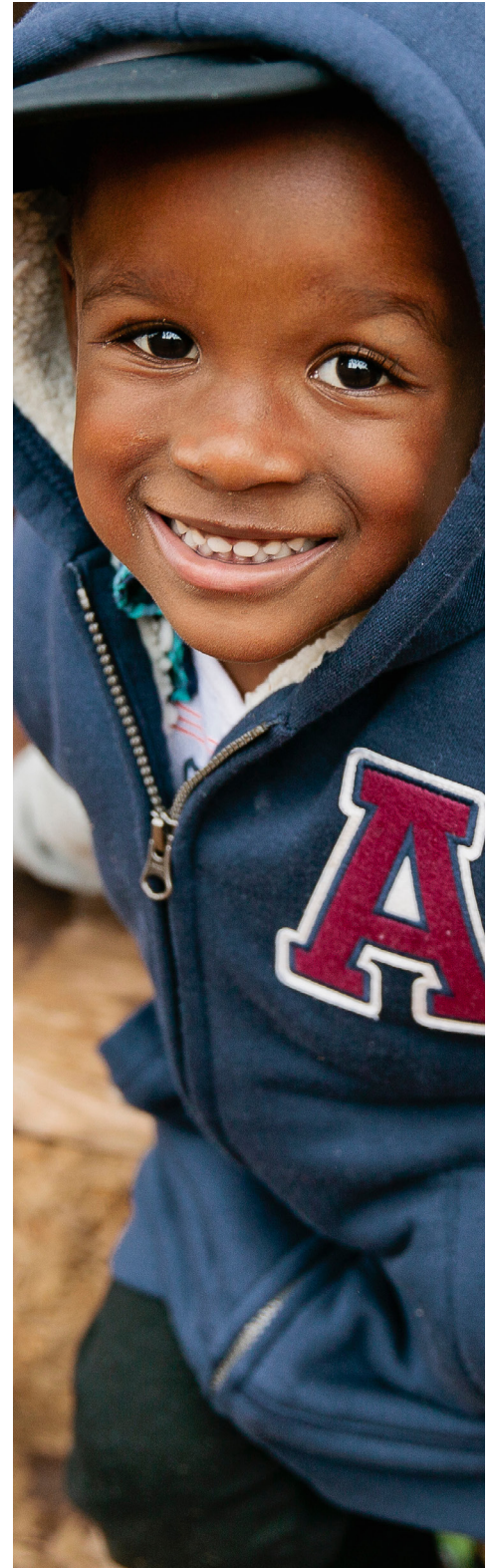


# STATE OF THE CHILDREN: EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION IN WASHINGTON STATE | 2024



# VISION & EQUITY STATEMENT

We envision a future where every child thrives, regardless of income level, race, ethnicity, ability, nationality, gender, or location. In this report we prioritize access to quality early care and education as a way of supporting children and families and define quality child care and early learning as practices centering love, joy, and care for children’s physical, mental, relational, emotional, cultural, and spiritual health.

**“Ellos van a ser otra generación, entonces, como nosotros ir preparando el camino para nuestros hijos pero también para otras generaciones que vienen atrás de nosotros.”**

**- Iris Rosas, King County parent**

*[English Translation] “They are the next generation, therefore, we need to prepare the pathway for our children, but also for other generations to come.”*

Children of color, children with disabilities, children living in low-income conditions, and emergent multilingual learners are disproportionately affected by inequitable early care and education systems. Systemic and policy changes are necessary to make child care more inclusive, accessible, and affordable. It is also critical that early care and education programs be welcoming and inclusive, and build on community knowledge to inform education practice.

**“[We need] a welcoming environment where parents can be honest with some of the issues with their family without being judged or disregarded.”**

**- Co-design participant**

The historical roots of child care begin with the forced labor of enslaved black women in the United States. Black women and women of color have long provided care for children with no or minimal compensation, and this legacy continues today. Ninety-six percent of the early care and education workforce are women, 48 percent are people of color, and the average compensation is \$42,485 per year, just above the federal poverty level for a family of four. This inequity must be rectified as a matter of racial and gender justice.

Washington Communities for Children, Washington STEM, and a variety of partners co-designed the State of the Children report to raise awareness and drive action so that, as one co-designer said, “all children have access to a joyous childhood.” We advocate for policies and funding that will support working families, increase compensation for early care and education professionals, and lead to greater collaboration with families, caregivers, and communities.

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“They are the next generation, therefore, we need to prepare the pathway for our children, but also for other generations to come.”

