



OUTDOOR PRESCHOOL PILOT

Legislative Report





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Executive Summary

Substitute Senate Bill (SSB) 5357, laws of 2017, required the Washington State Department of Early Learning, now the Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF), to establish a four-year pilot project to license “outdoor, nature-based early learning and child care programs,” otherwise known as “outdoor preschools.” In 2018, DCYF established the Outdoor Preschool Pilot Standards, which are the licensing standards for outdoor preschools. These standards are based on local, national and international best practices. There are approximately 40 additional or alternative standards to WAC 110-300 for center-based programming that are designed to address the different types of hazards presented by an outdoor, nature-based program. In 2019, DCYF began issuing outdoor preschool pilot licenses based on these standards, and has five successfully licensed outdoor preschool programs.

Washington is now the first state in the country to provide a license to an outdoor preschool program, ensuring quality care and education without the need for a child care center facility or family home. Licensure allows outdoor preschool programs to provide care for children beyond four hours per day, and allows subsidy payment for income-eligible families (WCCC). Two licensed outdoor preschool programs provide a full-day program with a blended model of care, where children are enrolled in outdoor preschools programs as well as a center-based early learning program. DCYF will continue licensing outdoor preschool programs, and will support and monitor programs through July 2021, when the pilot project ends.

Initial reports from researchers and partnering agencies indicate that outdoor preschools are beneficial to children’s education and health, and that programs are able to meet high quality standards. To support participation in Early Achievers, DCYF has implemented trial observations to learn how quality rating tools, including ECERS-3, work in the outdoor environment. Outdoor preschool programs have also begun to implement the Since Time Immemorial early learning curriculum, incorporating tribal sovereignty curriculum into their nature-based programming. A final recommendation for how outdoor preschools can participate in the state’s quality, rating, and improvement systems will be included in the final report.

This year DCYF began the process of determining precise teacher competencies to meet the dual goals of health and safety in the outdoors, and nature-centered teaching and learning for preschool-age children. DCYF invited experts and stakeholders from around the state to establish the core competencies for nature-based teachers. This resource is due to be finalized and available to support workforce professional development beginning in 2020.

As DCYF began issuing outdoor preschool licenses in September 2019, various media outlets reported on Washington State’s leadership and progress, along with educating the wider public on nature-based early childhood education. The Seattle Times article on October 2, 2019 was the first to highlight the pilot’s progress, and there was a nationally televised segment on NBC’s Today Show. In September 2019, DCYF staff presented on the outdoor preschool pilot at the National Association of Regulatory Administrators (NARA) conference, expanding national professional awareness of the pilot project. These opportunities, as well as other partnerships at the state, national and international level, have expanded national awareness of Washington’s outdoor preschool pilot project, its progress and success.

Introduction

Substitute Senate Bill (SSB) 5357, laws of 2017, required the Washington State Department of Early Learning, now the Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF), to establish a four-year pilot project to license “outdoor, nature-based early learning and child care programs,” otherwise known as “outdoor preschools.”

In August 2017, DCYF and stakeholders in the outdoor preschool industry formed the Outdoor Preschool Advisory Group (OPAG), and began meeting regularly to maximize the inclusion of stakeholder input and expertise in the pilot. The pilot project began with 14 outdoor preschool programs across 22 sites throughout Washington, ready to participate as either an “implementer” or “observer” in a two-tiered pilot project structure.

In 2018, DCYF established the Outdoor Preschool Pilot Standards, which are the licensing standards for outdoor preschools. DCYF engaged the OPAG to review the aligned center and family home early learning program rules (now Chapter 110-300 WAC). DCYF extensively researched national and international best practices to help identify which licensing standards would need to be waived, adapted or replaced for an outdoor, nature-based program. DCYF has applied a vast majority of the center-based early learning program rules to outdoor preschools in the pilot. However, there are approximately 40 additional or alternative standards designed to address the different types of hazards presented by an outdoor, nature-based program. Some standards for outdoor preschools are more stringent, such as ratio and group size; some standards have been waived entirely, such as the requirements related to owning and managing an indoor structure; and some standards have been added, such as the requirement for documented benefit-risk assessments to support play and learning in variable, natural environments. The outdoor preschool pilot standards were reviewed by local and national experts as well as the Washington State Office of the Attorney General, and additional recommendations to ensure child safety were incorporated.

In 2019, DCYF began issuing outdoor preschool pilot licenses based on these standards, and has five successfully licensed outdoor preschool programs. Washington is now the first state in the country to provide a license to an outdoor preschool program, ensuring quality care and education without the need for a child care center facility or family home.

