

# SOUTHEAST REGION STATE OF THE CHILDREN

## EARLY LEARNING & CARE



**Benton, Franklin, Walla Walla,  
Columbia, Garfield, and Asotin  
Counties**

# 32,391

CHILDREN UNDER SIX IN THE REGION



**13,115 (40%)** OF CHILDREN UNDER SIX  
IN LOW-INCOME\* HOUSEHOLDS

## Spanish, Vietnamese

MOST COMMON LANGUAGES SPOKEN AT  
HOME OTHER THAN ENGLISH

# 57%

(18,322)

CHILDREN OF COLOR

## CHILD CARE ACCESS AND AFFORDABILITY AFFECTS US ALL

Lack of access to **child care costs employers an estimated \$113.6M** due to employee absenteeism, turnover, and lost productivity. **44% of children do not have access to a licensed child care.** For those that do, the average cost of child care for two children is \$23,412, **27% of the average family's income.**

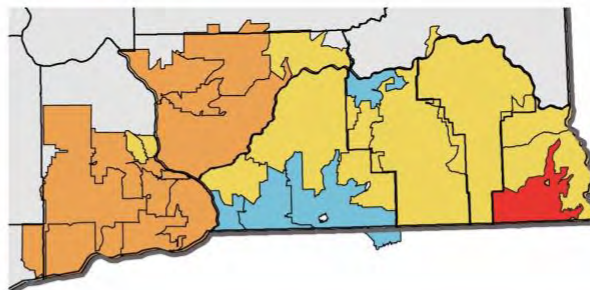
### ECEAP AND HEAD START

Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP) and Head Start preschool programs specialize in inclusive and high-quality care for low-income families and children with disabilities. Right now, these critical programs only serve half of the 3,536 children in our region who need them.

# 55%

(1,928)

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



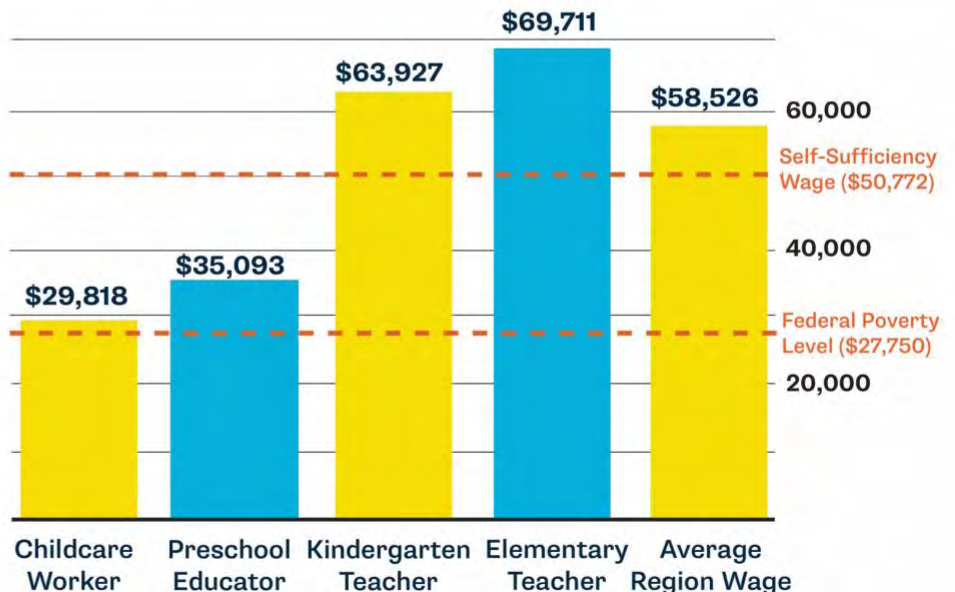
## EARLY LEARNING WORKFORCE

Our early learning and care system currently depends on **925 early learning and child care professionals** in the Southeast region, of whom **more than half are people of color** and more than 80% are female. While providing an essential service, most child care providers make near poverty wages and **50% 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 \$52,400 for a family of four.

\*\*Visual of 2020 data. Capacity includes Child Care Centers and Family Homes

## CHILD CARE VS. K-12 WAGES





## CHALLENGES TO PROVIDING CARE AND EDUCATION

Child care providers in Southeast Washington are experiencing challenges as a result of the recent pandemic. Many have reported that even though they are finally starting to see an increase in the number of families wanting care for their children, they are unable to enroll due to not being able to find employees to staff their programs. The staffing challenges are affecting all early learning programs, including private child care centers, family child care providers, as well as Head Start and ECEAP programs. Ginger Still, owner of Kid's World Childcare in West Richland said, "In my thirty plus years in child care, I have never experienced this level of challenge in hiring staff. I am hiring 2-3 staff nearly every week and hoping they show up. It's disheartening to say that many of them don't show up, or quit within the first month, sometimes even week or day."



## CHALLENGES TO ACCESSING CARE AND EDUCATION

Long waiting lists and lack of staffing has made it increasingly difficult for families to find care for their children. ECEAP programs all around the Southeast region, particularly in rural areas like Walla Walla County, are having to put holds on enrollment due to teacher shortages. "It's difficult to tell families that they qualify for our program, but we can't enroll them until we find teachers. The majority of the families we serve are from the most vulnerable populations, but we are having to wait weeks, sometimes months to enroll while we find qualified staff," says Brittany Hartikainen, an ECEAP Administrator for ESD 123. Barriers to accessing quality early care and education have contributed to young families moving out of towns like Walla Walla and into larger cities where there are more options for infant/toddler care and preschool, with the additional long term impact of declining enrollment in the Walla Walla school district.

### IMPACT OF THE FAIR START FOR KIDS ACT

Passed in 2021, the Fair Start for Kids Act made historic investments that were intended to accomplish the following:

- Make child care more affordable for low-income families
- Expand early intervention and behavioral health services for young children and caregivers.

While these investments are a good start, the majority of child care providers continue to make near poverty wages, child care deserts persist, and children with disabilities are often unable to access inclusive care. Continued and increased support for our early childhood systems is necessary to create true access and equity for all Washington's children and caregivers.



## 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 for:

- Sustained funding for partners like Washington Communities for Children
- Inclusive, accessible, and affordable early care
- Household sustaining wages and professional supports for early care and education providers
- Aligning systems across early learning, K-12, health, and mental health to connect and coordinate supports for families.