- Co-design participant

## STORIES AND DATA

In 2022, Washington STEM facilitated a series of co-design sessions, engaging community members from the Parent Institute for Engagement, the Head Start Parent Advocacy Council, and other key stakeholders. A significant part of our discussions focused on the barriers to accessing child care for families of children with disabilities, those experiencing homelessness, and immigrant communities. The experiences and insights of these communities are included alongside numbers and statistics to create a more whole picture of the early care and education (ECE) landscape. The figures in this report were updated in 2024 to reflect more current data.

## WHAT POLICY MAKERS AND STATE AGENCIES CAN DO:

- **Include ECE professionals and families** in conversations that address access to early care and education.
- **Increase child care subsidy rates** to cover the full cost of quality care; increase the subsidy rate for Family, Friend, and Neighbor caregivers.
- **Set subsidy rates** that cover the cost of quality and meet the individual needs of children with disabilities.
- **Increase access to screenings**, diagnostics, and ongoing services for children with disabilities.
- **Provide a living wage** to all early care and education professionals.
- **Increase grants** and direct investments to open new child care programs.
- **Gather accurate data** on key populations, including young children with disabilities, children experiencing homelessness, and Native American children and **create a centralized and accessible early care and education data hub.**



# EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION

## ACCESS, AFFORDABILITY, AND QUALITY

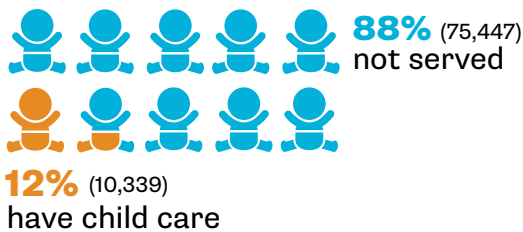
By age five, 90 percent of a child’s brain has developed. Investing in high-quality early care and education experiences builds the foundation for future learning, behavior, and health. We must focus on policies and programs that promote access, affordability, and quality ECE opportunities for the 517,361 young children in our state.

### EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION: ACCESS

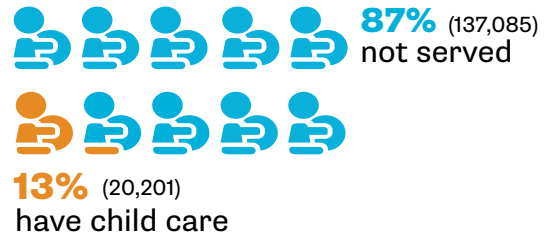
Current licensed child care availability only meets the needs of approximately 22 percent (64,460) of children under six whose parents are in the workforce and need care in Washington State. About 293,000 children under age six need child care, and this lack of access to child care often has dramatic impacts on families and employers. Of children with all parents in the workforce, 61 percent would access child care if it were available.\*

### NEED AND SUPPLY OF CHILD CARE

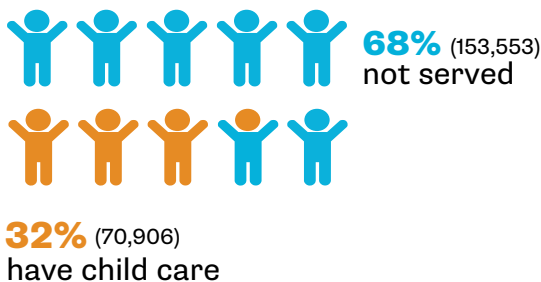
#### Infant



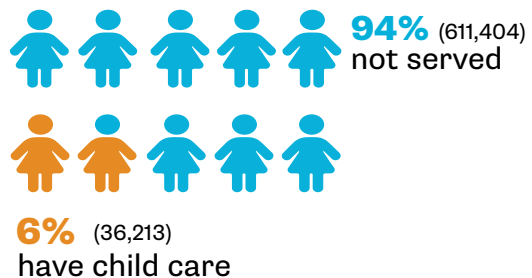
#### Toddler



#### Preschool



#### School-age



Gap by age indicates the shortfall in child care spots. Supply estimates do not include Transitional Kindergarten programs operated by school districts.

## EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION: AFFORDABILITY

The cost of child care is unaffordable for most families. Families with two young children (one infant and one preschooler) who make the state median income (\$141,177) spend up to 26 percent (\$37,380) of their income on child care. The Washington State Department of Commerce states that child care should cost no more than seven percent of a family’s income. These costs place a tremendous burden on families and impact household earnings in three areas: work time commitment, productivity levels, and long-term career.