This report covers DCYF’s efforts since the last report delivered to the Legislature in January 2019, and details DCYF’s plans for the remainder of the pilot project.

Legislative Background and Requirements Overview

When the bill passed, the Legislature found that more than 40 outdoor preschools were operating in Washington, but because these programs were unlicensed they could not provide full-day care. The Legislature also found that these part-day programs were in high demand, and many had waitlists. Further, because these programs were unlicensed, they were unable to serve families who would otherwise be eligible for high-quality early learning opportunities through the state's Working Connections Child Care (WCCC) program and the Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP).

The goal in creating this pilot project was to “expand access to affordable, high-quality early learning programs, and to further investigate the benefits of outdoor, nature-based classrooms for Washington’s children and families” (SSB 5357, Section 1).

To accomplish this, the Legislature required DCYF to establish a pilot project to license outdoor preschools, which began August 31, 2017, and is scheduled to conclude June 30, 2021. DCYF must adopt rules to implement the pilot project and may waive or adapt licensing requirements as needed to allow for outdoor preschool classrooms. DCYF must also explore options for outdoor preschool participation in Early Achievers, and convene an advisory group of outdoor, nature-based early learning practitioners.

DCYF must provide brief, annual status reports, which began on January 15, 2018, that describe the implementation of the pilot project, and provide a full report on findings from the pilot project by November 30, 2020. This is the third annual report.

Review of Past Progress

When SSB 5357 was signed into law, DCYF began coordinating the pilot project both internally and with stakeholders in the outdoor preschool industry. DCYF hired a pilot program manager with a 14-year history in child care licensing, and a program specialist with a background in early childhood policy development, program evaluation and nature-based early childhood education.

In 2017, the OPAG established a pilot project structure to maximize the inclusion of stakeholder input and expertise, resulting in a two-tiered cohort participation structure. “Implementers” work with DCYF to apply the outdoor preschool pilot standards under a “pilot license” and receive the related opportunities, like accepting child care subsidies and participating in Early Achievers. “Observers” provide comparison data until they apply for a pilot license. Directors of both the implementer and observer cohort programs participate in the OPAG and provide program data to help establish appropriate licensing requirements and advise DCYF in meeting the goals of the pilot project.



Recruitment of existing programs in the outdoor preschool industry shows that outdoor preschool programs operate with a variety of organizational structures and program types. Participating programs include a mix of rural, urban and suburban locations to provide more family choice (see Appendices A and B). These programs also include a mix of nonprofit or for-profit organizations, programs located at the University of Washington campus, programs that work in conjunction with Seattle Parks and Recreation and programs that operate in public parks throughout the state. The pilot project also includes the participation of a federally recognized Indian tribe operating a licensed child care center. Although the majority of outdoor preschool programs participating in the pilot have historically been exempt from licensing, licensed child care centers can also provide an outdoor preschool program. These classrooms are conducted in natural areas adjacent to or nearby the licensed child care centers. See Appendix B for updated participant testimonials.

In 2018, DCYF established the Outdoor Preschool Pilot Standards, which are the licensing standards for outdoor preschools. Additional or alternative standards were designed to meet the same health and safety expectations as center-based early learning programs. Pilot participants began implementing these standards, which has led to more consistent practices among outdoor preschool programs, particularly around practices of benefit-risk assessment and supporting children’s safe and educational explorations of natural environments.

Providing a pilot license to outdoor preschool programs that have historically operated in license-exempt status required addressing a number of regulatory challenges. In 2018, DCYF resolved these challenges by developing a contractual relationship with each outdoor preschool applying for an outdoor preschool pilot license, requiring these participants to adhere to general health and safety rules for child care, (e.g. background checks and federal monitoring requirements) and to adhere to the Outdoor Preschool Pilot Standards.

In the second half of 2018, many of the implementing programs preparing for licensure began making necessary improvements to their program policies, handbooks and safety practices. Outdoor preschool programs often operate in public parks, and although these spaces are managed for public safety, it is the responsibility of the outdoor preschool provider to ensure child safety and education. The key differences

between center-based early learning program rules and the outdoor preschool pilot standards are in the following areas:

