embedding: The Go-To Move

More than two-thirds of sustainers simply absorbed CIRCLE innovations into day-to-day operations. Of the 55 grantees who relied on a single tactic, four out of five chose embedding (41% of all sustainers). These projects rewrote job descriptions, shifted line-item budgets, or plugged new activities into existing program calendars, avoiding the scramble for outside dollars.

We have a part-time Environmental Arts Specialist—a role that's sometimes hard to explain to our board, since many of them are in a different stage of life. But for whatever reason, everyone connects with the idea of music. We had lost our music specialist around the same time, and we were incredibly lucky to find someone who could fill both roles. That made it less of a financial leap, and now the position is embedded in our budget.

– CIRCLE Grantee, ECE program, Denver County

2. Supplemental Dollars: Helpful but Not Always Essential

Four in ten sustainers did secure new money, yet only 11% named funding as their sole tactic. The rest paired dollars with embedding (6%), partnerships (6%), or a broader three- or four-part mix. The pattern echoes a similar finding explored below: extra cash strengthens sustainability but, by itself, does not determine survival.

A bilingual coordinator hired with CIRCLE dollars is still on staff by braiding three small grants. The CIRCLE Grant helped us partially fund a new Education and Engagement position—and we were lucky to find someone who's fluent in both English and Spanish. Her ability to lead outreach, trainings, and engagement in Spanish has been profound. And while CIRCLE got us started, we've been able to keep her on staff by piecing together several small funding streams. It's not just about new dollars—it's about building the capacity to go deeper, do better, and center equity in a lasting way.

– National Wildlife Federation

3. Partnerships: Sharing the Load

One in three sustainers reported establishing partnerships. When used alone, partnerships were rare (2%), but paired with embedding (8%) or embedded in three-way combinations (up to 6%), they became a force multiplier, giving small providers access to expertise, space, or referral pipelines without large cash infusions.

*During the CIRCLE Grant, Joint Initiatives brought together all partners in our community
who "touched" the ECE workforce development pathway at any point, and we mapped
out what the credentialing experience of a person entering the field and wanting to progress
looked like. These meetings changed the way that we worked together—taking us
from siloed organizations to a collaborative person-centered professional development system.
This collaborative work and spirit started to change the local public will.
Now, years later El Paso County has a thriving Family Friendly Initiative which is focused
on the early childhood system as a whole- workforce being one area
of focus—with over 100 organizations and leaders involved in the efforts.*

– CIRCLE Grantee, Early Childhood Council, El Paso County

4. Community Support: The Lightest Lift

Roughly one in five tapped volunteers, donated materials, or community fundraisers.
Community support seldom stood alone (2%) but often rounded out a three-or four-strategy
bundle, especially in rural counties where philanthropic dollars are scarce.

Does Additional Funding Drive Sustainability? A Nuanced Picture

To understand the role funding plays in sustaining CIRCLE-funded efforts, we first look back
to the original grant period (2022–2023), a time when many grantees sought additional dollars
to support or expand their work while the CIRCLE Grant was still active. This offers a chance
to explore whether bringing in outside funding early on predicted long-term continuation.

We then follow the trajectory after the grant ended, examining what happened in the immediate
months that followed and what patterns emerged over the next two years. Did grantees
secure new resources right away? Did early access to additional dollars translate into longer-term
sustainability? Or did some organizations find alternative ways to keep going without a fresh
infusion of cash?

This step-by-step analysis allows us to trace the relationship between timing, type, and impact
of funding, and to better understand when and how financial resources truly shape whether
innovations last.

During the Original Grant Period (2022–23)

Most grantees whether they ultimately sustained or discontinued their CIRCLE projects brought
in at least one other funding stream while the grant was still active. In 2023, 83% of eventual
sustainers and 74% of non-sustainers reported receiving outside dollars (Figure 8). The great
majority in both groups (≈80%) said that money directly supported CIRCLE implementation
(Figure 9). In short, extra cash during the grant was common but not predictive; many projects
with supplementary funding still wound down, and many that later endured also had it.

Figure 8: A majority of sustainers and non-sustainers brought in at least one other funding stream

Received other funding during CIRCLE project (2023)
Did NOT receive other funding during CIRCLE project (2023)
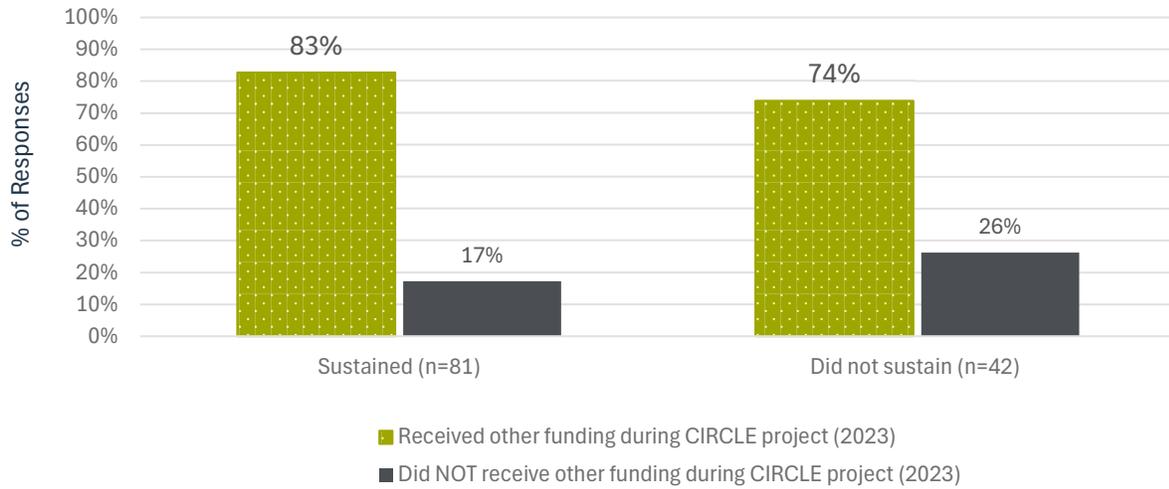
Figure 9: Funding received supported CIRCLE projects for both sustainers and non-sustained

Received additional funding that supported CIRCLE project (2023)
Received additional funding that did NOT support CIRCLE project (2023)
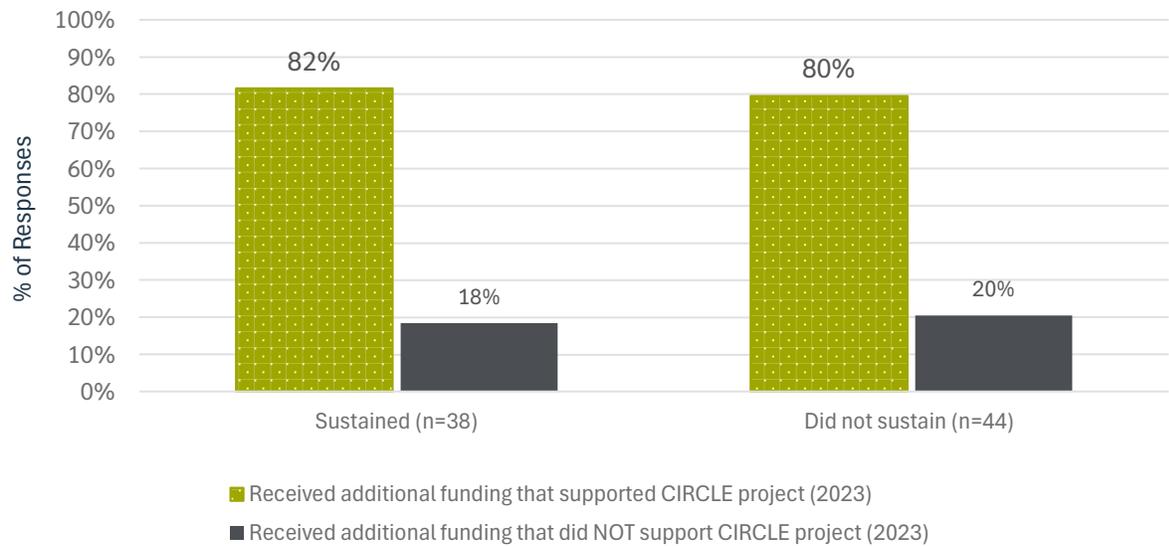
Immediately After the Grant Closed (Mid-2023)

Securing follow-on dollars proved harder. By the end of the first post-grant summer, only 27% of sustainers and 24% of non-sustainers had lined up new money to keep CIRCLE work moving (Figure 10). Yet three out of four projects were still operating in early 2025—evidence that lack of immediate replacement funding did not automatically derail momentum.

