

Building Great Kids: Ensuring children have strong, stable early learning opportunities



About the State of Washington's Kids 2020 series

The State of Washington's Kids 2020 looks at how kids of color are leading our state into a more racially diverse future. Through this series of briefs, KIDS COUNT in Washington seeks to address the fact that too many kids have never been well served by old structures that disproportionately channeled opportunity, education and prosperity along lines of race.

This brief combines the existing data about child well-being with the information of expertise supplied by Washingtonians working hard to improve child and community outcomes across the state. Their responses have informed the analysis and solutions we offer in this brief to fuel our common future.



KIDS COUNT in Washington is a partnership between the Children's Alliance and the Washington State Budget & Policy Center.

Healthy development for young kids creates a better future for all. Today's children are the voters, parents, nurses, educators, volunteers, and business owners of tomorrow. Within just a few short years, they will take their places in civic society. Washington's collective well-being—the health of public structures, the vibrancy of communities, the vitality of the economy—is enhanced by everyone having the chance to make their greatest contributions in these diverse roles.

Kids gain the essential skills to take on these roles from day one, as they grow and learn to regulate their emotions, focus their efforts, interpret the actions of others, and find joy in serve-and-return play.

A key component of a young child's development is their relationships with the adults in their lives: not only the parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles who may comprise their family network, but the network of caregivers they rely on when the adult members of their families are at work or in school. The early childhood educators that take on this important role in children's lives, hold the responsibility of developing strong relationships with kids and nurturing face-to-face interactions, which decades of research shows is critical in childhood development.

In nearly 6 in 10 U.S. families with children under the age of 6, all parents in the household work outside the home.¹ Early childhood professionals fulfill a vital service to families, kids, and the economy by caring for and educating infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. Yet the low pay and scant professional support for this workforce is incompatible with the robust cognitive and social-emotional development taking place in the children they care for.

The lack of investment over the last three decades in the early learning system is now compounded by the effects of the coronavirus pandemic, which is disrupting working families' access to child care—and children's stable relationships with the caregivers they've come to know and trust.

Prior to the coronavirus, 63 percent of families in Washington lived in a child care desert, where the supply of child care is inadequate to meet the demand.² Since the onset of the pandemic, enrollment has gone down 50 percent statewide. Additionally, Washington has lost nearly

28 percent of the state's child care capacity, and 33 percent of the workforce is either laid off or furloughed.³ Some of this could be permanent; in a recent survey of child care providers in the state, 46 percent of open programs have reported risk of closure (50 percent of centers, 45 percent of family child care homes, and 40 percent of school age programs).⁴

Before the pandemic, the shortage of affordable, quality, flexible care cost the state billions in lost revenue annually. Considering opportunity costs to employers, including lost productivity and lost opportunity to reinvest funds, it is estimated that child care access and affordability issues cost the state's gross domestic product (GDP) about \$6.5 billion in lost contributions in 2018.⁵ Now, to emerge from the

crisis, public investments in children, families, and early education are more important than ever.

If we want all kids to achieve their rich potential, we need to make better investments in infants, toddlers, and preschool-age children—by amply supporting the early childhood professionals who devote their time and skills to nurturing their future.

This KIDS COUNT in Washington data brief is designed to look into the factors influencing young children's healthy development in the context of the professionals who care for them—both those who work in home-based and center-based settings—and whose level of economic stability and public support can profoundly influence the lives of kids, the well-being of their families, and the health of our shared future.

Barriers to Quality Care



all six areas have a greater likelihood of success in kindergarten and beyond. During the 2019-2020 school year, only 51.5 percent of kindergarteners met standards across all six domains.⁷

If we want all kids to achieve their rich potential, we need to make better investments in this prime developmental window—by amply supporting the early-childhood professionals who devote their time and skills to nurturing the future.