- Ratio and Group Size – Outdoor preschools must have a 1:6 staff to child ratio, with a maximum group size of 16. For comparison, center-based early learning programs have a ratio of 1:10 with a maximum group size of 20. This difference ensures appropriate active supervision of children in the outdoor preschool environment.
- Benefit-Risk Assessments – Outdoor preschool providers must complete a benefit-risk assessment and create a risk management plan for all regularly used locations and nature-based activities (e.g. climbing natural features, foraging and encountering wildlife). Activities or locations with increased risk must have policies and procedures to mitigate that risk, and these must be approved by DCYF.
- Teacher Qualification in Environmental or Outdoor Education – Outdoor preschool program directors or supervising staff must have experience or training in environmental or outdoor education in addition to the same early childhood certificate requirements as center-based early learning programs. This qualification supports child safety in the natural environment, as well as optimized learning with a nature-based curriculum.
- Curriculum Requirements – Outdoor preschools must utilize developmentally appropriate techniques to teach children about boundaries and self-regulation for outdoor play. Instead of having fences, teachers use visual cues, such as cones, and review the boundaries with children. Outdoor preschools must also provide a nature-based curriculum, utilizing natural materials and processes to enhance learning. The outdoor preschool pilot also requires programs to incorporate a tribally-approved curriculum, such as the Since Time Immemorial early learning curriculum, in the spirit of SB 5433.
- Weather-Related Policies and Emergency Procedures – Outdoor preschools operate outside every day and must ensure that children have the proper clothing and gear to remain healthy and safe. They must also have a safe building available for emergencies. Programs must partner with parents to understand the importance of providing proper clothing and must support children who do not have such clothing. Programs must also have policies and procedures for closures due to weather (e.g. poor air quality or dangerous storms), and staff must be trained in emergency procedures for sudden changes in weather.
- Hygiene – Outdoor preschool providers must follow alternative procedures to ensure the same level of hygiene as required in other licensed early learning programs. For example, outdoor preschools may use sanitizing wipes to clean public toilets before children’s use, and they may provide hand wipes with alcohol to sufficiently wash children’s hands before eating. Each of these alternative procedures is aligned with guidance from a DCYF health specialist.
- Outdoor, Nature-Based Specific Standards – Standards are also developed for the following:
 - Waterless toileting standards, such as port-a-loos or composting toilets, which are based on guidance from the Washington State Department of Health.
 - Egg collection activities, storage and serving standards, which are based on guidance from the Washington State Department of Agriculture.



- Campfire areas and activities, including supervision and safety procedures, which are based on guidance from the U.S. Forest Service, and aligned with practices used by other outdoor education organizations or nature-based early learning programs in other countries.

DCYF continues to support outdoor preschool programs to meet these standards. The outdoor preschool pilot licensing standards address concerns about health and safety. They also support and promote children's healthy development and encourage interaction with nature. The outdoor preschool pilot will evaluate these practices once they are implemented by the participating programs. The regulatory standards developed by the end of this pilot project could lay the foundation for quality, outdoor early childhood environmental education for Washington State, and programs around the nation.

"We started her at two days and I think that was a good way to kind of ease into it. My husband and I laughed that any time she's ever come home from preschool with a complaint... it's about another kid, but we've never heard her complain about the weather even on like the absolute worst days. So that helped us to make the decision to put her in five mornings." – Outdoor preschool parent

SSB 5357 also charged DCYF with developing a pathway for outdoor preschools to participate in Early Achievers, the state quality rating and improvement system (QRIS). In 2018, DCYF began to collect various quality rating tools (including ECERS-3, which is currently used in the Early Achievers program) to assess them for their suitability to outdoor preschools. This work is ongoing, and necessary to explore how outdoor preschool programs can be incorporated into the statewide QRIS.

