



# WASHINGTON'S STATEWIDE EARLY LEARNING NEEDS ASSESSMENT

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**



# Executive Summary- Washington Statewide Early Learning Needs Assessment

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Washington has a long history of sustained support for early learning. Over the last decade, that investment has led to real progress for children and families across the state. Many of the strategies outlined in the 2010 Early Learning Plan — the state’s first comprehensive formal plan for early learning — have been implemented, including the expansion of the state’s Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP), expansion of home visiting services, implementation of a quality rating and improvement system (Early Achievers), and creation of a statewide network of regional early learning coalitions. Families have more access to high-quality services that promote healthy development and school readiness for children than ever before.

Washington’s early learning strategy is driven by two goals: (1) achieve a 90% statewide kindergarten readiness rate and (2) eliminate race and income as predictors of readiness. As the statewide system prepares to implement a new set of early learning strategies for the next five years, the state is also making a powerful commitment to advance an equity-focused early learning system that builds on existing strengths and eliminates persistent disparities in educational, health, and resiliency outcomes for children and families.

Washington’s vision for early learning requires the active collaboration of state-level, regional, and community partners across all programs, services, and supports that contribute to the physical, cognitive, and social-emotional development of Washington’s children. Reflecting that collaborative approach, this needs assessment was developed in partnership with many organizations, tribal governments, agencies, and individuals (parents, caregivers, providers, and others) across the state. It reveals the rich diversity of the state’s children, families, communities, and providers. It shows the strength of community support for early learning and the strength of leadership across the field — from families, providers, tribal communities, advocates, organizations, schools, state agencies, legislators, and more.

The needs assessment also shows that there is still much work to be done to support children and families, particularly those most vulnerable. There is deep disproportionality related to race and ethnicity in accessing services and achieving positive outcomes. There are striking economic limitations in the current childcare system, for both families and providers. There are areas of extremely limited access to services and supports in rural communities. There are still gaps in the breadth of supports needed by parents, caregivers and early learning professionals.

This report will serve as a foundational document for the design and implementation of Washington State’s next statewide early learning aspirational plan. It will provide a valuable resource for state and local partners as they create the next generation of improvements and enhancements to the state’s early learning system. It is also important to note that the needs

assessment is a snapshot in time. The current economic, public health, and political landscape is changing rapidly, which has created a need for dynamic collaboration and adaptability.

## **What we know about Washington’s children and families**

Washington State is home to more than 800,000 children between the ages of birth and 8 years. Access to programs and services that promote healthy development (and predict later opportunity) for these children is affected by multiple factors, including institutional/systemic racism, historical trauma, geographic isolation, poverty, and more.

Among groups recognized as vulnerable or underserved in Washington State:

- More than half of children 8 years of age or younger are children of color.
- More than 35,000 children aged 9 years or younger live in rural communities; just over 16,000 are younger than 5 years old.<sup>1</sup>
- At least 22,000 of Washington’s children age birth through 9 years live in tribal communities.
- More than one-third of all children 8 years and younger live in households with income at or below 200% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL).
- One-third of children in Washington who are 5 years or younger live in households where English is not the primary language.
- 12% of children in Washington State who were 5 years or younger have special health care needs.
- Nearly 50,000 children in Washington State ages birth through 8 years have been involved with the child welfare system.
- An estimated 7.2% of children under age 6 years in Washington State are homeless<sup>2</sup>; almost half of the children in shelters are younger than six.<sup>3</sup>

Inequities related to race/ethnicity, income, geography, and the other factors noted above create greater challenges for some families in accessing services for their children.

Some parents of color report not knowing about available services, choosing not to access them because of fear or distrust of the system, or feeling that their children may be unfairly treated or inaccurately assessed because of their race or cultural differences. Community members say that challenges faced by families in rural areas and families facing income inequities need to be addressed before the early learning system can truly support every child’s healthy development.

The impact of disproportionate access to services and supports appropriate to the needs of individual children can be seen in data on kindergarten readiness and opportunity gaps later in life. In the 2019–2020 school year, 81,694 students entered Washington’s public kindergartens. Overall, 51.5% of children entering kindergarten met the WaKIDS standards for kindergarten

readiness,<sup>4</sup> but only 40% of children of color, and only 24.7% of children experiencing homelessness were kindergarten ready.<sup>5</sup> Many of these gaps persist as children grow, particularly for Black children, children from tribal communities, and children with developmental disabilities.

