

# PIERCE COUNTY REGION STATE OF THE CHILDREN EARLY CARE & EDUCATION



## Pierce County, Washington

# 67,365

CHILDREN UNDER SIX IN THE REGION



**18,842 (28%)** OF CHILDREN UNDER SIX IN LOW-INCOME\* HOUSEHOLDS

## Spanish, Slavic languages

MOST COMMON LANGUAGES SPOKEN AT HOME OTHER THAN ENGLISH

# 55%

(36,738)

CHILDREN OF COLOR

## CHILD CARE ACCESS AND AFFORDABILITY AFFECTS US ALL

Lack of access to child care **costs employers an estimated \$364M** due to employee absenteeism, turnover, and lost productivity. Meanwhile, **82% of children do not have access to licensed child care.** For those that do, the average cost of child care for two children is \$33,756, **19% of the average family's income.**

### ECEAP AND HEAD START

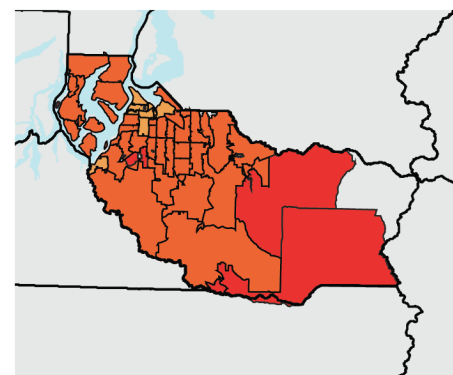
Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP) and Head Start (HS) preschool programs specialize in inclusive and high-quality care for low-income families and children with disabilities. **While there are funded slots for only 56% of the 5,842 children in our region who qualify for them,** many of these slots go unfilled due to a lack of staffing. More must be done to recruit and retain educators for this critical programing.

# 56%

(3,280)

OF CHILDREN WHO NEED ECEAP/HS HAVE A SPACE AVAILABLE TO THEM

### PERCENT OF CHILD CARE DEMAND MET\*\*



- More than 75% need met
- Between 50 - 74% need met
- Between 25 - 49% need met
- Less than 25% need met
- No Child Care
- Not Enough Data

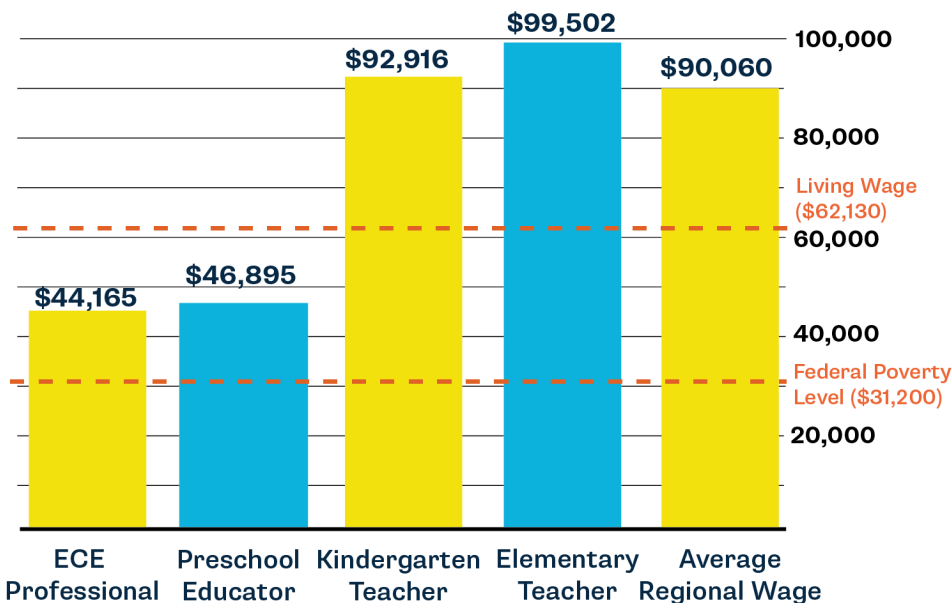
## EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION WORKFORCE

Our early care and education (ECE) system currently depends on **3,470 ECE professionals** in the Pierce County, of whom **48% are people of color** and **96% are women.** While providing an essential service, most ECE professionals make significantly less than the regional living wage and **52% with one dependent would qualify for some form of government assistance.**

\*We define low-income as 200 percent of the federal poverty line, which is \$62,400 for a family of four.