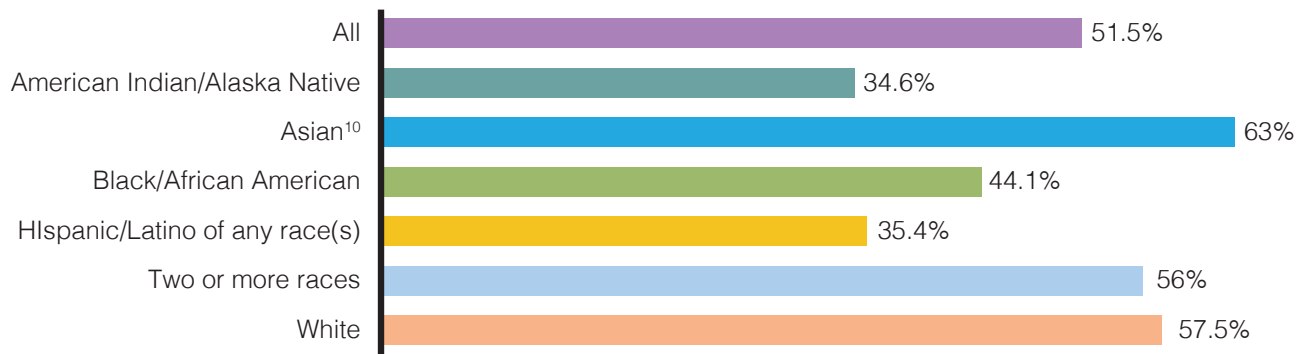
The first five years of life lead to a landmark occasion: arrival to kindergarten, when the state assumes its constitutional duty to provide each child with the chance to gain the building blocks for lifelong success through universal, free public education through grade 12. The Washington Kindergarten Inventory of Developing Skills (WaKIDS), includes an assessment that is administered during the first two months of kindergarten. Teachers observe students across six domains of development and learning: social-emotional, physical, language, cognitive, literacy, and math.⁶ While the only requirement for kindergarten entry is to be five years of age by August 31, children who demonstrate readiness in

The experiences children need to attain kindergarten readiness are often out of reach for some—a product of the barriers to opportunity created by historic and current forms of institutional racism and other forms of bias. These barriers disrupt healthy learning at an early age by destabilizing families in a variety of ways: in their chance to earn and save; their ability to put down roots in stable, affordable communities; and their access to good jobs and a quality education.⁸

As a result, WaKIDS data tend to show disparities both by household income and along lines of race and ethnicity, with many children of color faring substantially poorer outcomes than white non-Hispanic children.⁹

Many kids of color face the greatest barriers to a strong start in school

Percent of students ready for kindergarten by race and ethnicity, Washington state, 2019–20



Source: Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction WaKIDS data, 2019–2020. WaKIDS measures student readiness for school across six developmental domains: social-emotional, physical, language, cognitive, literacy, and mathematics.

This data comes from classroom observations performed by kindergarten teachers; limited in setting and in scope, they are imperfect. But they offer a broad, population-level indicator of young children’s preparation for their K-12 years.

No single childhood experience will determine whether a child meets kindergarten entry expectations. The state legislature has made repeated commitments to expand quality preschool options for families with low-incomes and those furthest from opportunity, but the timeline to achieve the promised entitlement the state’s pre-k program, Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP), continues to be delayed due to state budget shortfalls. Children’s learning and development can also be impacted negatively by multiple educational factors including teacher bias, disruption in continuity of care, and lack of access to quality programs. The National Institute for Early Learning Research (NIEER) found that the quality of ECE programs Black children attend are—on average—lower than that of programs attended by white non-Hispanic children. NIEER also reports that only high-quality programs can be expected to substantially reduce inequities in learning and development. Low-quality programs, on the other hand, are likely to exacerbate inequality.¹¹

There are, however, other factors that create the positive foundation for healthy learning and development. Child development research over the

last two decades has shown that quality learning environments and consistency and stability in the early childhood workforce have major positive influences on child development. In the short- to mid-term, children who are enrolled in high-quality early learning programs are less likely to need special education services in their K-12 years; less likely to commit juvenile offenses; and more likely to graduate from high school. In the long term, those same children are more likely to be employed and less likely to be dependent on government assistance later in life.¹²

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Supporting Kids by Supporting Educators

The states' early care and education workforce—the professionals who care for and educate the next generation—works in every corner of the state, at all hours of the day, in a wide variety of settings, whether in their homes or in a child care center. All are impacted by the actions and investments of policymakers.