Progress Made in 2019

Providing an Outdoor Preschool Pilot License

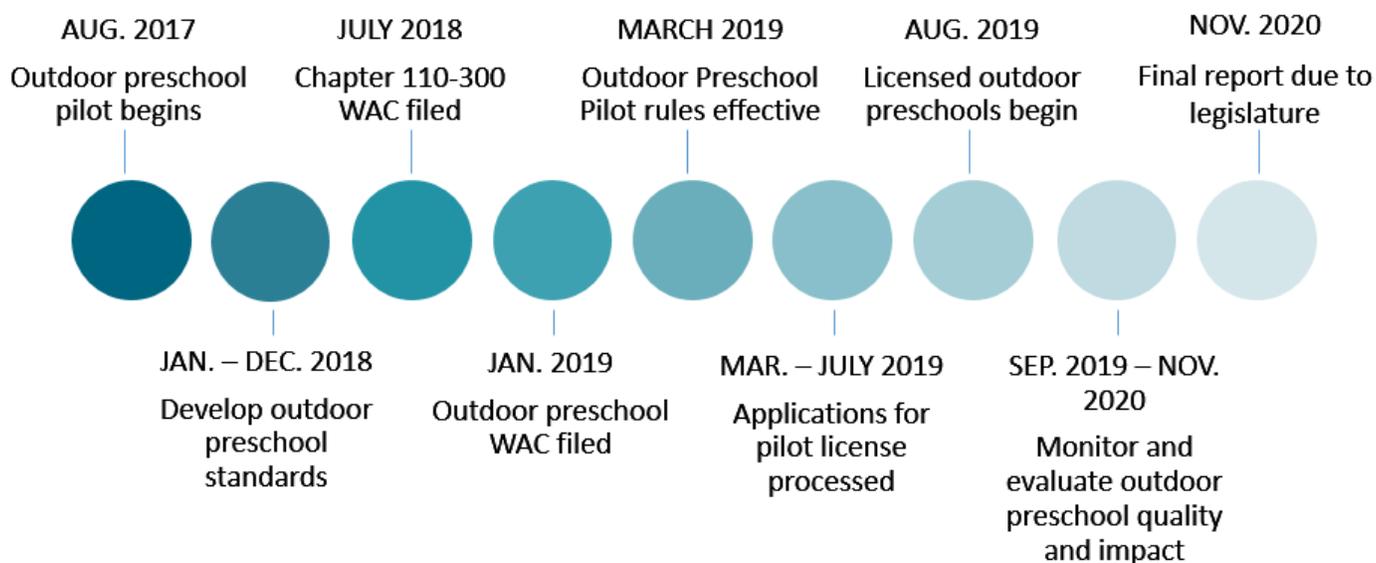
In 2019 DCYF has provided an outdoor preschool pilot license to five outdoor preschool programs:

- Squaxin Island Child Development Center’s Sapling & Cedars program, in Shelton, Wash.
- Kaleidoscope Forest School on Orcas Island, Wash.
- Three Tiny Trees programs in Carkeek Park, Camp Long, and Jefferson Park in Seattle.

Washington is now the first state in the country to provide a license to an outdoor preschool program, ensuring quality care and education to children without the need for a child care center facility or family home.



Each of the five licensed outdoor preschool programs successfully applied for a pilot license according to the Outdoor Preschool Pilot Standards. Each program currently has an initial pilot license, and will be assessed for a full license within six months of initial licensing¹. This process is on schedule for the outdoor preschool pilot timeline. Other implementer programs who are not yet licensed (see Appendix A), are being supported to begin a licensed program in winter of 2020.



The outdoor preschool pilot license allows outdoor preschool programs to operate their outdoor classrooms and provide care for children beyond four hours per day, expanding service to more children and families, and allow subsidy payment for income-eligible families. Two programs, Saplings & Cedars and Kaleidoscope Forest School, are also associated with licensed childcare centers, and children are provided a full-day program with a blended model of care, where children engage in the outdoor preschool program as well as center-based early

¹ Licensing processes for outdoor preschools mirror the process for centers, and can be found in more detail in WAC 100-300-0425 and Outdoor Preschool Pilot Standards 0425.

learning program (See Blended Center and Outdoor Preschool Models below). The three licensed Tiny Trees programs do not have an associated facility and still operate a half day because their enrollment process took place prior to receiving a pilot license. However, they plan to provide full-day (six-hour) care in licensed outdoor preschool locations in the 2020-2021 school year.

The pilot license application process is similar to the child-care center licensing process, however there are additional requirements for materials to be submitted, such as a location map and the program's benefit-risk assessments and associated policies. Maps are required to ensure there is sufficient natural space to support a nature-based curriculum, as well as to establish the regularly used areas between the program and DCYF. Additionally, program resources and staff qualifications are assessed according to the outdoor preschool specific requirements.

To prepare for licensing outdoor preschool programs, in March, 2019, DCYF began training two licensors on the Outdoor Preschool Pilot Standards and nature-based programming for young children. These staff have a combined 20 years of experience as early learning licensors, and have provided important feedback on the outdoor preschool licensing process. Each program is assigned one licensor to review the application, provide technical assistance and continue monitoring the program. However, due to the large area an outdoor preschool class may cover, licensing staff have begun to work as a pair during on-site visits to ensure familiarity with the park or other natural areas.

During an initial licensing visit, the pair of licensors inspect each regularly used location within the park alongside the outdoor preschool program director, and review each location's benefit-risk assessment and required practices. When any changes need to be made, the outdoor preschool provider must update their program's materials prior to being provided an outdoor preschool license. Licensors also inspect the area for hazards, which are dangers that cannot be navigated by children during supported "risky play" activities².