### PRICE BY AGE GROUP

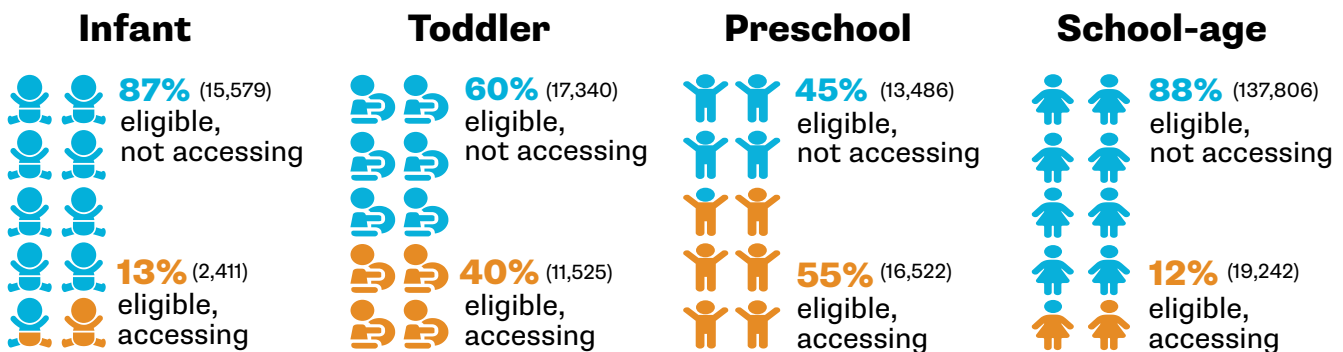
	Yearly Price
<b>Infants</b> (<1 year old)	<b>\$21,000</b>
<b>Toddlers</b> (1-2 years old)	<b>\$18,396</b>
<b>Preschoolers</b> (3-5 years old)	<b>\$16,380</b>
<b>Schoolage</b> (5-12 years old)	<b>\$5,196</b>
<b>Average price for Community College</b>	<b>\$7,620</b>

The average annual price of early care across all ages is higher than the cost of attending community college (\$7,620) for three quarters.

## WORKING CONNECTIONS CHILD CARE SUBSIDY

The Working Connections Child Care Subsidy (WCCC) is a subsidy program that helps income-eligible families pay for child care. Two WCCC bills passed in 2023 that increased access by broadening eligibility to more families and caregivers, including undocumented families, child care providers, and families in the therapeutic court systems (see [SB 5225](#) and [HB 1525](#)). The Fair Start for Kids Act, passed in 2021, decreased co-pays and expanded eligibility so that more families could qualify by income. Currently, 233,911 children under the age of 13 in Washington State are eligible for the WCCC, but only 49,700 children (21%) are accessing this program designed to make child care more affordable.

### ACCESS TO THE WCCC SUBSIDY PROGRAM



# IN THEIR OWN WORDS

## CHILD CARE PROVIDERS AS CATALYSTS FOR CHANGE

Child care providers understand the distressing reality of inadequate child care availability and the impact on families. They also describe how they are transforming their communities into networks of child care services as they strive to meet their community's needs.

### FAMILIES STRUGGLE TO FIND CHILD CARE IN THE NORTH OLYMPIC REGION

*“The lack of availability for families to find care in their community is frustrating. Every day, we receive phone calls from **frantic parents** trying to **find care** for their child so that they can work to provide for their family but also be a community participant who keeps the economy moving! Our families do not deserve this. Our government needs to step in! We **need more providers to help our families thrive!** We need our government to see that the lack of funding has created this crisis.”*

– Katie Hudkins, Director, Tree Top Village Childcare Center, North Olympic Region



### FROM CHILD CARE DESERT TO SERVICE NETWORK IN OKANOGAN COUNTY

Irma Acosta, a licensed child care provider in Okanogan County, has been advocating for her community for over two decades. Brewster, her hometown, used to be considered a child care desert due to the lack of providers and early learning programs to support children. Recognizing the urgent need for systemic intervention, she sought support from early care and education programs such as **The Imagine Institute and Diversa Unificada Educational Non-Profit**. Through these initiatives, Irma gained essential credentials and skills to provide high-quality child care services in her community. She supported and mentored others, leading to a wave of individuals becoming child care providers themselves. This collective response to a community-wide problem transformed the once child care desert into a robust network of services. Today, thanks to a collective effort catalyzed by Irma's initial actions, Brewster is a community that has more child care that meets their needs.