Figure 10: Majorities of sustainers and non-sustainers did not secure additional funding by the end of the grant term
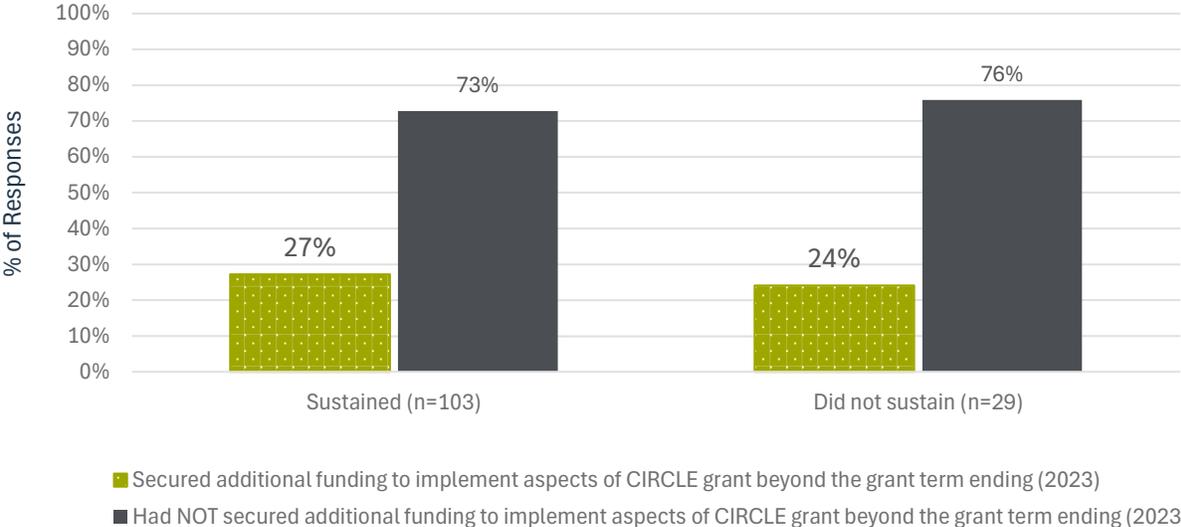
Looking Ahead from the 2023 Vantage Point

Intent to keep fundraising was nearly universal: 85% of sustainers and 82% of non-sustainers said they planned to pursue additional dollars (Figure 11). Subsequent grant tracking confirms that persistence paid off: grantees collectively raised $6.9 million in 2024—four times the 2023 total— plus another $0.6 million in early 2025 (Figure 12). Philanthropic foundations supplied just over one-half of all awards, with state or local agencies contributing another one-quarter (Figure 13).

Figure 11: Sustainers and non-sustainers planned to pursue additional funding

Planned to pursue additional funding to support aspects of CIRCLE project (2023)
Did NOT plan to pursue additional funding to support aspects of CIRCLE project (2023)
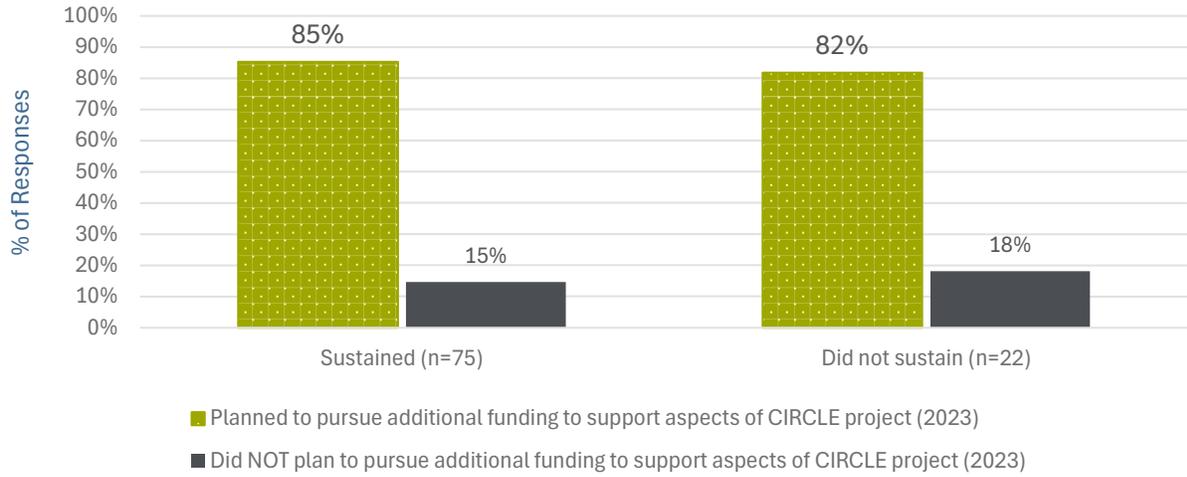
Figure 12: Funding amount across all awards by year
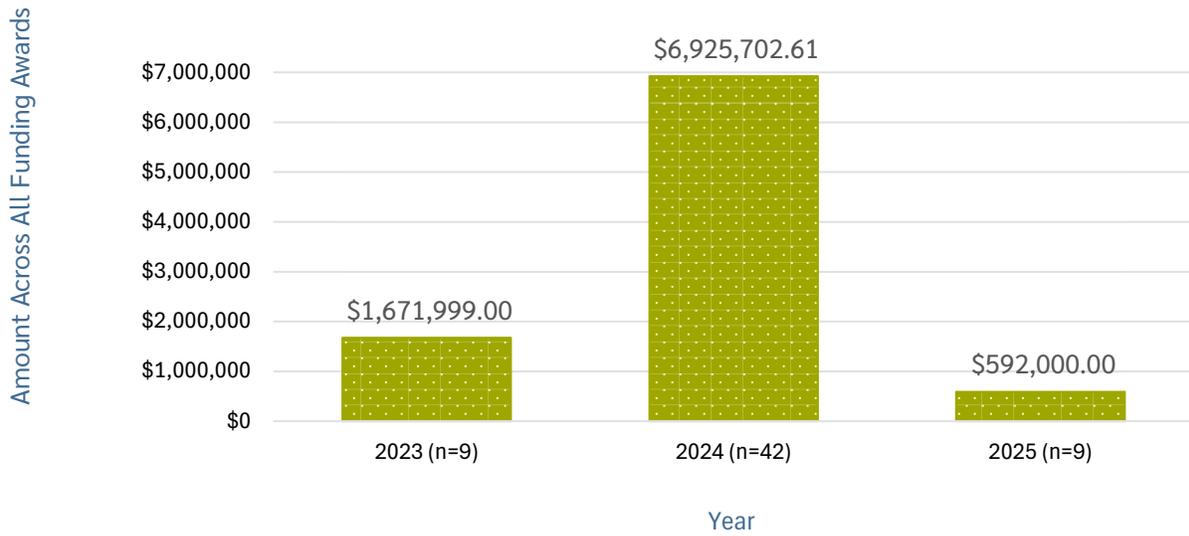
Figure 13: Funder organization types

- Philanthropic organization (n=36) — 53%
- State or local government agency (n=17) — 25%
- Other funder (n=4) — 6%
- Private funder (n=4) — 6%
- Federal agency (n=3) — 4%
- Intermediary (n=2) — 3%
- Local school district (n=2) — 3%
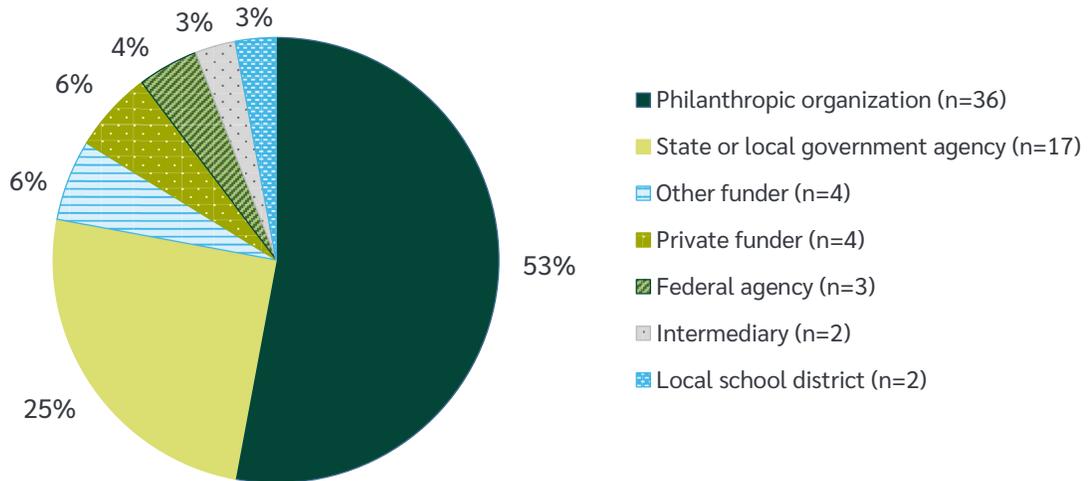
For Projects that Did Not Survive, Money Matters Most

Among the 29 directors who said their projects ended, 97% cited "lack of funding" as a primary barrier (Figure 14). By contrast, fewer than 40% pointed to staffing or changing community needs.