Participation in the Outdoor Preschool Pilot

Throughout the 2019 year there have been changes in pilot project participation, which allowed DCYF the opportunity to support additional programs to join the pilot or start a new outdoor preschool program³. The new programs include Kaleidoscope Forest School, which is one of the licensed pilot programs, and the Montessori Forest School (Snoqualmie, Wash.) and Sequoia's Farm and Forest School (Olympia, Wash.) who are preparing their license applications.

² According to the Outdoor Preschool Pilot Standards definitions: "hazard" means a source of harm that is not obvious to the child, such that the potential for injury is hidden; or a source of harm that is greater than a child can manage to avoid; "risky play" means physical activity and play that is thrilling and exciting and where there is a risk of physical injury. Risky play for outdoor preschools includes, but is not limited to, play involving heights, speed, dangerous tools or near dangerous elements (e.g. fall into something), and where children may get lost; and "risk" when used in reference to "risky play," means a situation in which a child can recognize and evaluate challenge and decide on a course of action, although there is the potential for injury. In this context, risk can be necessary to support healthy child development.

³ The Madrona School (Bellingham, Wash.) is closing after the 2019-2020 school year and is no longer participating in the pilot; Play Frontier (Carson, Wash.) is focusing on licensing their center, instead; Washington Outdoor School (Roslyn and Ellensburg, Wash.) has moved into the implementer cohort and is preparing for licensing; Montessori Forest School (Snoqualmie, Wash.) has joined as an implementer and is preparing for licensing; and Kaleidoscope Forest School (Eastsound, Wash.) has joined the pilot and is a licensed implementer program.

The pilot project now includes 13 outdoor preschool programs, across 22 separate sites throughout Washington. Of those, 11 sites participate as implementer programs, five of which are already licensed, and six of which are preparing for licensing (see Appendix A). The pilot project continues to ensure a broad representation from around the state and a variety of program offerings (see Appendix B).

Blended Center and Outdoor Preschool Models

SSB 5357 established this pilot project to license outdoor early learning and child care programs. Initially, this was to provide a licensing option to the outdoor preschools currently operating in license-exempt status, and which generally operated without a facility, for under four hours a day, and without the ability to accept childcare subsidies.

However, since then child care centers with a passion and commitment to nature-centered or outdoor education began to express interest in providing an outdoor preschool program, or “outdoor classrooms” in addition to the quality care and learning they provided in their center. These outdoor classrooms could be offered by the child care center agency without requiring major capital investment to expand the facility, and would expand the center’s capacity to serve more children and families in their community. Two such programs, the Squaxin Island Child Development Center (CDC) and the Kaleidoscope Preschool and Child Care Center were the first to receive outdoor preschool pilot licenses and they each provide a combination of nature-based and center-based preschool to ensure children and families can receive full-day childcare. So far, these two programs serve 42 children who are enrolled through ECEAP, and two children whose families receive WCCC subsidy.

Squaxin Island CDC began their Sapling and Cedars program with just a morning session in their outdoor classroom, where the children who were enrolled at the center would be outside for the morning and then return to the center for regular programming in the afternoon. Within months a waiting list formed. Squaxin Island CDC then opened up an afternoon session where children were in the center for the morning, and the outdoor classroom for the afternoon – this was immediately filled. By providing a morning and afternoon session in the outdoor classroom, Squaxin Island CDC was effectively swapping one group of 12 children for another between the nature-based and center-based environments. Through this swapping model, 24 children receive four hours of high quality outdoor, nature-based education each day in addition to the high quality indoor learning experiences. This program has allowed the Squaxin Island CDC to increase their overall enrollment by 12 children.

The Kaleidoscope Forest School program began September 2019, as part of the Kaleidoscope Preschool and Child Care Center on Orcas Island, Wash. At this program, children rotate from the center into the Forest School program either once, twice or four times a week, depending on parent interest. The outdoor program runs in the morning and afternoon, and lunch is brought to the outdoor preschool program by staff from the center. By licensing the Kaleidoscope Forest School Program, an additional 12 students are provided full-time care by the Kaleidoscope Preschool and Child Care center. Through this rotational model, a total of 34 children get 1-4 days of immersion in an outdoor, nature-based program, depending on parent choice and availability.



Outdoor Preschool Participation in ECEAP, Early Achievers and WCCC



The purpose of the outdoor preschool pilot is to expand opportunities for Washington’s children and families to access high-quality preschool options, and this is accomplished in a variety of ways by outdoor preschool programs participating in the pilot. Prior to licensing, outdoor preschools found their own ways to provide tuition assistance to families in need (see Appendix A). Some programs fundraise, provide a sliding scale, or have developed partnerships to support families in need of financial support, such as the Tiny Trees partnership with the Seattle Pathways Preschool program.