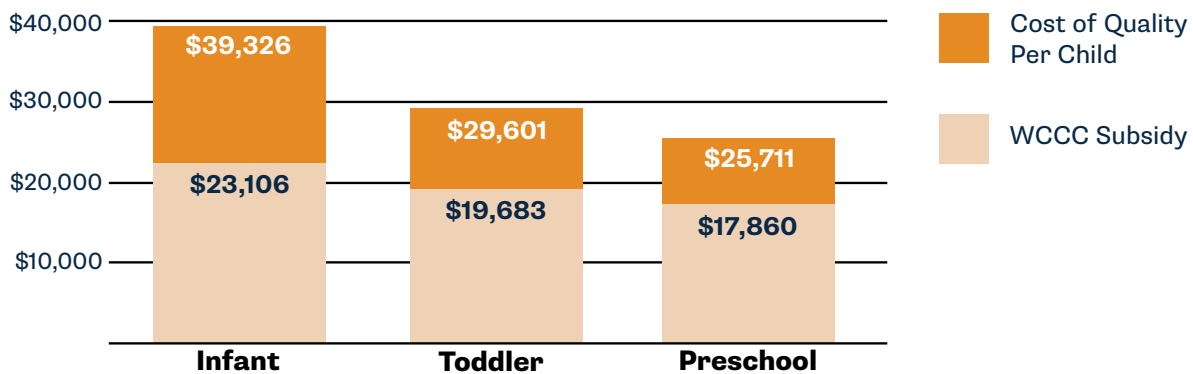
Despite challenges, child care providers are adaptable and resourceful in delivering quality care. Utilizing their networks and resources, they support and inspire others to join the profession, ultimately strengthening the community of caregivers. Any initiative aimed at addressing challenges within the child care industry must recognize their central role in creating viable solutions.

## EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION: QUALITY

Researchers have found that children who receive high-quality early care and education enter school with better math, language, and social skills than their peers. Quality early care and education provides safe, loving, and stimulating environments for young children. Early Achievers is a program that supports ECE programs to provide high-quality care. Many ECE programs in our state have achieved a quality rating through Early Achievers, however, quality care has a financial cost that varies by age. Care for infants and toddlers is often very expensive, and there is not enough of it for most of the children and families who need it.

In 2022, the Washington State Department of Commerce released a [Cost of Quality](#) report that estimates the cost of high-quality care for children by age and location. The report includes costs associated with higher levels of quality, such as paid planning time for teachers, money for curriculum and assessment, and living wages for early care and education professionals. Estimates show a significant difference between child care costs and the current WCCC subsidy rate, and an even greater gap with what families can pay. While many child care programs demonstrate high quality, they do it at a financial loss and often at the cost of their own wages. In addition, these estimates do not include data on the cost of high-quality care for children with disabilities, who may need additional supports to be included in early care and education programs.

### COST OF HIGH-QUALITY CARE VS. WCCC SUBSIDY RATES BY AGE



*Note: Figures represent the statewide average for children in center-based care with an Early Achievers rating of Level 5.*

## ECEAP, HEAD START, AND EARLY HEAD START

The Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP), Early ECEAP, Head Start, and Early Head Start are early learning programs that specialize in inclusive and high-quality care for low-income children and children with disabilities. Programming is either part-day or full school day (seven hours), and some programs run year round. While these programs provide critical supports, working families who participate in them are often left to piece together care. In addition, many of the children who need these services still do not have access to them. There is a plan to expand ECEAP so that all children who qualify can participate. Continued commitment from lawmakers is needed to ensure this plan is enacted. A total of 50,383 preschool children across the state were eligible for ECEAP/Head Start in the 2022-23 school year, however, only 29,041 spots were funded.

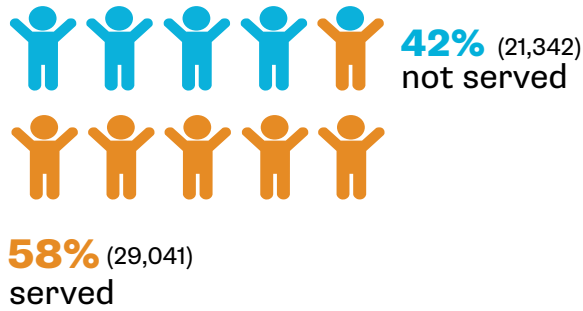
**907** infants and toddlers are enrolled in Early ECEAP and/or Early Head Start programs.

**58%** (29,041) of preschool children who qualify have a funded slot in ECEAP/Head Start.



# NEED AND SUPPLY OF ECEAP/HEAD START

## Preschool



## FAMILY, FRIEND, AND NEIGHBOR CARE

In Washington State, 78% (258,267) of young children in families where all parents work are not in formal care. Nationally, about 25% of these children regularly spend time in the care of a Family, Friend, or Neighbor (FFN) caregiver. Families who choose FFN care do so because they know and trust the caregiver and usually share home cultures, languages, and values. Communities of color, immigrant and refugee families, parents who work non-traditional hours, families with infants and toddlers, and families of children with special needs report using FFN at higher rates than their peers. Caregivers provide care as a way to support the family and child, and they have nurturing relationships that extend well beyond the child's early years.