If we had the opportunity to fund more 2-year-old scholarships, partnerships to add more ECE programs/classrooms and train/recruit more educators would be helpful.

— CIRCLE Grantee, Community-based nonprofit organization, Denver County

More stable local and state funding would be helpful. Most of our work is wrap-around services and it is often the first to be de-funded when there is a budget shortfall to address child welfare, child care subsidies or the delivery of prescribed services.

— CIRCLE Grantee, Early Childhood Council, La Plata County

Figure 14: Almost all projects that ended cited lack of funding

Primary Barriers to Sustaining CIRCLE Project
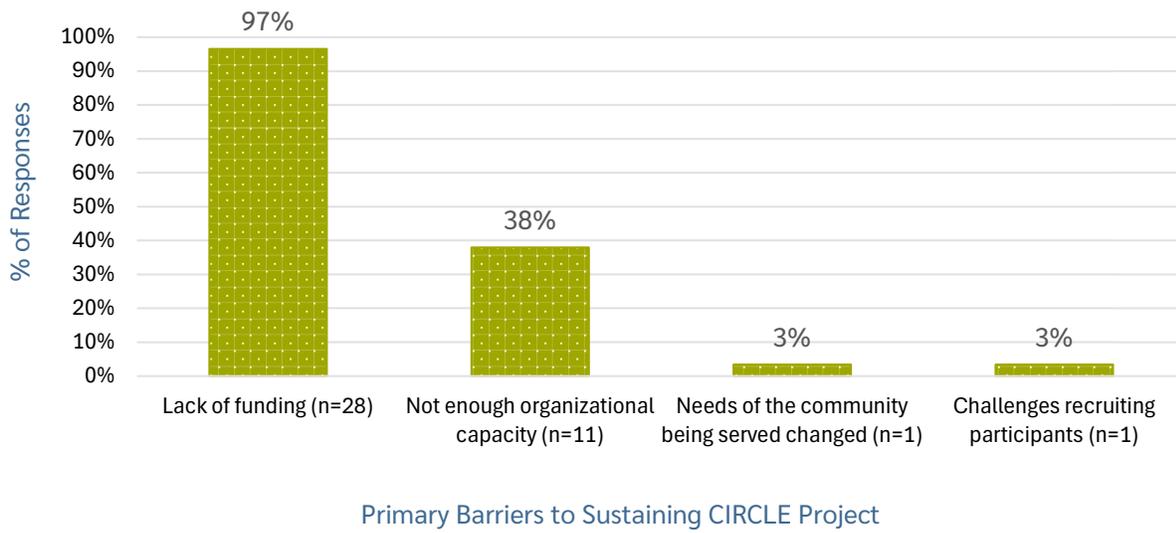
Funding and Sustainability: What We Learned

Although adequate funding is essential for sustaining CIRCLE-funded projects, it isn't enough on its own. Nearly one-quarter of projects that remained active into 2025 did so without securing new dollars. Instead, they kept going by embedding CIRCLE activities into existing budgets, staffing plans, or partner programs—demonstrating that integration can substitute for replacement funding, at least in the short term.

That said, timing and ambition matter. Many grantees managed a "soft landing" in the first year after the grant ended, stretching reserves or internal resources to buy time. But by 2024, most had launched serious fundraising efforts—either because their original funding ran out or because they were ready to grow their work. Speed and scale often determined whether momentum could be maintained.

Across the board, relationships proved more effective than applications. The majority of post-grant funding came from philanthropic and local government sources, often unlocked through partnerships and trust built during CIRCLE. These relational pathways were more fruitful than competitive state or federal grants.

Finally, when projects lacked both new funding and a way to embed costs, sustainability became nearly impossible.

Ripple Effects

Like a stone dropped into water, a well-targeted grant sends out waves of change that radiate from the point of impact. These "ripple effects" begin with the people and programs directly involved and, if conditions are right, travel outward to reshape organizations, communities, and even policy systems over time; 85% of grantees say they have seen individual-level change, three-quarters report change inside their organizations, roughly two-thirds see effects in the broader community, and just under one-half point to system-level shifts (Figure 15).
In other words, the CIRCLE Grant's influence is most visible close to the ground and gradually tapers as ripples move outward—exactly what one would expect from an initiative that started with frontline providers and local coalitions.

The CIRCLE Grant directly empowered both our staff and families to achieve meaningful, measurable growth. Among staff, targeted training funded by CIRCLE led to notable gains in leadership skills, communication confidence, and child development expertise. . . .
For families, the CIRCLE-funded enhancements provided greater access to early intervention supports, consistent developmental updates, and mental health resources. . . .
Overall, the grant transformed individual participants from passive recipients of services into active contributors to a resilient, growth-focused community.

– CIRCLE Grantee, ECE program, Denver County

Figure 15: Most projects reported individual level impacts
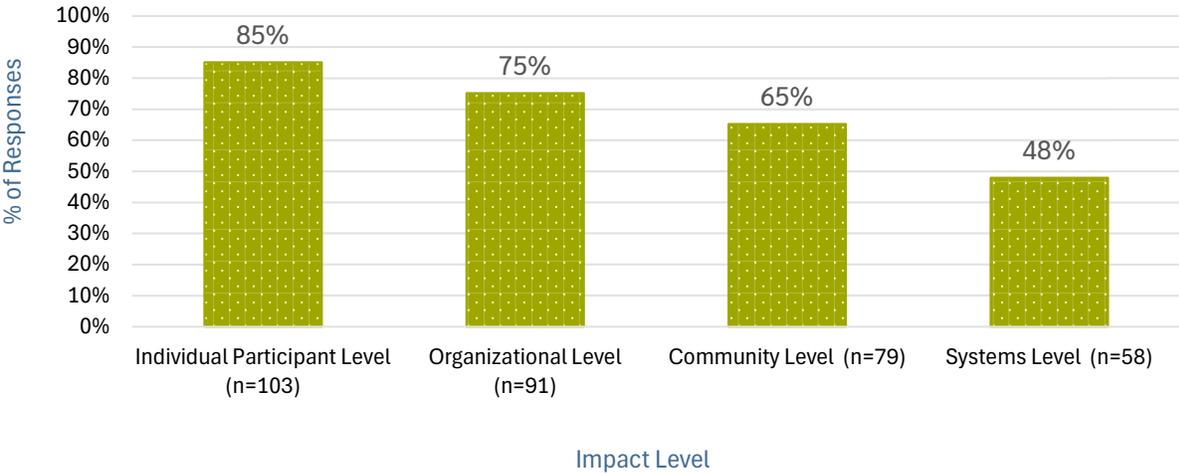
Interpreting Ripple Effects with the Community Capitals Framework

When a grant or initiative tries to strengthen a community, it rarely changes just one thing. Instead, resources flow, relationships deepen, and new skills or policies emerge in tandem, like ripples spreading from a single stone. The Community Capitals Framework (CCF)[1] helps us make sense of those ripples. It groups the many kinds of assets a community can draw on into a set of distinct but tightly interconnected "capitals" (Table 3). Looking across the capitals shows where momentum is building (e.g., inside one center or across a whole county) and how early wins in one area spark progress in another. For the follow-up study, we coded every story of impact at four concentric levels (individual, organizational, community, systems) against eight capitals, allowing the paths those ripples take over time to be traced. The Community Capitals Framework provides a vocabulary for talking about how and where change happens, and a roadmap for ensuring short-term grants like CIRCLE generate long-term, system-wide benefits.

Table 3. Community capital asset definitions

Capital	Definition
Human	The knowledge, skills, health, and confidence of people—the "know-how" they carry.
Social	The quality of relationships and networks—trust, reciprocity, and formal or informal partnerships that help people get things done.
Built	Physical infrastructure, technology and built environments that support community life.
Financial	Money and financial instruments that can be invested in programs or staff, grants, stipends, tax credits, savings.
Political	The ability to influence rules, policies or public spending by elevating community voices and organizing around issues.
Cultural	Shared values, traditions, languages, and ways of knowing that shape whose voices are heard and how welcome people feel.
Natural	Environmental assets—land, water, air quality, green space—and a community's relationship to them.