One major factor in the strength and vitality of the early childhood workforce is Working Connections Child Care (WCCC), Washington's subsidy program that allows families with low incomes to access affordable, quality child care while they work or participate in approved school and work-related activities. Lawmakers have increased their investments in the program since 2018, but the investments made continue to be far less than what is needed to support the quality of care desired. In the early months of the coronavirus pandemic, to help close the gap in lost revenue for providers, the Department of Children, Youth and Families (DCYF) continued these payments based on March 2020 enrollment, even when child care facilities closed or were operating with reduced attendance. Yet Working Connections subsidy rates remain too low, lower than market rate and the true cost of providing quality care. The current gap between private pay for an infant and the WCCC reimbursement rate is \$18,021 (annually).¹³ In order to remain operational, early learning providers often limit the number of subsidized children they accept, and the lost revenue often leads to increases in tuition for private pay families, slim operating margins, and/or poor wages and benefits for employees. As a result, parents receiving WCCC¹⁴ struggle to find quality care for their children. Currently, only 9.8 percent of income-eligible children are receiving WCCC, indicating a dire need for increased investment, not just increasing the reimbursement rate level but also to increase the number of children WCCC serves (which is currently capped at 33,000 families).¹⁵

If policymakers increased subsidy rates to match market rates, quality programs that accept Working Connections could further the goal of eliminating the opportunity gap between Black children and their white peers. Such rate increases would

incentivize more high-quality providers to accept WCCC families and would give parents a greater choice of child care options. These steps could further racial equity in potentially far-reaching ways—first, giving all families, including families of color using the program¹⁶ greater access to high quality options, and second, because families with low incomes, who face longstanding, inequitable barriers to jobs with good pay, could find more quality, affordable providers as they search for child care.¹⁷

If we want all kids to achieve their rich potential, we need to make better investments in this prime developmental window—by amply supporting the early-childhood professionals who devote their time and skills to nurturing the future.

Existing funding levels for Washington's state preschool program, ECEAP, also remain woefully inadequate and require urgent investment from state lawmakers. ECEAP has remained underfunded since its inception and even more so since lawmakers made cuts during the Great Recession. ECEAP still has not met the promised entitlement first made in 2010 for the 2018-2019 school year and now pushed out to the 2022-2023 school year: providing universal access for all eligible 3- and 4-year-olds¹⁸ in the state. Like WCCC, ECEAP is unable to serve all income-qualifying children, serving only 16 percent of eligible 4-year-olds. Washington state has a 26-point kindergarten readiness gap – only 30.5 percent of kindergarteners from low-income families are fully school ready, compared to 56.5 percent of their more affluent peers.¹⁹ The limited investment in pre-k leaves ECEAP providers operating on razor-thin margins, discourages teacher retention, and restricts access to high-quality pre-k to only a handful of qualifying families.

Another opportunity for greater action by policymakers is wages and workforce support for the early education sector—each of which help determine whether dedicated early childhood professionals remain in the profession long-term. Because early childhood educators earn some of the lowest wages of any profession nationwide, experts believe that providers are leaving the field in search of higher pay.²⁰ No single model outlines the best step mode of pay parity for early childhood educators, so in 2019, the state's Compensation Technical Workgroup recommended a series of proposals to the legislature, including a salary scale and a competitive compensation package (retirement, sick leave, etc.) comparable to K-3 educators.²¹ The Child Care Collaborative Taskforce will complete a compensation report with recommendations to the legislature in December 2020.²²

Finally, because parents desire a range of choices in child care settings, policymakers can take action to expand and preserve the early childhood

workforce that offers children the linguistic and cultural variations that mirror the experiences they have among families.