\*\*Visual of 2024 data. Capacity includes licensed child care, ECEAP, HS, and Family Friend and Neighbor Care.

## ECE VS. K-12 WAGES



## BARRIERS TO ACCESSING CHILD CARE

Families in Pierce County are struggling to find safe, affordable, and equitable child care. Child care centers have extremely long waitlists, are costly, and are not sufficiently culturally diverse or inclusive. It becomes even more challenging if care is needed for multiple children or a child with special needs. These are just some of the many barriers that exist to accessing high-quality child care. When parents cannot access child care, they are left to make difficult decisions that affect the whole family. Community members have shared their experiences, some of which include leaving employment, not returning to work after the birth of the child, relying on friends and family, or leaving their child in a child care center they would not otherwise choose. Community members also refused increases in compensation for fear of losing their child care subsidy, further increasing the cost of care. These cannot be the choices families must make. For families to thrive, they need concrete support and the ability to locate and choose safe, affordable, and equitable child care that works best for them.



## CHALLENGES OF CHILD CARE PROVIDERS

Over 250 Pierce County ECE professionals were interviewed in 2022 for the Child Care Capacity Initiative to assess their current needs and obstacles. Several barriers were identified for preventing stability, business growth, and expansion. The top five barriers were taxes and wages, staffing, education access, financial development, and Washington Administrative Code compliance. While all identified barriers warrant attention, taxes and wages must be a priority to establish a sustainable child care system. **An astounding 98% of ECE professionals shared they make below living wages.** ECE professionals not connected to a center are often responsible for their own medical insurance, spending almost one-third of their income on basic health coverage. Unfortunately, providers are not currently able to maintain a basic standard of living with their current wages.

## WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Washington state has passed legislation to increase the child care quality and access, leading to 1,683 more children served in our region. Unfortunately, these investments have not funded the true cost of providing high-quality\* care, and many ECE professionals make far less than a living wage. In partnership with the Child Care for Washington campaign, we are advocating for the following:

- Maintain the promise of the Fair Start for Kids Act by increasing Working Connections Child Care eligibility\*\* and expanding ECEAP.
- Ensure that Working Connections Child Care rates reflect the true cost for providing high-quality child care.
- Increase capacity for child care by investing in the Early Learning Facilities (ELF) Fund.



## WHAT YOU CAN DO TO GET INVOLVED

For Washington state, time is of the essence. Children, families, and educators need and deserve a fully funded system that supports them. Please join us in advocating with them by:

- Contacting your Early Learning Coalition Lead: Muriel Herrerra-Velasquez, Pierce County Early Childhood Network, [muriel@first5fundamentals.org](mailto:muriel@first5fundamentals.org).
- Contacting your STEM Network Director: Elvin Bucu, Graduate Tacoma, [ebucu@graduatetacoma.org](mailto:ebucu@graduatetacoma.org).
- Learning more on the Washington STEM website using the QR code or the link: [https://washingtonstem.org/focus\\_area/early-stem/](https://washingtonstem.org/focus_area/early-stem/).
- Talking to your local representatives.

\*High-quality ECE is defined here as participation in the Washington Early Achievers Quality Rating and Improvement System; the cost is defined by the 2022 Department of Commerce Cost of Quality Report.

\*\*Learn more about the Working Connections Child Care subsidy program at [www.dcyf.wa.gov](http://www.dcyf.wa.gov).