Figure 16 and Table 4 translate 450-plus impact stories into the seven capitals of the Community Capitals Framework (Table 3).

[1]Mueller, D., Hoard, S., Roemer, K., Sanders, C., & Rijkhoff, S. A. M. (2020). Quantifying the community capitals framework: Strategic application of the community assets and attributes model. *Community Development, 51*(5), 535–555. https://doi.org/10.1080/15575330.2020.1801785

Three patterns emerge from the data:

1. **People first: Human and Social capital dominate the inner rings**
   - At the individual and organizational levels, new credentials, coaching skills, and peer networks show up most often—21–25% of all coded stories.
   - Social ties are strongest at the community tier (35%) where cross-county cohorts and multi-agency task forces give projects staying power.

2. **Assets and dollars rise as scale grows**
   - Once relationships are in place, communities land the bigger wins: shared HR portals, outdoor-play spaces, and statewide apprenticeship registries.
   - Built capital leads the systems bar (31%); Financial capital follows (16%), reflecting new stipend pools, blended scholarship funds, and even lodging-tax revenue for mobile preschools.

3. **Small counts, big leverage: Cultural and Political capital**
   - Cultural and Political capital appear in fewer stories (9% and 12%, respectively), but a single rule change or a county wage-ballot exploration can shift the field for everyone.

Figure 16: Describe the impact the CIRCLE Grant has made including any policy, process, or programming changes
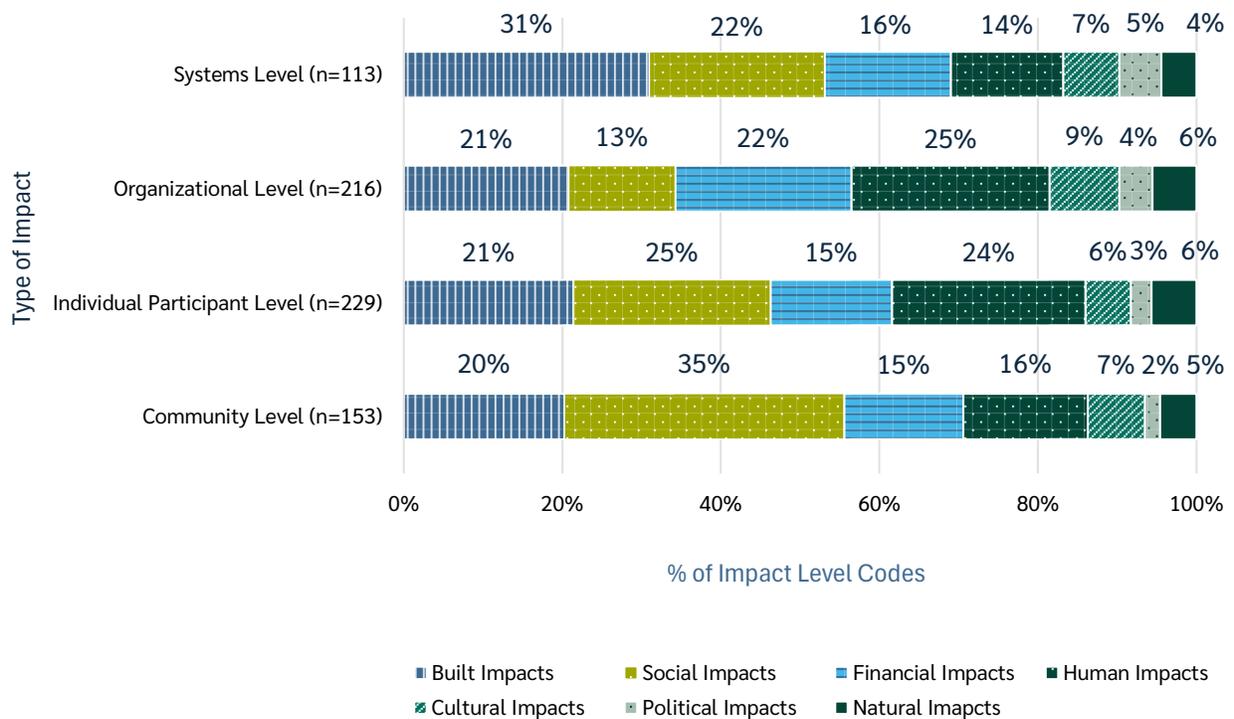
Table 4: Capital types

Capital	Most Prominent At...	Snapshot of Typical Examples
Human (skills, knowledge)	Individual 64%, Organization 60%	New credentials, staff confidence, parents learning advocacy skills
Social (relationships, trust)	Individual 61%, Community 61%, Systems 56%	Peer-mentoring networks, cross-county cohorts, state task forces
Built (infrastructure, tools)	Systems 78%	Shared HR portals, outdoor classrooms, statewide apprenticeship registry
Financial (resources, revenue)	Systems 56%	New state stipend pools, blended funding for scholarships
Cultural (values, language justice)	Most visible at the Individual level (22%)	Staff adopting bilingual practice, families requesting diverse books
Natural (environment, green space)	Modest but even (≈14% across levels)	Nature-play spaces, indoor air-quality upgrades
Political (policy, voice)	Emerges chiefly at Systems (13%)	Testimony for legislation expanding child care access, county tax-ballot exploration

How Ripples Travel—from Early Wins to System Shifts

CIRCLE projects rarely made impacts on only a single level as time progressed from the grant funding end (Figure 17). A change that began with staff skills or a new classroom routine often surfaced later as a community partnership, a policy tweak, or a statewide tool.

Figure 17: When did you FIRST observe these impacts?

Legend:
- Immediately when we were awarded the grant (about May or June 2022)
- During the first year of grant implementation (between June 2022 and June 2023)
- At the end of the CIRCLE grant funding (about July 2023)
- Within one year after funding ended (July 2023-June 2024)
- Within two years after funding ended (July 2024-June 2025)
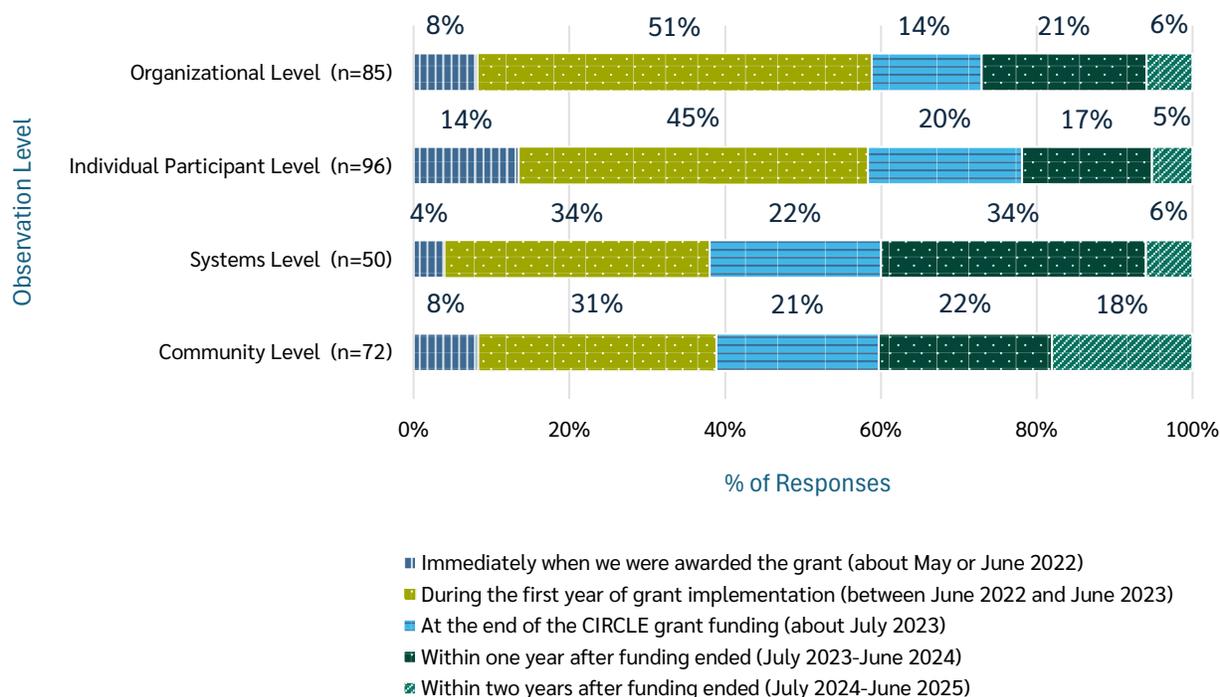
1. First ripples break closest to shore

During the very first year of implementation, well before the grant closed, 51% of project directors reported measurable gains at the organization level and 45% at the individual level. Community-level effects followed (31%), with early system signals for one-third of projects (34%) (Figure 17). These early wins track to the **Human** and **Social** capitals: staff learned new skills, parents engaged more deeply, and peer networks crystallized.