## Healthy children and families

Washington State's investments in child and family health, including the introduction of Apple Health, have driven improvements in access to health care and in outcomes for key indicators of child and family health. Washington has one of the lowest infant mortality rates in the nation, at 4.9 per 1,000 live births. Rates of low birth weight that are consistently lower than the national average, at around 5% (compared to just over 8% nationally).

**While Washington has made impressive progress in some aspects of child and maternal health, there is still substantial need among Washington's infants and children – and their families.**

More than 10% of children ages birth to 5 years and almost 20% of children ages 6 to 11 years have special health needs.<sup>6</sup> Maternal diabetes and hypertension, both of which increase the risk of birth defects, stillbirth, and preterm birth, have increased in Washington over the past decade: from 9.5% to 10.0% and 8.0% to 8.9%, respectively.

**The burden of poor health does not rest on all groups equally.**

Infant mortality rates among Black/African American and American Indian/Alaska Native children are 8.5 and 7.8 per 1,000 live births, respectively, vs. 4.09 per 1,000 live births among white children. Black/African American children experience low birth weight at almost twice the rate of children across Washington State (9.1% vs. 5.1%).

Preterm birth disproportionately affects American Indian/Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and Black/African American women (ranging from 10.2% to 12.9%, vs. 7.7% among white women). Similar trends along racial/ethnic lines are seen for dental health and key indicators of maternal health (diabetes, hypertension).

**Many children under the age of 5 years are still in need of the protection of health insurance, and greater access to care.**

Apple Health, which provides insurance at no cost for all children in households  $\leq$ 210% of FPL and a sliding scale of premiums for other income levels, has helped Washington State achieve one of the lowest rates of uninsured children between birth and 5 years in the nation.<sup>7</sup> However,

11,000 of children birth to age five are without insurance. Families report a variety of barriers to access, including difficulties navigating the enrollment process.

Despite the high rate of coverage, rates of well-child visits in Washington State (ranging from 39% to 69%, depending on age) remain lower than the national average (just above 70%).<sup>8</sup> Families who do not already have access to health care describe a need for access to free or affordable health care — and assistance securing it.

**Access to mental and behavioral health care, and trauma-informed care, is an important gap with a powerful impact on Washington’s children and families.**

Mental and behavioral health is an important factor in outcomes for children. In 2016, the National Survey of Children’s Health reported that 18.9% of children in Washington State had experienced one or more adverse childhood experience (ACE; a key risk factor for trauma) and 14.8% had experienced two or more ACEs.<sup>7</sup> Children in tribal communities are also vulnerable to the impact of historical trauma, and children and families of color experience trauma related to systemic racism and may face higher barriers to accessing culturally relevant mental health services.<sup>7</sup>

Trauma early in life can affect the brain during a period of rapid growth. For children who experience trauma early in life, mental health support can increase the capacity to form and maintain stable relationships, increase the likelihood of positive educational outcomes, and lower the risk of health issues.<sup>9</sup> Communities frequently cite mental health services for both children and adults as a significant gap in the existing system.

Children who have experienced trauma may also be more likely to display behavioral and other issues in childcare settings, where they may be at greater risk of expulsion and other exclusionary disciplinary practices.

Similarly, children with developmental delays or disabilities face a disproportionate risk of suspension and expulsion — a staggering 75% of preschool expulsions are of children who are receiving special education services. These children may experience traumatic stress because of receiving care that is not tailored to their needs, as well as from interruptions in their relationships with caregivers.

**Substantial gaps remain in developmental screening.**

Developmental screening to identify a child’s delays and disabilities can increase the likelihood that families connect with services that support them, and can reduce the need for future services

later in life. However, currently, only 27.7% of Washington’s children receive such screening, compared with a national average of 31.1%. Washington has committed to implementing universal developmental screening and is working with tribes and with stakeholders across a broad range of sectors to create a comprehensive and integrated screening system.