As demonstrated by the licensed outdoor preschools, however, licensing outdoor preschool programs expand a childcare agency’s capacity to enroll children through the state’s ECEAP and WCCC programs⁴. These programs support access to quality childcare for families who qualify throughout the state. Licensure also supports outdoor preschools to participate in city-based programs like the Seattle Preschool Program, which also makes high-quality programs free or affordable to families and supports quality improvement. Specifically:

- Of the 24 children enrolled in the five-day a week Sapling & Cedars program, 12 are ECEAP students
- Of the 34 children experiencing the Kaleidoscope Forest School, 18 are ECEAP students and two are children whose families receive WCCC subsidies
- Across four locations, Tiny Trees has 40 students enrolled in the Seattle Preschool Program

For the purpose of ensuring that outdoor preschools can serve families who are receiving subsidy supports through Working Connections Child Care (WCCC), DCYF determined that the outdoor preschools participating in the pilot will be classified as center-based early learning programs and receive the center reimbursement rate. This determination considers that outdoor preschools operate outside of an individual’s home, require at least two staff to supervise children and can enroll more than 12 children.

“I really feel like kids need to be outside and learning about our environment so they’ll care about it, and so I’m really hopeful that it’s done well and I think that a sliding scale cost is really important to maintain. I feel like a lot of our programs help the poorest of the poor, or if you’re really wealthy you can afford to pay, but for people in the middle who can afford to pay some, sometimes it leaves them out...” – Outdoor preschool parent

It also takes into account the education requirements for staff which were modeled off of center-based early learning regulations, and include additional specialty training or experience in environmental education. For example, at least one staff in a leadership position at an outdoor preschool (director, assistant director or

⁴ The Early Childhood Education Assistance Program (ECEAP) is Washington’s pre-kindergarten program serving at-risk three and four year olds and their families. ECEAP provides children in 36 counties with preschool education, health services, intensive family support and parent involvement and training. The Working Connections Child Care program (WCCC) helps Washington families with low incomes pay for child care with eligible childcare providers.

program supervisor) is required to have training or experience in environmental education. Additionally, lead teachers are also required to have two years' experience in the specialization of nature-based early childhood education, unless the program supervisor is a 15 min walk or ride to the site. Depending on the program site, staff may also need additional training as lifeguards or in wilderness first aid. This specialist training is critical for prioritizing environmental safety, behavior management and keeping children engaged in outdoor settings.

Initial reports regarding outdoor preschool participation in ECEAP indicate that outdoor preschools are able to meet ECEAP standards for the education of young children, and may be particularly beneficial for children's behaviors and self-regulation. Within the first month of the Saplings and Cedars program, Squaxin Island CDC teachers tracked incidents of challenging behavior between children⁵. They found there were seven incidents when children were indoors or in the fenced playground, but there were no incidents for the same group of children in the outdoor preschool classroom. This trend continued for the next two months of Squaxin Island CDC's Sapling and Cedars morning session, when there were 29 incidents of challenging behaviors between children when children were in the center, but there were zero incidents for the same group of children when they were in the outdoor preschool classroom. When the afternoon session began, there were some incidents in the afternoon session, however the child who was having challenges was soon switched to the morning session, and "it was night and day" according to the Program's director.

"Most of the parents that I've talked to, they're like "Oh my kid didn't officially get thrown out of [other] schools but would have if we'd stayed, so now we're here" and so I think it's just kind of natural, that [outdoor preschools] attracts kids that need something different, behaviorally." – Outdoor preschool parent

These initial outcomes are aligned with research on how nature improves children's executive functioning, and could have big implications for the use of nature-based programs for at-risk children, and ultimately supporting the DCYF goals of eliminating race and income as predictors in children's outcomes. In the words of the Squaxin Island CDC Director, "It is interesting that the outdoor kids still have some problems while indoors, which only amplifies the basis that kids outside are more engaged and less likely to have issues." This year, Squaxin Island CDC also applied for Early ECEAP, and the ESD 113 supported this application, recognizing that the outdoor preschool program has been particularly successful in their outdoor preschool program (See Exhibit A).

As part of ECEAP and WCCC requirements, licensed programs must participate in Early Achievers, the state's QRIS. In 2019, DCYF implemented trial observations at implementer and observer cohort programs, to learn about how rating tools, including ECERS-3, work in this type of educational environment. In 2020, additional stakeholders will be coming together to assess the use of these tools and the QRIS scales to decide what is most appropriate for outdoor preschool, in both the short and long-term.