*The CIRCLE Grant has had a significant ripple effect on the broader community
by expanding access to high-quality child care and strengthening the early childhood workforce.
With more trained and supported educators in place, families have access
to more consistent, reliable care, allowing parents to remain in the workforce with confidence.
Additionally, by creating career pathways in early childhood education,
the grant has supported local economic development and helped address staffing shortages
that have long impacted our region. It's not just an investment in our centers,
it's an investment in the stability and growth of our entire community.*

– CIRCLE Grantee, ECE Program, Garfield County

2. One year out: the circle widens

By July 2024, an additional one-fifth of projects logged fresh activity at every level. Notably, 34% now saw community change—from shared-service HR hubs to bilingual CDA cohorts. System ripples grew more slowly (17%), mirroring what research says about policy timelines. Here **Built** and **Financial** capitals enter the story: joint data dashboards, small county stipends, and seed funds for apprenticeships.

*Through the creation of interpreter communities of support and long-term partnerships
with digital access providers, the CIRCLE Grant has facilitated
the development of a robust network of resources that extends beyond
the grant's immediate scope. These systems allow for greater
collaboration and shared responsibility, strengthening the infrastructure
for immigrant and refugee communities. Centers now see us as experts
in the field and seek guidance when working with students from our communities.*

– CIRCLE Grantee, Community-based nonprofit organization, Denver County

3. Two years on: policy currents start to flow

Even in the grant's afterlife, 6%–18% of respondents recorded brand-new impacts, mostly at the system and organization levels (Figure 17). Examples include a statewide apprenticeship registry hosted by CDEC (**Built** and **Financial** capitals) and county ballot-measure task forces exploring mill-levy support for wages (**Political** and **Financial**).

A Sankey diagram further illustrates the flow of Ripple Effects from the initial CIRCLE award (Figure 18). A Sankey (named after engineer Matthew Sankey) visualizes flows by the thickness of each stream: wider bands mean more projects followed that pathway. Here, each stream starts at the level where a project reported its earliest CIRCLE impact (left blocks) and ends at the level where the *same* project reported a new impact two years later (right blocks), using paired survey responses linked to timing data in Figure 17.

The diagram shows *movement* of reported impacts, not proof of cause-and-effect, so flows should be viewed as descriptive rather than strictly causal. The Sankey makes one point unmistakable: systems change is rarely a straight shot. It often rides on community energy or organizational infrastructure, pauses at a policy node, and then loops back to strengthen practice.

Figure 18. Ripple timeline
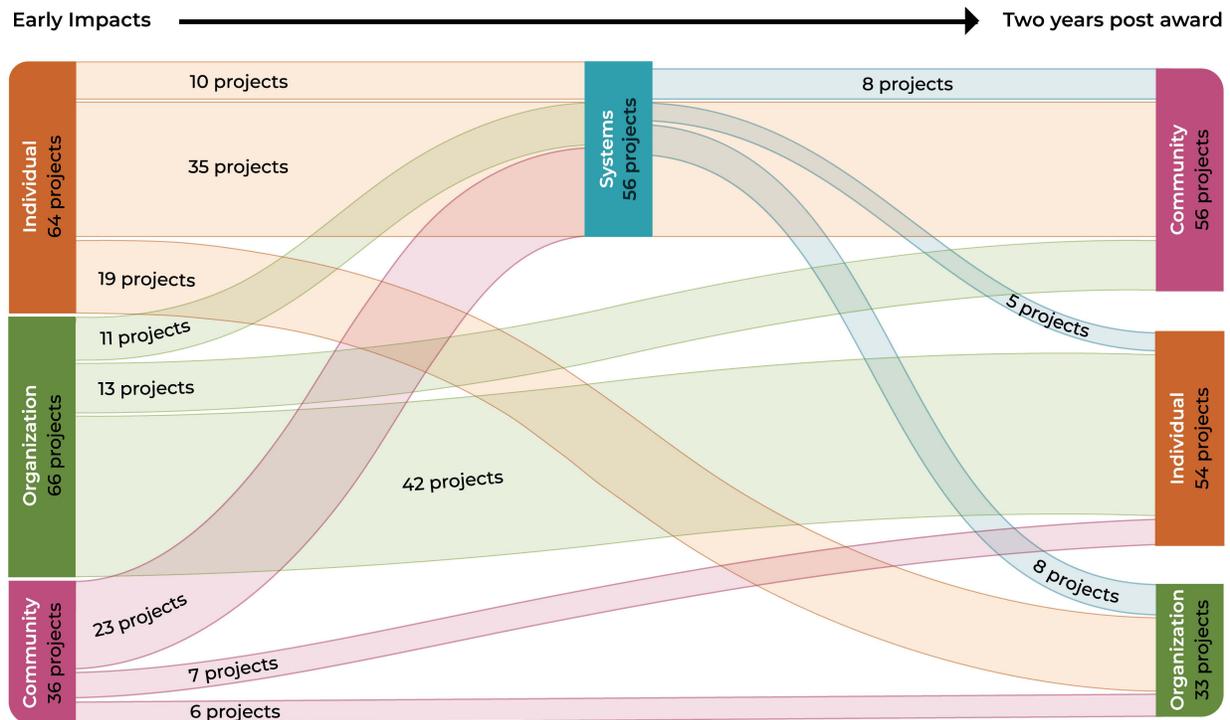
Table 5 distills the full Sankey map into four primary "journeys." For each stream, we identify where a project's earliest ripple showed up (left column), where that same project reported a new ripple two years later (middle column), and what the transition tells us about how change moves through the early-childhood ecosystem (right column). Read it as a general snapshot, not a tally of every possible path: it highlights the dominant pathways, internal institutionalization, peer-to-community spread, bottom-up policy lift, and the feedback loop that brings system assets back to classrooms, so funders and practitioners can see how early wins most often cascade outward (and sometimes boomerang home).

Table 5. Project ripple journeys

Early-Impact Pathway	Most Common Destination by 2025	Interpretation—What the Flow Really Means
Organization ➜ Individual (42 projects)	Other internal units or sister sites within the same agency	Institutionalization. When a pilot proves its worth, directors fold it into budgets, replicate it in new classrooms, and standardize the practice (e.g., coaching cycles, HR portals). Built and Human capital get locked in, making the gain "sticky" even without extra dollars.
Individual ➜ Community (35 projects)	Local coalitions, parent networks, shared-services hubs	Diffusion of human capital into social capital. A newly trained teacher becomes a mentor; parents who learned advocacy organize playground builds. Skills acquired at the micro level spark volunteerism and peer-to-peer spread across programs, multiplying reach at low cost.
Community ➜ Systems (23 projects)	State task forces, licensing rule-makings, regional funding pools	Bottom-up policy lift. Cross-county coalitions translate local prototypes—nature-play yards, shared substitute pools—into statewide guidance or funding streams. Grass-roots legitimacy accelerates uptake, converting Social and Built capital into Political and Financial capital.
Organization/Community ➜ Systems ➜ Back again (Systems ➜ Organization 8; Systems ➜ Individual 5)	Policies or tools loop back to providers and educators	Reinforcing feedback loop. Once a system asset exists (e.g., a stipend portal or apprenticeship registry), benefits flow back to classrooms and staff, boosting retention and quality. The cycle turns abstract policy into concrete, day-to-day value—evidence that system change is sustainable only when it re-feeds local actors.

Insights from the Ripple-Mapping Sessions

To deepen the survey and Sankey findings, we convened three one-hour virtual Ripple Effect Mapping (REM) sessions with 14 project directors. Guided by Appreciative Inquiry, each group surfaced success stories, positioned them on a shared mind-map, and then traced "ripples" across Human, Social, Cultural, Built, and Financial capitals. The mind-maps (See Appendix C) reveal four cross-cutting stories (Table 6).