## **Strong, stable, nurturing, safe, and supported families**

Parents and caregivers in Washington have immense resilience, knowledge, and commitment to the healthy development of their children. They feel strongest when that resilience is bolstered by external support: resources that help them meet basic needs, support from health care providers, support from early learning organizations and agencies. Washington State has implemented an array of services to support families across all their needs.

Young children who are in stable housing and whose parents have access to financial support are more likely to be healthy, to meet developmental milestones, and to be ready for kindergarten and successful in school.<sup>10,11</sup> But many families in Washington are exposed to a variety of risk factors that threaten stability and success. Some families struggle to simply meet basic needs for housing, food, and transportation, and the cost of childcare is an additional and often overwhelming burden.

**The early learning system can be a key support, helping families connect to resources and services they need, but state programs are not yet closing the gap for all low-income and other vulnerable families.**

Washington’s Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP) and home visiting are both two-generation programs that offer support for family stability as part of their overall support for children and their families. ECEAP’s Mobility Mentoring program helps families identify and work toward tailored goals, including economic independence. Many home visiting models help connect families with services that meet economic and other needs.

Working Connections Child Care (WCCC) Subsidy helps low-income families pay for childcare. Approximately 27,000 families received payments every month in 2019, representing only about 15% of those eligible. While the subsidy program plays a critical role, subsidy may not be enough to cover costs for lower-income families, and some families with income too high to be eligible may still not have the resources needed to pay privately for childcare.

The state’s Paid Family and Medical Leave program, available as of January 1, 2020, also provides economic support to families, helping employees that have experienced a serious health condition or have a family member who has a new baby or child. However, it does not provide coverage to all workers, and self-employed people must opt in to receive coverage.

**There is a growing need for a coordinated information, resource, and referral system that families and providers can access.**

A number of programs and systems are in place to serve distinct populations or needs, from the Accountable Communities of Health coalitions, which support care coordination for Medicaid-eligible populations; to Child Care Aware of Washington, which links families with high-quality childcare. As Washington's early learning system expands, both families and providers need a more robust system that will allow families to connect, as well as allow providers to effectively connect families to resources.

**The continued engagement of families in the design of the early learning system has been, and will be, critical to its success.**

To inform its understanding of families' strengths and needs, Washington State has worked to engage parents in decision-making around early learning programs, services, and supports. DCYF relies on the Parent Advisory Group, which includes parents and family caregivers of children 9 years and younger. Other parent-driven groups amplify the voices and influence of parents, caregivers, and families participating in ECEAP and Head Start, and others at the policy and strategy table.

## **Positive early learning experiences**

Washington State's early learning system is designed to effectively support children, families, and communities during key developmental stages through a broad range of programs, supports, and services. The breadth of options for programs and services (both formal and informal) available to families translates into greater flexibility and choice for the care and development of children.

**Over the past ten years, Washington State has made considerable progress in delivering a broad range of high-quality early learning experiences to Washington's children.**

Options for families have increased across settings-based, home-based, and informal programs, services, and supports, helping maximize access to and availability of high-quality services throughout the state. Some of those services and supports include the following:

- As of early 2020, there were approximately 5,200 **licensed childcare** sites in Washington (including traditional childcare, ECEAP, and Head Start), providing care to more than 40,000 infants and toddlers and 82,608 preschoolers.