⁵ Incidents were defined by the Squaxin Island CDC teachers as "fighting, hitting, biting, pushing, etc. and requiring teacher intervention."

Benefits of Nature-Based Preschool and Initial Child Outcomes

Although additional research into the outcomes of Washington’s licensed outdoor preschool programs is forthcoming, both as part of this pilot project and independent research within the state, there is a large body of existing research to support the practices and policies being put in place through the pilot project. Most notably, a recent meta-analysis of research into the cause-and-effect relationship between experiences with nature and learning outcomes provides us with a summary of hundreds of studies. These studies provide “converging evidence [that] strongly suggests that experiences of nature boost academic learning, personal development and environmental stewardship⁶.”



“So being able to have a basic concept and general understanding [of gardening] to cultivate your own, your own outdoor lifestyle around your house, to help supplement your food and everything, is not a bad idea...” – Outdoor preschool parent

Regarding early learning specifically, outdoor, nature-based play has been shown to provide physical, cognitive, social and emotional benefits for children:⁷

- Physical Benefits – Outdoor play provides more vigorous, varied and sustained play; improves gross and fine motor development, including bone health, balance, coordination, endurance, spatial awareness, core strength and posture; strengthens immune systems and promotes lifelong engagement in physical activity.
- Cognitive Benefits – Outdoor, nature-based play supports improved executive functioning and self-regulation abilities; increases observation and problem-solving skills; increases attention and focus; and challenging play supports children’s resilience, independence and self-confidence.
- Social and Emotional Benefits – Nature-based play supports development of empathy for the natural world and an emotional connection to special places, laying the foundation for environmentally-responsible attitudes and behaviors and reduced stress, anxiety and depression.

Additional research into the specific health impacts of Washington’s outdoor preschool programs also became available in 2019⁸. Tiny Trees, who is participating in the outdoor preschool pilot and has 12 locations across King County, has been a partner in a research project led by Dr. Amber Fyfe-Johnson, Assistant Research Professor at Washington State University. In 2018 Dr. Fyfe-Johnson completed a pilot study examining the impact of outdoor, nature-based early childhood programs on children’s obesity, compared to children

⁶ Kuo M, Barnes M and Jordan C (2019) Do Experiences With Nature Promote Learning? Converging Evidence of a Cause-and-Effect Relationship. *Frontiers in Psychology* 10:305. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00305. <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00305/full>

⁷ See Exhibit C: Cultivate Learning’s *Nurturing Early Learning: Research to Support Young Children’s Learning in the Outdoors*. Cultivate Learning is responsible for assessing program quality in the Early Achievers program, as well as providing Early Achievers Institutes for professional development. In July 2018, UW’s Cultivate Learning and doctoral students at UW developed a series of research briefs that highlight the benefits of outdoor, nature-based learning opportunities to support educators in making improvements to their practice.

⁸ 2017 UW Master’s thesis research showed no difference between rates of children’s illness and injury at Tiny Trees outdoor preschools and conventional preschools over the course of 14 weeks.

enrolled in more traditional indoor preschool models. This pilot study looked at 50 children over nine months, and found that for children enrolled at Tiny Trees there was a 14% reduction in the prevalence of children's obesity within six months, compared to no change in obesity in the control group of children enrolled in more traditional indoor preschools. In 2019, Dr. Fyfe-Johnson received a five-year NIH-funded grant to conduct a more comprehensive study with similar objectives, but with more participants, longer follow-up time and more health outcomes.

“Overall it seems like it's been really great for her immune system and she just loves being outside in the nature. I wish I could've gotten my son in the program too, but it didn't start until after he started kindergarten.”– Outdoor preschool parent

Tiny Trees and the Squaxin Island Child Development center have also been assessing children's learning and development, as part of their requirements from either the Pathway to Seattle Preschool Program (SPP) or ECEAP, respectively. All ECEAP and SPP children (including Pathway to SPP and Step Ahead, which is a similar Seattle program, but is now over) are assessed with the Teaching Strategies GOLD[®] Birth to Third Grade (TS Gold)⁹, in order to track their early literacy and math skills, and their cognitive, language, physical and social-emotional development. Measures are taken in the fall and spring to measure progress, and when children are at or above the widely held expectations for their age in the spring, they are on track for kindergarten readiness.