While the 2015 Early Start Act was designed to strengthen career pathways in the field, advocates and educators have since questioned its ability to support the aspirations of the state's early childhood educators. The higher education system risks perpetuating its long legacy of restricting access for people of color through standard recruitment, retention and testing practices. Recognizing this, DCYF has adopted measures to allow current teachers to demonstrate competency in the field without pursuing additional formal educational requirements.²³ While this is an encouraging step forward, future data on workforce turnover, compensation, and diversity will indicate the degree to which additional steps are needed to support quality and cultural relevance in early care and education.



Bevette Irvis
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“Lack of public investment in early learning causes children and their families to suffer the most, as they don’t have access to services that they need. Children miss out on opportunities for social interactions with their peers, and the ability to be in child-centered spaces. Families have more difficulty with doing what they need to do ... work, go to school, job training, etc. Programs are impacted as they need to figure out how to stay financially viable, including compensating staff at a livable wage and managing staff turnover.

Working Connections does not reimburse programs for their full cost of care, so oftentimes child care programs are running at a deficit. Other funding streams are relied on to cover the costs of providing high-quality early learning services to the most vulnerable children in our community.

Our hope for the future is that all children and families have access to high-quality early learning services that are affordable and culturally responsive, provided in settings with staff that reflect their cultural, racial and ethnic backgrounds.”

Steps forward in 2020

Policymakers took several bipartisan steps to stabilize and protect the early childhood workforce in the 2020 legislative session. Notably, the Washington State Legislature passed House Bill 2556, which creates alternative pathways to gaining the credentials educators need to attain licensing and gain higher quality ratings on the state's Early Achievers quality rating and improvement system. Recognizing that early childhood professionals acquire much of their expertise through workplace-based experience, the bill promotes workforce diversity and economic security, and therefore a greater diversity of choices for families seeking affordable, high-quality care.

Further steps are needed, especially to support immigrant child care providers and providers of color: two groups of providers more often trained in community-based settings to offer culturally relevant care. Senate Bill 5607, which passed the Senate but failed to move forward in the House, would have created the Dual Language Grant Program to increase the supply of high-quality dual-language early learning facilities. The bill would have also increased access to professional development materials for early childhood educators whose first language is not English. A proviso that supported an investment in dual-language learning was included in the final budget, but was then vetoed by Governor Jay Inslee in April in anticipation of the expected shortfalls caused by the COVID-19 crisis.

The legislature also made investments in ECEAP this session that would have enhanced the services that ECEAP providers are able to offer



to children and families. ECEAP takes a holistic child approach by combining strong pre-k education with comprehensive services including individualized, trauma-informed health and family support. In 2020, the legislature approved a \$2.2 million investment in the ECEAP complex needs fund, which Governor Inslee unfortunately vetoed out of the final budget as well.

As the pandemic's fiscal damage continues, state officials will be faced with many similar decisions. But an all-cuts response to the coronavirus pandemic will cost Washington state far more in the future—in short-term economic recovery and in lost opportunity for the next generation. And these cuts pose the greatest threat to children and families in communities of color and those long held furthest from opportunity.

Children, who are already learning from birth, experience a vast array of opportunities to build the cognitive foundation for all that comes later. From a policy perspective, this richness is both a challenge and a strength. No panacea will erase the disparities evident in the data; instead, there are many ways to partner with parents as they make momentous choices about how their children acquire the building blocks of learning.

Even amid changing circumstances, wise policymakers must identify the best ways to continue to support families and early learning educators as they strive to secure a bright, stable future for children. Now that we know the importance of quality, stability, and cultural and linguistic relevance in early care and education, and the connection of those factors to eradicating opportunity gaps, we need to act. It is a collective responsibility to ensure children have what they need to thrive.

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Thank you to Bevette Irvis, Wellspring Family Services Early Learning Center, Seattle

Find hundreds of indicators of child wellbeing at the state, county and national levels at the Annie E. Casey Foundation's KIDS COUNT Data Center: datacenter.kidscount.org.

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