- **Head Start** (including Head Start, Early Head Start, Migrant Seasonal Head Start, and American Indian/Alaska Native Head Start) provide services to 19,904 children in the state in families with incomes at or below 130% FPL.
- Washington’s **ECEAP** program has steadily expanded since its launch in 1985, with 14,000 slots available in 2019–2020. ECEAP serves families with incomes at or below 110% FPL and/or families that are experiencing risks or stressors known to impede healthy child and family development. Washington is also launching **Early ECEAP** with the goal of expanding services for Washington’s youngest children.
- The **Working Connections Child Care subsidy** provides a monthly benefit to families with income at or below 200% FPL who are seeking childcare. The majority of subsidized childcare is provided by licensed childcare centers and family homes.
- Washington State offers **developmental preschool** to children who have special needs. In 2019, the state’s developmental preschool program served 18,256 children ages 3 to 5 years. Many children also receive Individualized Education Plan services in other ways, including through ECEAP, private therapy, and other supports.
- **ESIT** provides early intervention services to children birth to age 3 years who have disabilities or developmental delays. The program served more than 17,000 children cumulatively in 2017, with approximately 8,000 children receiving services at any given point in time.
- **ECLIPSE** serves children ages birth through 5 years who have experienced complex trauma and who may experience behavioral health issues as a result. Currently there are 225 slots available at two sites in the state, with 746 children served in 2018.
- Washington current has capacity to deliver **home visiting** services to families through 7,323 slots. Services are delivered through a number of standard models and funded both through the state’s Home Visiting Services Account and through other funding sources (e.g., Best Starts for Kids, Early Head Start Home Based Services).
- **Family, Friend, and Neighbor Care** — childcare provided by relatives or other members of a family’s community outside of formal settings — is a preferred source of care for many families in Washington State. Although the exact number of children receiving FFN care is unknown, in 2018, 26,524 children received care from subsidy-eligible FFN providers alone.
- Between July 2018 and June 2019, approximately 20,000 children, parents, and caregivers participated in **Play and Learn groups**, which give children the opportunity to engage in culturally and developmentally appropriate play and give parents and caregivers a place to come together for peer learning and mutual support.
- Parents also rely on **informal community resources** to support and nurture their children — for example, parks, libraries, swimming pools, and churches.

**While the availability of culturally responsive options has been increasing, there is still a large unmet need.**

The large and growing portion of children between birth and 8 years who are from communities of color, from tribal communities, or in households where English is not the primary language reflects the intense need for culturally responsive services and support. A number of comments from community outreach confirm that while the options for culturally responsive services have improved, there is still significant unmet need. Examples frequently mentioned include use of assessment tools that do not stigmatize children of color, access to materials on child development that are available in multiple languages, and hiring and retention of early childhood providers who reflect the cultures of the children in their care.

**There is still room for Washington State to enhance and expand access to important early learning services and supports, to reach those furthest from opportunity.**

Parents, caregivers, providers, and others in the early learning community say that programs like ECEAP, Head Start, ECLIPSE, and ESIT make powerful contributions to the community — but their impact is limited by availability in communities, long wait lists, and other barriers to access.

For example, while ECEAP and Head Start programs reach a large number of children — 42,500 in 2019, an estimated 19,083 children are in need of ECEAP/HS services but do not have access. Early Head Start has even less saturation, with 3,501 slots available and an estimated 84,000 eligible. Home visiting programs are currently operating in all but seven counties in Washington State, but only four of these counties have capacity to offer services to more than 15% of low-income families who have children of an appropriate age.

Childcare for children birth through 5 years is perhaps the most challenging. There are 112,000 children in licensed childcare in Washington State. Another 139,000 children have all available parents are in the labor force, but are not in the formal licensed market. It is unknown the extent to which this reflects family choice or challenges with availability, affordability, or access. Some of these children are served by Family, Friend, and Neighbor care, but not all. And ECLIPSE, which focuses on children 5 years and under who have experienced significant trauma, has limited slots available, with 2,846 children estimated to be in the top 1% of risk related to the services it provides.

**Affordability of childcare is a major concern for many families. The cost of childcare continues to outpace the ability of working families to pay.**

The high cost of childcare makes it difficult for many families to access services. In Washington State, the annual cost of high-quality full-time care for a single infant in a licensed child care

center ranges from \$9,240 to \$16,200, more than the annual cost of in-state tuition at Washington's public universities.**Error! Bookmark not defined.** For a single parent with one infant, the cost is prohibitive — 51.6% of average annual income. For a married family with two children who live at the poverty line, the cost is impossible: 101.6% of average annual income.**Error! Bookmark not defined.**

The high cost of childcare is distributed disproportionately across regions within Washington State. Smaller counties experience more instability in costs, because changes in the availability of childcare (for example, when a facility closes) have a greater impact on the relationship between supply and demand. Urban centers with larger populations have more stable costs, but also higher costs.