Families who depend on FFN caregivers and qualify by income level can participate in the Working Connections Child Care Subsidy program. However, the subsidy rates are extremely low at \$4 an hour for FFN caregivers. Systems need to more equitably support this part of our care infrastructure by increasing FFN child care subsidy rates, providing financial and material support (e.g., diapers, food, toys), and expanding programs that support caregivers, such as facilitated play groups and home visiting programs like [Parents as Teachers](#).

**25%** (64,567)  
of young children with all  
parents in the workforce  
are in FFN care in  
Washington state.

**\$4.00**  
**PER HOUR** is the WCCC Subsidy  
rate for Family,  
Friend, and Neighbor  
caregivers.



# STORIES FROM PARENTS

## NAVIGATING CHILD CARE FOR CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

### THROUGH COMMUNITY DISCUSSIONS WITH CO-DESIGNERS, FIVE THEMES EMERGED:

#### 1. Lack of Child Care for Children with Disabilities

*"Finding child care is difficult, and even harder for BIPOC or immigrant families with a special needs child...No child care wanted to enroll Johnny, my 3-year-old sweet boy with significant delays, so I tried to teach him at home."*

– Danna Summers, King County parent

**2. Navigating Diagnostic and Support Systems:** Navigating diagnostic and support systems for children is difficult and complicated by issues like inadequate insurance coverage and lengthy wait times.

*"[My son's] pediatrician said he likely had autism but would need a formal diagnosis. However, no place in Vancouver can evaluate a child on state insurance. You need to go to Portland or Seattle, which have 12+ month waits."*

–Baylee Gonzales, Clark County parent

**3. Inclusive Care is a Social Justice Issue:** The lack of inclusive child care options is a sign of systemic ableism in education and early learning.

*"Families of children with disabilities also deserve widespread access to these same [child care] options. Anything less than full inclusion and care reinforces systemic ableism in the education and early learning sector and harms children with disabilities, their parents, and their support network."*

–Whitney Stohr, Snohomish County parent

**4. Equitable Compensation for Providers:** Many families of children with disabilities need respite care to allow parents a break. However, wages for respite care providers are too low, making it hard to find and retain this important part of the child care system.

*"What would really help parents in my position is not just making it easier to obtain paid services, but also offering a livable wage to respite care providers, to better incentivize them to accept the work."*

–Amanda Zamara, Snohomish County parent

**5. Unfair Economic Consequences:** The lack of inclusive child care sometimes means parents of children with disabilities may have to leave the workforce to care for their child.

*"I had to give up my career to support Johnny, learn the system, and talk to many people who dismissed me."*

– Danna Summers, King County parent

## THE SOUTH SOUND PARENT TO PARENT PROGRAM CREATES WINS FOR CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

Programs like South Sound Parent to Parent (SSP2P) offer innovative approaches to provide inclusive care for children with disabilities. In 2021, SSP2P established an early learning program to provide **accessible and inclusive child care services** for families of children with developmental delays in Thurston, South Mason, and Grays Harbor Counties. The program, called **Growing Learners**, is a transitional preschool in Thurston County for children aged 3-5 who have completed the Early Support for Infants and Toddlers program but who do not qualify for **ongoing special education through their public school**. Funded by private donations and community grants, this early learning program features certified teachers and specialists and provides care for 16 children. ([Learn more about SSP2P and Growing Learners.](#))



To expand programs like Growing Learners, we need a comprehensive understanding of the true cost of care for children with disabilities. Accurate cost estimates are necessary to set appropriate subsidies and other forms of support so early care and education programs have the resources necessary to provide quality and inclusive care.

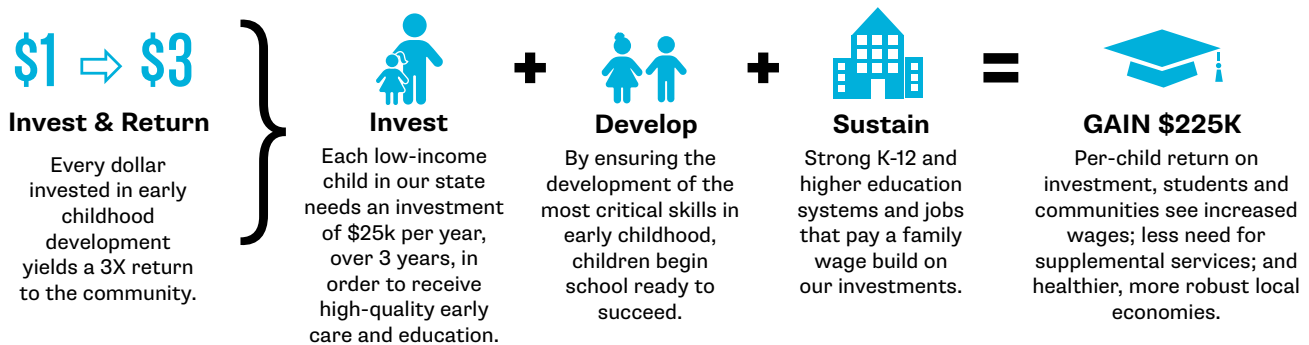


# THE ECONOMIC BENEFITS OF INVESTING IN EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION

Research has shown that investing in high-quality early care and education does more than provide a strong foundation for young learners. The spillover effects of investing in children at an early age have been linked to a stronger economy, increased parental job stability, and a reduction in the cost for special education, healthcare, and criminal justice spending later in life.