Table 6. Ripple map themes

Over-Arching Story	Community-Capital Gains	Illustrative Ripple
Partnerships move fastest—and farthest	Social and Financial	A center leveraged CIRCLE momentum to win free meeting space from The Salvation Army, deepen ties with Ft. Carson, and pull churches and Boy Scout troops into food-pantry and garden projects.
"Grow-your-own" pipelines anchor the workforce	Human and Financial	One site built a salary scale and paid interpretation so every bilingual aide could earn credentials; staff retention climbed from 82% to 88% in two years.
Language justice sparks cultural capital—and policy lift	Cultural and Systems	A refugee-led program used interpreters, free laptops, and bilingual digital-literacy classes to shepherd 130 multilingual educators into college courses and state task-forces on equity.
Infrastructure and apprenticeships unlock scale	Built and Financial	CIRCLE funds seeded a substitute-placement agency; a later partnership with Colorado Mesa University now reimburses 50%–75% of apprentice wages, helping centers stay open and families remain at work.

The REM sessions put a human face on the survey findings. They show that change almost always starts small with new skills, tools, or routines inside an organization, and then moves outward. Within a year, early gains in **Human** capital (staff credentials, leadership confidence) tended to spark **Social** capital (peer networks and partnerships). Those relationships, in turn, unlocked **Financial** capital (grants, wage supports) and sometimes even **Built** capital (renovated classrooms, nature-play spaces). By the second year, several projects had reached the policy arena: five directors testified at the legislature or sat on CDEC task forces, bringing frontline credibility to debates on compensation, health consultation, and language access. In short, the maps confirm that when grantees have room to learn, partner, and adapt, a modest, flexible grant can set off a chain reaction that touches practice, community, and policy alike.

Cross-Cutting Theme: Equity and Innovation

From survey responses, Ripple-Effect Maps (REMs), and follow-up interviews, one story is constant: equity and innovation were not side projects, but rather powered every major gain. Whether a grantee focuses on workforce, access, or quality, each success rests on reaching families and educators who are too often left out and on trying new ways to solve old problems.

1. Reaching every ZIP code, not just the Front Range

Statewide reach with a rural backbone

- **All 64 counties** still host at least one active CIRCLE project two years on.
- Metro counties topped the raw counts (Adams 29; Arapahoe 33), yet **rural hubs such as Garfield (20) and Mesa (14)** show that innovation dollars travelled well beyond the I-25 corridor.
- REM maps add texture: a Spanish speaking family child care home provider network established a nanny pool in high-needs urban area; a substitute-teacher tech platform is most heavily used on the Western Slope.

Why it matters: Equitable access means new ideas arrive where services are thinnest, not just where large agencies already sit.

2. Language justice moves from aspiration to routine

Embedding bilingual practice and materials

- **9% of projects named dual-language learners as a primary audience; 4% focused on immigrant and refugee families** (Figure 2).
- Grantees funded interpreter stipends, created **bilingual CDA cohorts**, and produced full **Spanish, Arabic, and Dari** resource libraries.
- One REM story describes a director who now budgets for a dedicated Spanish-speaking family liaison "before pencils or paper."

Why it matters: Access in a family's first language is a predictor of both enrollment and long-term engagement. CIRCLE dollars let providers treat language justice as a line item, not an after-thought.

3. Financial inclusion for an under-resourced workforce

New money, new tools, less stress

- A micro-loan pilot capped interest at **18% APR**, reaching educators shut out of mainstream credit; **90% of borrowers reported a major drop in financial stress.**
- Tax-credit coaching unlocked **$80-120k refunds** for small centers, cash that kept classrooms open and wages stable.
- Follow-up interviews note that several directors used their refund windfall to launch bilingual wage scales or pay for new credential cohorts.

Why it matters: Paycheck-to-paycheck staff cannot focus on quality if they are worried about rent. Innovative finance tools widen the circle of who can stay in the field.

4. Smart infrastructure where buildings are scarce

Nature-play spaces, mobile classrooms, and tech work-arounds

- **Nature-play spaces** converted vacant lots into free outdoor classrooms; teachers note more focused engagement and stronger gross-motor skills.
- A statewide **substitute-placement app**—built with CIRCLE seed dollars—matches educators to centers.

Why it matters: Equity is impossible without physical or digital places to learn; innovation fills the gaps that bricks-and-mortar cannot.

5. Policy influence from the ground up

Grass-roots credibility at the Capitol

- **5 of 14 REM participants** have already testified in the legislature or sit on CDEC task forces, shaping bills on compensation, health consultation, and language access.
- These directors cite CIRCLE data dashboards as the "evidence in their back pocket" when making the case for sustained public funding.

Why it matters: Lasting equity requires policy shifts; practitioners who pilot and measure new ideas become credible messengers for statewide change.

CIRCLE's flexible, short-term dollars ignited durable equity gains because they allowed grantees to:

1. **Embed new practices** (language justice, wage scales) inside existing budgets.
2. **Experiment quickly** (mobile classrooms, micro-loans) without waiting for large capital outlays.
3. **Leverage relationships** to convert local wins into policy conversations.

These cross-cutting results show that equity and innovation are mutually reinforcing drivers of stronger early-childhood systems.

Lessons Learned

The two year follow-up confirms that most CIRCLE projects did far more than simply continue; they evolved. Many used the grant as a springboard to deepen relationships, expand services, and build confidence in sustaining their work. The lessons they shared offer practical guidance for future rounds of investment. Drawing from survey results, Ripple Effect Mapping, and interviews, five key insights emerged (see Table 7 and Figures 19–24):

Table 7: Five insights for future rounds

Insight	Key Evidence	Implication for Future Rounds
1. Partnerships are the engine of momentum.	65% cited new or strengthened partnerships as a top post-grant benefit; 28% called them an unexpected win (Figs. 19–20).	Funders should support time and space for relationship-building. Consider scoring proposals on partnership plans and offering coalition-management technical assistance.
2. Growth beats mere survival.	53% of grantees expanded services and 47% added new training or PD after the grant ended (Fig. 19).	Treat short-cycle grants as launch pads. Follow-up mini-grants can reward grantees that show potential to scale.
3. Quality and workforce stay at the learning edge.	Quality improvement (40%) and workforce development (35%) were the top lessons learned (Fig. 21). These areas now shape 45% of current strategies (Fig. 23).	Invest in embedded coaching and "grow-your-own" workforce pipelines—grantees are ready to go deeper in these areas.
4. Funding know-how matters more than funding windfalls.	Only 4% of grantees reported receiving a large new grant, yet 91% feel better prepared to apply for funding (Fig. 24).	Support fundraising fluency through grant-writing labs, shared development staff, and training in braided finance.
5. Unanticipated barriers call for a safety net.	18% of grantees reported surprise challenges like burnout or licensing delays (Fig. 20).	Include rapid-response funding and peer-led support in future grant designs.

Figure 19: Most often new partnerships and expanded services emerged as a result of receiving a CIRCLE Grant

New Resources and Opportunities

Category	%
New partnerships or collaborations (n=69)	65%
Expanded services or programs (n=56)	53%
More access to training or PD (n=50)	47%
Increased staffing (n=32)	30%
Increased volunteer support (n=14)	13%
Increased resources / funding (n=4)	4%
Policy influence / advocacy (n=2)	2%

% of Responses

Figure 20: Organizations created unexpected new partnerships and faced unexpected challenges

What unexpected things have happened at your organization as a result of the CIRCLE Grant?

Category	%
New & deepened partnerships (n=22)	28%
Operational challenges & resistance (n=14)	18%
Sustainability & funding shifts (n=14)	18%
Program expansion / diversification (n=13)	16%
Workforce pipeline development (n=11)	14%
Staff well-being & retention (n=10)	13%
Infrastructure & physical environment (n=9)	11%
Demand spike & family engagement (n=8)	10%
Community visibility & reputation (n=6)	8%
Systems / policy influence (n=4)	5%
Early identification & inclusive practices (n=4)	5%
Emergent leadership & ownership (n=4)	5%
Data & measurement culture (n=2)	3%

% of Responses

Figure 21: Program improvement and staff capacity building were most cited as lessons learned

Lessons Learned	% of Responses
Quality / program improvement (n=44)	40%
Workforce / staffing (n=38)	35%
Community engagement / Community needs (n=37)	34%
Community / partnerships (n=35)	32%
Mental-health & social-emotional learning (n=34)	31%
Funding / financial sustainability (n=30)	28%
System navigation / case management (n=25)	23%
Flexibility & adaptability (n=21)	19%
Health, safety & licensing (n=21)	19%
Equity / culture / dual-language (n=17)	16%
Technology & virtual delivery (n=8)	7%
Communication (n=8)	7%
Infant / toddler emphasis (n=5)	5%
Outdoor learning / environment (n=5)	5%