### **The growth of ECEAP, home visiting, and other early learning services places pressure on the supports for those services.**

Families across the state have access to a range of preschool opportunities for their children, including ECEAP and Head Start, developmental preschool, childcare, and private preschool. Recently, some school districts in Washington began offering transitional kindergarten, a classroom experience for 4-year-olds that is intended to support school readiness for children who are experiencing a multitude of risk factors that can impede their development before kindergarten entry.

While access has increased over time, the demand for high-quality preschool remains. In addition, each preschool offering comes with its own set of programmatic, eligibility, and funding requirements, which can create implementation barriers for providers and access barriers for families needing services for their 3- and 4-year-olds.

It is the vision for Washington to create an integrated approach to serving 3- and 4-year-olds that ensures increased access and more sustainable, more inclusive programming across program type. An integrated model should be built on the strong foundations of quality and research of programs like ECEAP and Head Start, both known for their effectiveness in contributing to school readiness and healthy development.

Home visiting is recognized as an effective strategy for improving child health and development, especially in populations with limited resources. Currently, there are more than 7,000 home visiting slots available in Washington. A 2019 report to the Washington State Legislature suggested the addition of 20,500 slots, focusing on the highest-risk communities. The report also calls for deep community involvement and involvement of parent voices in the expansion process.

**There are still gaps in high-quality services and supports for infants and toddlers.**

High quality early learning opportunities in Washington are more limited for infants and toddlers than for any other age group. This is an extremely vulnerable group, more vulnerable to health risks, and more likely to encounter the child welfare system than any other age group. Although families in Washington have access to home visiting and Early Head Start, current systems reach only 7% of the state’s toddlers in income-eligible families.

**Children who have developmental disabilities or delays or who have been exposed to trauma may also not be served well by the system.**

Children with developmental disabilities or delays are substantially less likely to meet the WaKIDS criteria for kindergarten readiness than their typically developing peers (22.4% vs. 54.5%, respectively). Parents and caregivers say that there is an overall lack of appropriate programs and services and of providers who have the knowledge to support children that have experienced high levels of trauma or that have special needs. They also say that health insurance often does not cover or has limited coverage for necessary services, or there can be barriers to accessing needed services. In some communities, professionals with needed specialized skills (e.g., speech pathology) are simply not available.

ESIT provides early intervention to families with infants and toddlers who have developmental delays or disabilities; however, without consistent developmental screening, children miss out on critical early intervention services. ECLIPSE, a specialized program to support children who have been exposed to complex trauma, is currently offered in two communities, leaving many children and families unserved.

The access gap grows significantly for children of color or from tribal communities who also have developmental disabilities or delays. Relatively few tribes offer Part C services, and of those that do, some report difficulties accessing these services.

**Families need an integrated system that provides greater support for transitions – both across the age continuum and among the broad range of available services and supports.**

As children move from childcare to preschool to kindergarten and beyond, each transition creates the need and opportunity for the family and for providers to be well supported by the system. A fully integrated early learning system includes effective transition practices that support all those engaged in a child’s emotional well-being and education success. Washington State has several initiatives that support these transitions: the WaKIDS framework provides

guidance to connect preschool and kindergarten providers; ECEAP and Head Start support families during the transition to kindergarten in multiple ways; and transitional kindergarten is opening the door to a broader effort toward integrated preschool services, which should further strengthen collaboration and improve transition practices.

However, children from lower-income families and those experiencing multiple challenges are less likely to have access to comprehensive transition support, as are those from historically underserved populations. Parents still report the need for support through transitions across the early learning system. Parents also expressed a desire for better support through the transition between early intervention and an Individualized Education Program.

**The establishment of Early Achievers has helped embed a foundation for quality care in childcare settings.**

Early Achievers, Washington’s quality rating and improvement system, is designed to help participating early learning providers reach a level of quality that promotes strong child outcomes<sup>12</sup> and, by aligning with ECEAP and Head Start standards, to streamline quality across Washington State. As of June 2020, there were 3,803 childcare centers, family childcare homes, and ECEAP/Head Start providers participating in Early Achievers. Early Achievers provides continuous improvement for programs serving infants to entering kindergarteners; DCYF is currently developing a quality improvement system for school-age programs.