Unequal opportunities due to poverty reduce our state’s economic prosperity. However, early investments can make a big difference down the road. For every **one dollar invested** in high-quality care in the early years of life, there is a more than **three dollar return** in savings on later interventions and upward economic mobility in adulthood.

## RETURN ON INVESTMENT\*



\*Investment and gain figures are based on the cost of year-round, full-day, quality-rated child care for children age 3-5, as estimated by the Department of Commerce’s Cost of Quality Report.

## ECONOMIC IMPACT ON EMPLOYERS

Washington employers incur costs of \$2.8 billion annually due to employee absenteeism resulting from a breakdown in child care coverage.

*“The complexity of our state’s current child care system does not work for everyone and impacts our local and state economies every day. In order for communities across Washington to thrive, our state must make direct investments into our child care system to ensure access, options, and affordability. Now more than ever, our region and state are at risk of losing talent and productivity due to our underprioritized, yet essential, child care system.”*

Alisha Benson, CEO, Greater Spokane Inc.

<b>KEY FINDINGS</b>	<b>\$2.8B</b> Annual cost employers incur due to lack of child care in Washington State.	<b>185,040</b> 36% of workers with children under six years old quit a job due to child care issues in Washington State.	<b>128,500</b> 25% of workers with children under six years old fired from work due to child care issues in Washington State.
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# ECONOMIC IMPACT FOR CHILD CARE PROGRAMS AS SMALL BUSINESSES

The economic reality of owning a child care business can be challenging because revenues are often low compared to expenses. Child care businesses generate most revenue through tuition paid by parents, some subsidies provided by the state, and a small portion from other state or federal programs. The biggest expense in most child care businesses is staffing due to staff requirements for providing safe and appropriate care for young children. Parents cannot afford to pay more in child care costs, and the WCCC subsidy still does not cover the cost of quality care. Child care businesses are often left in the difficult position of providing high-quality care for children and families, an essential service, without sufficient revenue to adequately support their staff or business.

## CHILD CARE BUSINESS FEASIBILITY ESTIMATOR

The [Child Care Business Feasibility Estimator](#) helps potential child care business owners understand the costs and revenues of their child care business idea and how their business might fare. This tool provides estimates based on location, ages of children served, and whether a potential child care facility will be in a family home or in a center based child care.

The screenshot shows a web browser window displaying the Washington STEM website. The URL is [www.washingtonstem.org](http://www.washingtonstem.org). The page features a dark blue header with the Washington STEM logo and navigation links: "Our Work", "Tools", "Networks", "About Us", and "Support Us". A "Donate" button is visible in the top right corner. Below the header, there is a section titled "Facility Information" with a form for inputting details. The form includes a note: "Please fill out each field to the best of your knowledge. Note: For family home child care, when calculating number of children, the Estimator defaults to the maximum number of infants and toddlers." The form fields are: "County" (a dropdown menu), "Type of Facility" (a dropdown menu), and "Square footage intended for children" (a text input field with a red information icon). To the right of the form, there is a "Resources" section with links to: "Washington State Department of Commerce: Cost of Quality Report", "Washington State Department of Commerce: Cost of Quality Technical Manual", "Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families", and "Imagine Institute". A "Privacy - Terms" link is located at the bottom right of the page.