Figure 22: Most organizational approaches have been shaped by lessons learned

Influence Organizational Approach	% of Responses
Yes (n=102)	84%
No (n=19)	16%
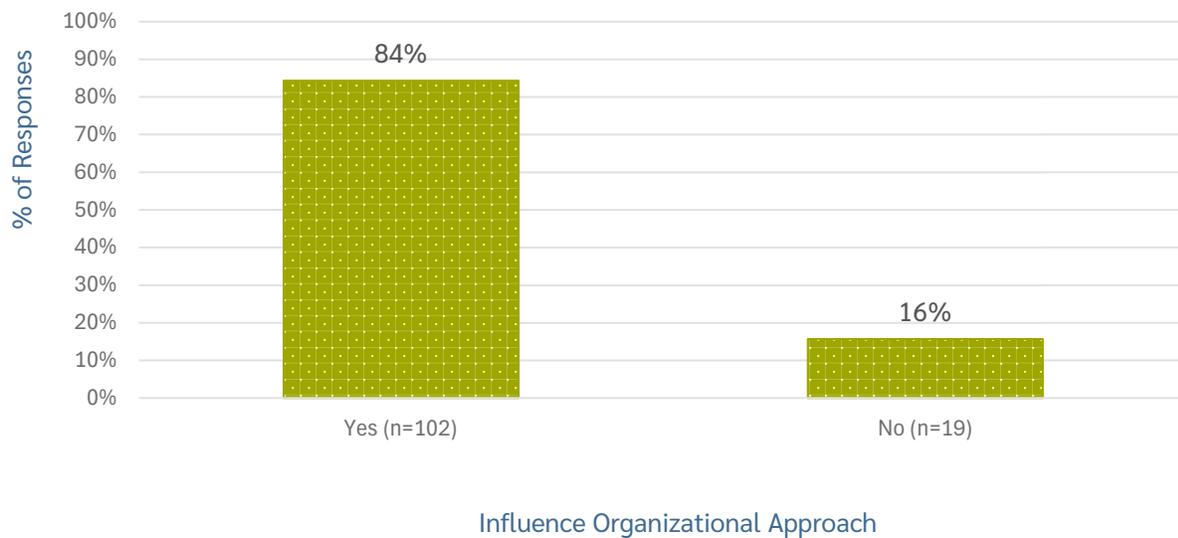
Figure 23: Lessons have shaped organization's approach to funding and quality improvement most often

Funding / financial sustainability (n=46) — 45%
Quality / program improvement (n=46) — 45%
Family engagement / family needs (n=35) — 34%
Workforce / staffing (n=30) — 29%
Community / partnerships (n=28) — 27%
Flexibility & adaptability (n=22) — 22%
Mental-health & social-emotional learning (n=19) — 19%
Equity / culture / dual-language (n=16) — 16%
Health, safety & licensing (n=15) — 15%
System navigation / case management (n=14) — 14%
Outdoor learning / environment (n=8) — 8%
Communication (n=8) — 8%
Technology & virtual delivery (n=5) — 5%
Infant / toddler emphasis (n=1) — 1%

Organization Practices Influenced

% of Responses

Figure 24: CRICLE grant organizations are more prepared to seek additional grant opportunities

Prepared (n=99) — 91%
Not prepared (n=10) — 9%

% of Responses

Preparation to Seek Additonal Grant Opportunities

Partnerships in Action: A Ripple Effect

Perhaps the strongest legacy of CIRCLE is its relational impact. Many grantees named new or deepened partnerships as their most lasting gain. As shown in Figure 25, since the grant ended:

- 41% forged or strengthened ties with nonprofits and coalitions,
- 27% now participate in Early Childhood Councils or state-level tables,
- 19% have formal connections with K–12 or higher education, and
- 15% strengthened internal peer networks, boosting morale and collaboration.

These connections translated into concrete community change (see Table 8 and Figure 26).

Table 8: Ripple effects sparked by CIRCLE partnerships

Community Ripple	% of Respondents	Examples
New / strengthened partnerships	32%	Shared substitute pools; councils co-hosting PD
Community engagement & volunteerism	30%	Parents building nature playgrounds; retirees offering multilingual story time
Unexpected barriers or gaps	21%	Licensing delays; data-sharing issues
Workforce benefits & pipelines	13%	Pooled health plans; high school intern tracks
Program expansion / new space	13%	Rural hubs opening satellite classrooms
Extra funding / in-kind resources	9%	Donated buses; mini-grants from counties
Visibility & media attention	5%	Local news coverage; community awards
Policy / systems momentum	4%	County-led ballot initiatives to support ECE wages

Figure 25: Most often connections with other non-profits and community organizations have been foraged or deepened since the end of CIRCLE Grant funding
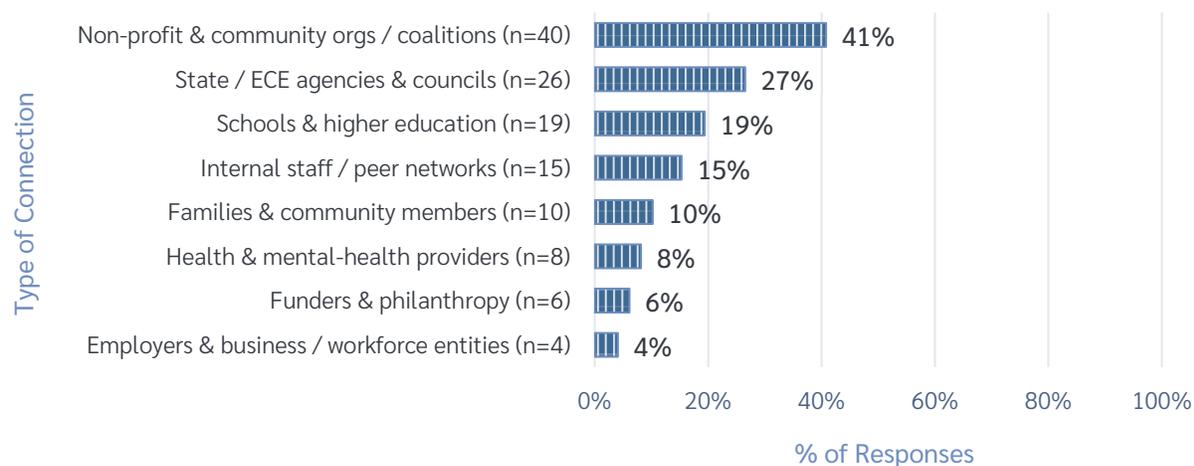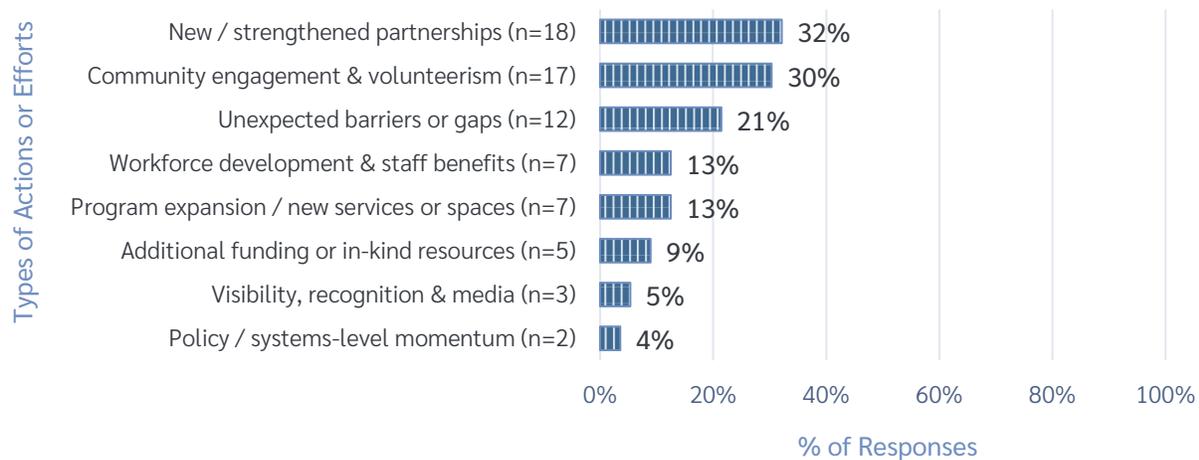
Figure 26: Grantees were most often surprised by the new or strengthened partnerships came about or were linked to the CIRCLE Grant

The findings suggest that investments in capacity and connection, not just services or slots, supports grantees to spark broader momentum. Community action, new funding, and even policy innovation often start with relationships. Future funding rounds should continue to support partnership-building as both an allowable cost and a success metric.