While many providers value the quality standards and support provided by Early Achievers, they also say that there are significant pressures, economic and otherwise, associated with the system — for a workforce already under significant strain.

## **Powerful communities and a responsive early learning system**

Washington has prioritized investment in and growth of the state’s early learning system and has strengthened the role that communities play in developing policies and implementing programs and services. This system strength was broadly acknowledged during community outreach, which highlighted better-aligned licensing standards, some strong regional early learning coalitions, increased awareness among policymakers about the value of early learning, and increased advocacy from parents and caregivers. Continuing to advance that infrastructure will be key to success over the next ten years.

**Outreach participants emphasized the potential for increased coordination of services across sectors, among state agencies, and among state and regional efforts.**

A number of agencies, coalitions, and collaborations work to coordinate programs, services, and supports. At the state level, DCYF brings all of the state's juvenile rehabilitation, child welfare and early learning efforts together and provides a strong focal point for collaboration among state agencies. Two advisory bodies, the Early Learning Advisory Council and the Indian Policy Early Learning Committee, guide and advise DCYF on early learning strategy and implementation, ensuring that the experience and expertise of parents, providers, Tribal nations, and others are central to the decisions made by DCYF about the state system.

At the regional and community levels, there are a number of strong coordinating bodies that link the early learning system. Washington Communities for Children, for example, links early learning coalitions from every region in Washington State; other regional and community-level initiatives address ACEs and coordinate services for children with disabilities. However, the need for a formal structure to facilitate coordination across *all* local, county, regional, and state organizations and agencies is growing as rapidly as the early learning system itself.

**Lack of an integrated early learning data system presents a substantial barrier to understanding community needs and service effectiveness.**

Washington State has data systems that provide a wealth of information about families and children. However, without a single system to integrate and manage data related to early learning programming, understanding of community needs and service effectiveness is limited.

Washington State has made substantial investments in systems for collecting, managing, and analyzing data, with to the dual goals of understanding the needs of the families and children who live here and continuously improving the quality of the systems and services that support them. These systems include data from children and families, the early learning workforce (i.e., individual providers), and early learning programs.

At DCYF, early learning data are maintained in multiple, program-specific data systems. This presents significant barriers to coordination between systems, and even to fully understanding where the state's mixed-delivery early learning system is succeeding and where there are still opportunities for growth. In particular, there are needs for the ability to disaggregate data for individual communities of color, and for better reporting data for tribal communities. Communities describe a strong need for disaggregated data for local planning purposes and to be able to monitor state or regional goals regarding elimination of disproportionate outcomes for children.

DCYF envisions strengthening internal capacity for data analysis, bringing together data not only from across the early learning system but also from child welfare and juvenile justice. Because of

the urgency of the need, DCYF is building interim solutions that link data across programs for analytic purposes.

**Parents, caregivers, early learning providers, advocates, and other professionals who work with children and families highlight the need for stronger financing of the state’s early learning system.**

Currently, funding for early learning in Washington State comes from multiple sources with distinct and different regulations. Although this can enhance the availability of funding, it can be challenging to create a coherent, integrated system of services that does not confuse families about eligibility and other program requirements or overburden the early learning workforce with compliance requirements. Funding structures that ensure multiple funding streams can be coordinated and maximized will enable providers to offer services that are responsive, equitable, inclusive, and sustainable.

In addition, there is a need for sustained funding through public or private sources that would allow the state to expand effective programs and services to meet the needs of Washington’s children, families, and early childhood providers — for example, home visiting, trauma-informed care, mental health services and supports, and child care health consultation. Funding limitations make large-scale expansion across multiple services challenging, despite the recognized need and potential benefit to the state.

**Alignment of standards across programs is both a challenge and an opportunity for providers.**

Washington State has been working toward alignment across childcare licensing, Early Achievers, and ECEAP requirements for early childhood providers to create a simpler and more supportive set of regulations. The new standards, rolled out in 2019, updated childcare licensing, Early Achievers, and ECEAP requirements to emphasize children’s health and safety and created a quality progression across the three sets of requirements that better supports continuity and efficiencies for providers.