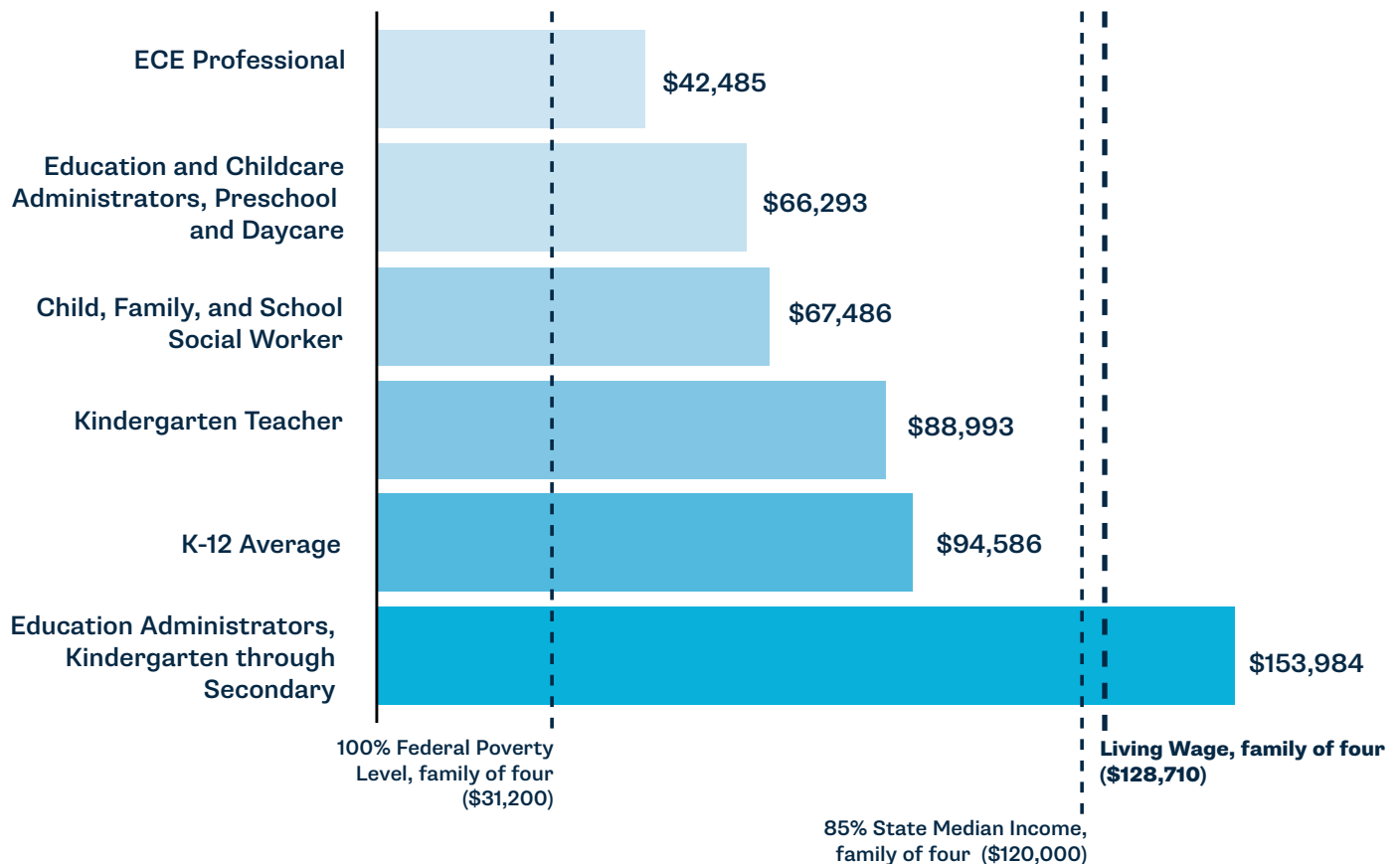
# EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION WORKFORCE

In order to meet our early care and education needs, we must invest in the workforce. According to Washington State’s Employment Security Department, our early learning system depends on 17,050 early care and education professionals, of whom 48 percent are people of color and 96 percent are women. These professionals promote the development and well-being of the young children and families in our state. In order to address the unmet need for child care, the state needs an additional 32,818 early care and education professionals.\*

## COMPENSATION

While ECE professionals are essential workers and a critical part of our care and education infrastructure, they make far less than their K-12 peers, even when accounting for level of education. Although they are responsible for the care and education of the next generation, their wages fall near poverty levels.

### ANNUAL INCOME ESTIMATES FOR EDUCATIONAL PROFESSIONALS IN WASHINGTON STATE (2023)



\*Numbers based on the assumption that 61% of children with all caregivers in the workforce would indeed use child care if it were to be available. (See citations on the last page for methodology.)

## KEY FINDINGS

**\$42,485**

is the average full-time child care worker salary, less than half the self-sufficiency wage of \$128,710 for a family of four.

**59%**  
(10,060)

of early care and education professionals with one dependent in Washington State qualify by income for Medicaid.

**26%**  
(4,433)

of early care and education professionals with one dependent in Washington State qualify by income for the low-income special supplemental nutrition program Women, Infants and Children (WIC).

The low pay of early care and education professionals is driven in large part by the fact that their salaries are paid out of tuition paid by families, or by subsidy rates that are inadequate to provide a living wage. The margins in the child care business are very narrow and this sector of the education workforce is currently **subsidizing the true costs of care with their low wages**.

## GROWING THE WORKFORCE

Growing the early care and education workforce in our state requires increased compensation and professional development investments so we can retain and recruit the skilled workforce needed. In order to **meet early care and education workforce** needs in Washington State, we will **need 32,818 additional educators**.