What Grantees Envision Next

During each REM session, we closed with a "look-ahead" exercise: directors restated the vision they drafted in 2023 and then updated it for the next two-year horizon (2025–2027). Comparing those aspirations reveals a clear maturation arc—from broad hopes to action plans that read like miniature strategic plans.

Table 9: REM sessions revealed hopes and action plans

Vision Element	Typical 2023 Language	Typical 2025 Language	Pattern that Matters
Precision & metrics	"Offer high-quality care and keep staff."	"Cut turnover from 25% to 15%; add 60 licensed infant slots; earn a Level 5 by December 2027."	*Concept → KPI*: sites now attach numbers, benchmarks, and deadlines.
Scope	"Prove the model in our center."	"Replicate across three counties; open a virtual coaching hub statewide."	*Scaling out*: pilots turn into multi-site or statewide ambitions.
Workforce investment	"Support our staff's growth."	"Implement bilingual wage scale tied to credentials; stand up a shared-services HR coop; launch a lead-teacher fellowship."	*Deeper Human and Financial capital*: compensation, leadership ladders, language-specific PD take center stage.

Vision Element	Typical 2023 Language	Typical 2025 Language	Pattern that Matters
System influence	"Hope state keeps noticing this work."	"Secure a dedicated CDEC funding stream; align with the new Early Childhood Apprenticeship Framework; serve as a regional 'center of excellence'."	*Project → policy*: visions shift from site outcomes to levers that move the whole system.

Summary

1. Nearly one-half of all original CIRCLE projects are still operating and serving thousands more children and educators.

Two years after the grant closed, 103 of 136 project directors report their CIRCLE-funded work is still operating, representing 46% of the original CIRCLE Grant cohort. Those 103 "sustainers" report reaching an additional 53,213 participants, from infants to early-childhood professionals, since funding dollars stopped in June 2023. The finding confirms that the program's short-cycle investments triggered durable capacity rather than one-off activities.

2. Embedding the work inside existing structures, often reinforced by partnerships, drives sustainability.

When sustainers were asked which tactics kept their projects going, four options emerged: folding costs into regular operations, securing new dollars, establishing formal partnerships, and garnering community support. Embedding topped the list (68%), followed by new funding (40%), partnerships (35%), and community support (22%). Most organizations chose *one* primary path: 56% relied on a single tactic, and four out of five of those single-tactic users embedded the project into day-to-day budgets and staffing (41% of all sustainers). Blending multiple tactics was rarer (only 5% used all four), underscoring that internal absorption—augmented, when needed, by selective external dollars and alliances—is the dominant recipe for longevity.

3. Fresh dollars help, but smart financing matters more than the size of the check.

Sixty sustainers reported a cumulative $8.79 million in follow-on awards (average ≈$146k; range $1.8k–$2 million). Yet only 11% named "secured additional funding" as their *sole* strategy, and nearly every non-sustainer pointed to lack of funding as a barrier (97%) (Figure 14). The pattern suggests that while access to new money matters, projects survive when dollars arrive *alongside* clear plans to weave the work into ongoing budgets, and when grantees know how to braid public, private, and in-kind resources.

4. Ripple effects spread across people, organizations, communities, and systems, especially through human and social capital.

Survey responses show that impacts most frequently touch individuals (children, families, educators), organizations (policies, staffing), and communities (new services), with nearly one-half of sustainers also noting systems-level shifts. Coded themes reveal that **Human** gains (skills, confidence) and **Social** gains (new or deeper partnerships) surface in every level of the Community Capitals Framework, providing the launch pad for later **Built** (facilities, tech) and **Financial** (new revenue streams) assets.

5. What grantees need next: know-how, networks, and time, not just another grant round.

When asked what would help them secure future funding, respondents most often chose technical assistance on grant seeking (≈ one-half of grantees), a financing-focused Community of Practice, more application runway, and chances to learn from peers who have already succeeded. On the partnership side, 56% want introductions to local funders or resource-sharing allies. Importantly, after two years of hands-on experience, 9 out of 10 feel more prepared to pursue new grants (Figure 24), signaling that targeted capacity-building and matchmaking may yield greater returns than launching another broad, one-off pot of money.

Recommendations: What Grantees Need Next

CIRCLE grantees have proved that small, flexible awards can spark big change. Two years on, 46% of projects are still alive, and many are eyeing state-level policy or financing reforms. What they need now is not another round of blank-slate pilots, but targeted support that carries promising work from proof-of-concept to permanence.

1. Glide-Path Grants—Bridging the Last Mile

The data shows a predictable dip in momentum 12–24 months after the initial award. Early wins are visible, but staff capacity is stretched and new revenue streams are not yet secure. Providing a **glide-path grant**, about one-third to one-half of the original amount, gives projects a short runway to:

- lock critical roles into the operating budget;

- complete outcome studies that attract larger funders; and

- finish braiding local, state, and philanthropic dollars without watching hard-earned gains unravel.

In practice, a glide-path grant might pay for a part-time coordinator, an external evaluator, or the legal work needed to formalize a cross-county consortium. It is *not* a forever subsidy; it is a timed landing strip that converts a burst of innovation into an asset a community can own.

2. Pair Dollars with Demand-Driven Technical Assistance

Survey and interview data point to five concrete "asks" that, taken together, will help projects stand on their own (Table 10). Nearly one-half of grantees want hands-on help writing proposals, a similar share asked for a peer funding network, and more than one-half need introductions to local foundations or county agencies. Funders can package that assistance in modular form:

- **Grant-writing bootcamps** to turn big ideas into bankable narratives;

- A **Funding Community of Practice** that meets quarterly, shares template libraries, and demystifies braided finance;

- **Two-stage applications** (LOI to full) that give novice applicants time and coaching;

- **Peer success panels** at statewide conferences so leaders can see and replicate what works; and

- **Regional resource roundtables** that seat providers next to county human-services staff, CDBG officers, and local philanthropies.

Table 10. Demand-driven technical-assistance menu for next-round grants

TA Component	Responds To...	Delivery Idea
Grant-writing bootcamps & office hours	49% TA request	Virtual cohort led by seasoned ECE fund developer
Funding Community of Practice	46% CoP interest	Quarterly peer huddles and template libraries
Time & runway extensions	42% need more time	Two-stage apps with short LOI before full proposal
Peer success panels	42% want examples	"Lightning-talk" slots at statewide conferences
Regional resource roundtables	56% seek partnerships	In-person meet-ups seating providers with county, CDBG, and foundation reps

3. Design Future Grants Around Ripple Logic

CIRCLE taught us that impact rarely stays where it starts. Workforce coaching can morph into county dashboards; a mobile preschool can become the template for lodging-tax funding. Stage-gated grants that release a second tranche only when a project demonstrates movement from "organization" to "community" to "system" keep funds—and attention—focused on outward ripples rather than mere survival.

4. Center Relationships, Language Access, and Coaching

The Community Capitals analysis is clear: **Human and Social capital are the first dominoes.** Grants that budget for relationship-building, bilingual materials, and ongoing coaching turn those early gains into the Built, Financial, and Political capital that sustains programs. Funders should view interpreter stipends, community liaisons, and cross-agency MOUs as core costs, not extras.

Conclusion

Together, these findings paint a clear picture. The CIRCLE Grant lit a spark that continues to burn because projects were quickly woven into everyday practice, reinforced by strategic alliances and selective new dollars. Future investments that pair *relationship-building and financial know-how* with flexible seed funding are poised to push the next wave of community-led solutions even farther. The two year follow-up leaves little doubt: CIRCLE's one-time funding delivers durable, equity-driven returns.

- **Sustainability**. Nearly one-half of projects remain active; together they have reached 53,000 additional children, families, and educators since the checks stopped.

- **Scaling**. Early program wins, better coaching, and stronger parent ties now ripple into shared substitute pools, county partnerships, and state task-force seats.

- **Equity**. Bilingual salary ladders, interpreter stipends, and refugee-led CDA cohorts translate cultural capital into higher wages, lower turnover, and policy change.

Long-Term Value

CIRCLE shows that short, flexible dollars with trust and technical backup can:

1. **Build resilient providers.** Projects folded costs into core budgets, added shared-service supports, and, when shocks hit, kept doors open.

2. **Widen equitable access**. Investments followed need, not ZIP code: every county hosts projects and the highest retention gains appear in multilingual, rural, and refugee-serving settings.

3. **Seed system reform from the ground up**. Grass-roots pilots now inform licensing rules, workforce stipends, and state funding formulas.

CIRCLE began as a pandemic response and evolved into a blueprint for a resilient, equitable early-childhood system. The evidence is in, the pathways are mapped, and the partners are ready. Now is the moment to drive farther together.

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