It is still early to assess the impact of these changes. At the outset, some providers have voiced appreciation for both the work to align three sets of standards and the support they have received in implementing the new standards, while others have expressed concerns about the additional financial and other resources required to meet and progress through the revised qualifications. Washington continues to work hard to find ways to support providers in adapting to and, for those who choose to do so, advancing through the new systems.

## Strong and supported early childhood workforce

Communities across Washington describe the early childhood workforce as deeply caring and committed — but challenged by low pay and lack of opportunity in the field. In 2018, there were 38,000 early childhood providers at licensed centers and family homes captured in the Managed Education and Registry Information (MERIT) database,<sup>13,14</sup> and this is only a small portion of all the providers across formal, home-based, and informal settings.

The well-being, skills, and knowledge of the early childhood workforce directly correlate to the quality of children’s experiences in early learning programs.<sup>13,Error! Bookmark not defined.</sup> However, early childhood providers are among the lowest-paid child educators in Washington. The median annual salary for childcare teachers is so low that it meets the threshold for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Early childhood providers seek parity (compensation and professional opportunities) with their peers at K–12 educational levels.

**There is a gap between the need for licensed early childhood providers and the number of skilled staff available and working.**

Recruitment and retention are significant challenges. In 2018, 18.7% and 28.4% of licensed childcare centers had unfilled positions, and the range for licensed family homes was similar, at 12.8% to 33.3%.<sup>Error! Bookmark not defined.</sup> As Washington rolls out its planned expansion of the ECEAP program, the state is estimated to need at least an additional 800 new early learning educators, adding to the shortfall.

Turnover rates among kindergarten teachers are high. In 2017–2018, the turnover rate was 24%. Among K–3 teachers, approximately 25% to 28% are inexperienced (fewer than 5 years of teaching experience), 16% have endorsements in areas other than elementary education, and approximately 6% have a limited certificate (substitute certificate, conditional certificate, emergency certificate).<sup>15</sup>

Washington’s investments in supporting the early childhood workforce cover a broad range of needs. These efforts are informed by groups working on employer-supported childcare (Child Care Collaborative Task Force); progressive professional development (Early Childhood Education Workforce Council); and improvements in wages, turnover, and recruitment (the Compensation Technical Working Group), among others. Early Achievers provides a variety of support and resources for providers to help them engage in continuous quality improvement.

**Family, Friend, and Neighbor (FFN) providers offer crucial support to families and children.**



Many FFN providers have challenges navigating a system that is siloed, have limited access to services and supports that assist in their care, and/or have limited financial resources. Because the majority of FFN providers do not receive the WCCC subsidy, and thus are not connected to the state's data systems, it is more difficult to fully understand those challenges and ways the state might better support this important group of caregivers.

However, Washington is one of only a few states that have committed state funding specifically to support FFN providers. There is a need for policy changes that continue and expand on that support, including ideas such as expanding home visiting to support FFN providers; expanding Community Cafés where FFN providers can come together as a community; and creating networks and shared services or hubs through which FFN providers can advise and support each other.

### **The resilience of the home visiting workforce is a key strength to be supported.**

The home visiting workforce support families with complex needs; 76.0% of home visitors reported working with families with low income; 34.8%, mental or physical health challenges; 21.0%, domestic violence; and 17.8%, children with special needs. Compensation for home visitors does not consistently reflect the difficulty and importance of the work. While some home visitors (e.g., nurses) may be well compensated, wages are low for many, and there are wide variances in health benefits. Approximately 23% of Washington's home visitors access two or more public assistance supports.

Home visitors enter the field with varying skills, level of education, and backgrounds. Although close to 88% of home visitors held Associates, Bachelor's, or graduate degrees, more than 36% of these degrees are unrelated to the work. However, workers in the field report a strong learning environment and that they seek and receive support from one another.<sup>16</sup>

### **Early Learning workforce racial/ethnic diversity should reflect the communities they serve.**

Currently, approximately 30% of early learning teachers are people of color, whereas almost half of the state's population of children under 5 are children of color. The demographics of K–12 students and K–3 teachers demonstrate a predominantly white teaching workforce with an increasingly diverse group of students: 1.3% of students are American Indian/Alaskan Native vs. 0.7% of teachers; 4.5% of students are Black/African American vs. 1.4% of teachers; and 1.1% of students are Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islanders vs. 0.3% of teachers.<sup>17</sup>

As well as providing training in cultural responsiveness to the existing workforce, Washington is investing to support a racially diverse workforce in which providers reflect the culture and language of the children they serve.