Culturally responsive professional development is also necessary to maintain the diversity of staff which is a strength of the early care and education system. The Fair Start for Kids Act expanded professional development to increase translation of materials and financial incentives for culturally specific caregiving. Investments like these help recruit and retain diverse early childhood educators and must be expanded.

## ADDITIONAL EDUCATORS NEEDED TO MEET STATE DEMAND

	Infants (<12 months old)	Toddlers (12-29 months old)	Preschoolers (30-71 months old)	Total Educators Needed
<b>Educators Needed</b>	<b>11,506</b> (1:4 ratio)	<b>11,946</b> (1:7 ratio)	<b>9,367</b> (1:10 ratio)	<b>32,818</b>

*Numbers based on the assumption that 61% of children with all caregivers in the workforce would indeed use child care if it were to be available. (See citations on the last page for methodology.)*

# COMMUNITY VOICES

## ADDRESSING EQUITABLE COMPENSATION AND SUSTAINING A DIVERSE EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION WORKFORCE

Early care and education professionals across the state voice the critical need for fair compensation and persist in creatively supporting their businesses, improving their services, and broadening their reach within their communities.

### LOW PAY FOR ECE PROFESSIONALS

*“I have a child care center, and unfortunately, the work of caring for children is poorly paid. I work very hard, and despite that, I can’t pay my employees more... I wonder why we’re not equal, given that we, child care workers, are the ones [taking care] of children. Many people do not want to work with children because they are not paid enough, and some prefer to work in agriculture because it pays better than child care. The state pays us an amount with which we can barely work miracles to cover our expenses.”*

– Maria De los Carriedo, Licensed Child Care Provider, South Central Region (original quote in Spanish)



### RETAINING ECE PROFESSIONALS THROUGH ACCESS TO TECHNOLOGY

*To help families find affordable and quality care in South Central Washington, in 2021 the Investing in Children Coalition (ICC) received a **Child Care Partnership Grant** from the Department of Commerce. With this grant, the ICC was able to hold listening sessions in four communities to understand child care providers’ needs, one of which was access to technology. Based on what they shared, the ICC was able to **purchase technology** packages for 32 child care providers, including laptops, software, wireless mics, headsets, and printers. In 2022, they received a second round of the grant and were able to buy 20 additional technology packages for providers in two more regions. In total, ICC provided over **50 providers** with technology packages, which some have even used to apply for expansion grants to increase the number of spots in their programs.*

– Investing in Children Coalition, South Central Region

Investments like the Child Care Partnership Grants are vital for supporting service delivery and must be expanded. Inadequate compensation in the early care and education workforce drives turnover and requires immediate and widespread attention.



# CONCLUSION

Young children and families need strong systems that will support their healthy development and economic wellbeing. Right now, not all families have access to the benefits of our early care and education system and early care and education professionals are not fairly compensated. Please join us in calling for policies and investments that will increase access and strengthen the workforce:

- **Include ECE professionals and families** in conversations that address access to early care and education.
- **Increase child care subsidy rates** to cover the full cost of quality care; increase the subsidy rate for Family, Friend, and Neighbor caregivers.
- **Set subsidy rates** that cover the cost of quality and meet the individual needs of children with disabilities.
- **Increase access to screenings**, diagnostics, and ongoing services for children with disabilities.
- **Provide a living wage** to all early care and education professionals.
- **Increase grants** and direct investments to open new child care programs.
- **Gather accurate data** on key populations and **create a centralized and accessible early care and education data hub**.



## NEXT STEPS YOU CAN TAKE

- Talk to lawmakers about the importance of early care and education and why it matters to you.
- Join in advocacy efforts with the **Child Care for WA** campaign.
- Join your regional **Early Learning Coalition** to learn about and engage in local solutions.
- See more early childhood data for your region at the **State of the Children Data Dashboard** and visit the **Child Care Business Feasibility Estimator**.

## THANK YOU

Washington STEM and Washington Communities for Children (WCFC) would like to thank the 58 members of the Community Co-Design Group and the WCFC Data Learning Network who met monthly in 2022 and 2023 to co-design this report. We would also like to thank the Washington State Department of Children, Youth & Families (DCYF) and Child Care Aware of Washington for providing data and collaboration on methodology and data visualization. We would like to thank the Department of Commerce and the members of the Child Care Collaborative Task Force for feedback and insight on the State of the Children project overall. We would like to thank the Ballmer Group for the funding that supported this project.

## SOURCES

To see a list of our data sources, as well as specific data elements, formulas, and other information about the numbers and figures please visit <https://bit.ly/3QQIWR> or by scanning the QR code.