- ECEAP and Early Achievers include training and professional development to increase the skills of educators serving dual language learners and Early Achievers coaches.
- DCYF provides scholarship support to non-English-speaking educators seeking to complete college education.
- Child Care Aware of Washington, which provides coaching for Early Achievers, has adopted culturally relevant practices and is strengthening the capabilities of its coaches to support a diverse workforce. Approximately one-third of coaches speak languages in addition to English.

### **Privately owned childcare facilities need greater support to achieve sustainability.**

Most childcare facilities in Washington State are private businesses, often owned by childcare providers or early childhood educators. This brings a unique set of financial and managerial challenges. In an assessment of child care businesses in King County, which has the largest population among counties in Washington State, Washington nonprofit Child Care Resources notes that “the cost of operating a quality child care business ... does not currently equal the amount families are able to pay (either personally or using subsidy).”<sup>18</sup>

These small businesses may also be restricted in their ability to provide high-quality early learning because they lack economies of scale for delivering specialized services. To address this issue, DCYF is establishing “shared services” hubs that offer financial and administrative capacity-building around fiscal management, administration, and information technology, program supports, among other needs.

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<sup>1</sup> United States Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2018: 2013–2017 5-Year Estimates, [Table S0101, Age and Sex](#).

<sup>2</sup> As defined by the federal [McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act](#), which is the primary federal legislation related to the education of children and youth experiencing homelessness.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Department of Education, Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development, Policy and Program Studies Service, *Early Childhood Homelessness State Profiles 2019*, June 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, [Washington State Report Card](#) (data for 2019–2020 school year).

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<sup>5</sup> Project Education Impact workgroup, *Children, Youth and Young Adults in Foster Care and/or Experiencing Homelessness*. January 2019, based on 2017 data.

<sup>6</sup>The federal Maternal Child Health Bureau defines children with special needs as “those who have or are at increased risk for chronic physical, developmental, behavioral, or emotional condition and who also require health and related services of a type or amount beyond that required by children generally.”

<sup>7</sup> Annie E. Casey Foundation, KIDS Count. *Children without health insurance by age group in Washington*, ages 0–5, 2017 data [table], KIDS COUNT Data Center.

<sup>8</sup> Washington State Department of Health, Systems Transformation team, and University of Washington’s School of Medicine, Primary Care Innovation Lab, “Well Child Visits” (web page), Healthier Washington Collaboration Portal website.

<sup>9</sup> Baum, A.C., Schnake, K. and Stegelin, D.A., 2020. Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health: Supporting Healthy Social-Emotional Development.

<sup>10</sup> K. M. Ziol-Guest and C. C. McKenna, “Early Childhood Housing Instability and School Readiness,” *Child Development* 85, no. 1 (Jan/Feb 2014): 103–13.

<sup>11</sup> G. A. Aarons, S. James, A. R. Monn, R. Raghavan, R. S. Wells, and L. K. Leslie, “Behavior Problems and Placement Change in a National Child Welfare Sample: A Prospective Study,” *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 49, no. 1 (Jan. 2010): 70–80.

<sup>12</sup> Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families, *The Early Start Act 2018 Annual Report*, 2019.

<sup>13</sup> Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families, *Compensation Technical Workgroup Report to the Washington State Legislature*, April 2019.

<sup>14</sup> Washington State Department of Early Learning, *2018 Child Care Market Rate Survey Final Report*, July 2018.

<sup>15</sup> Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, *Title II, Part A and Special Programs, Educator Growth and Development*.

<sup>16</sup> Butler Institute for Families, University of Denver, *The Region X Home Visiting Workforce Study: Brief 1, Demographic and Educational Characteristics of the Region X Home Visiting Workforce*, 2019.

<sup>17</sup> Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, *Washington State Report Card*.

<sup>18</sup> Child Care Resources, *Impact of Public Investment in Early Learning Facilities on the Child Care Business Model in King County*, 2019.