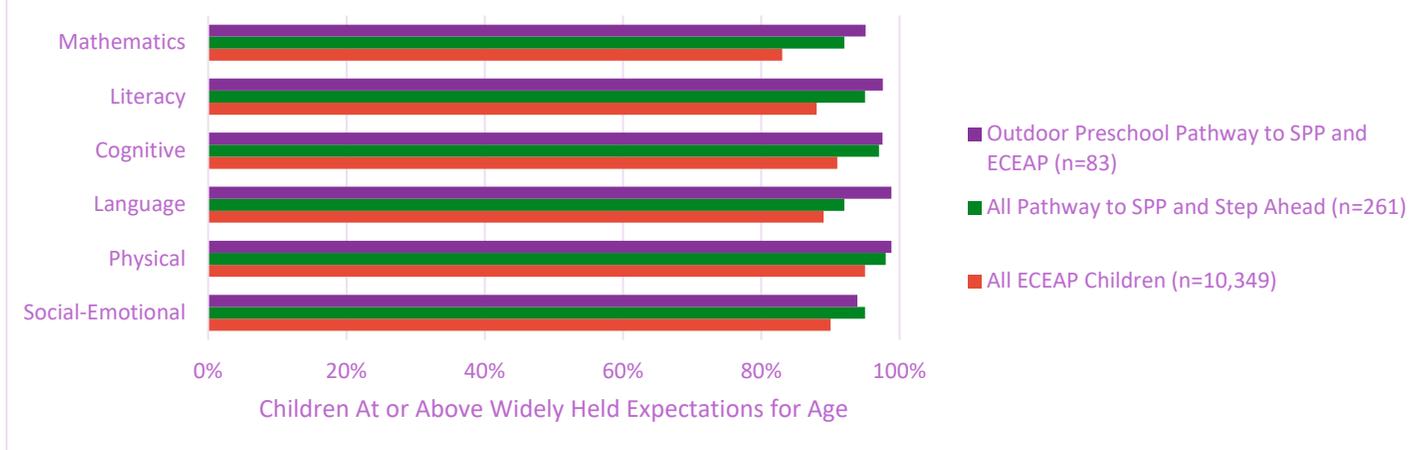
While there are a number of limitations¹⁰ to the comparison, a spring 2019 snapshot of TS Gold measures (Fig. 1) indicates that child development outcomes for the ECEAP and Pathway to SPP-qualifying children enrolled in outdoor preschools are the same or better than the average outcomes for children enrolled in ECEAP, statewide, and mostly the same or better than the total Pathway to SPP and Step Ahead populations.

⁹ According to the DCYF 2018-19 ECEAP Outcomes Report, TS Gold “is a valid, reliable seamless assessment system which meets the assessment standards of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the National Association of State Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education. Teachers observe children in the context of everyday activities and natural settings over time, record their observations, and use them to rate 36 objectives, plus two more for children learning the English language.”

<https://www.dcyf.wa.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/eceap/Outcomes.pdf>

¹⁰ Limitations include the small sample size of children (Tiny Trees n=40 and Squaxin Island CDC n=5), which limits the power of statistical analysis, and the potential impact of different teachers' use of the TS Gold assessment tool.

Figure 1. TS Gold Measures of Child Development - Spring 2019



Establishing Core Competencies for Nature-Based Early Care and Education Professionals

All positions in an outdoor preschool require at least the same qualifications as the equivalent positions in an early learning center, which are based on the Washington State Stackable Certificates in early childhood education (ECE)¹¹. However, during the process of establishing the outdoor preschool pilot licensing standards, it was determined that to provide safe and high quality nature-based education, supervising and lead teaching staff should have education and experience in ECE as well as environmental education or other outdoor, wilderness based qualifications. There are no standard degrees or certificates for early childhood environmental education in the United States, and so DCYF began the process of determining precise teacher competencies to meet the dual goals of health and safety in the outdoors, and nature-centered teaching and learning for preschool-age children.

Experts and stakeholders from around the state were invited to join a working group to establish the core competencies for nature-based or nature-focused teachers, as a supplemental document to the Washington State Core Competencies for Early Learning and Care Professionals¹². This working group includes faculty from universities and colleges, members of the Early Childhood Teacher Preparation Council, leaders and staff of independent environmental education teacher-training institutions, directors and staff of outdoor preschools, experts in child development, outdoor and environmental education experts from OSPI, various DCYF staff and tribal representatives. The working group met twice, in-person in 2019, with additional feedback and review opportunities via webinars and emails.

The resulting competencies describe what is important for outdoor early childhood educators to know and be able to do at the various levels of practice (i.e. entry-level through graduate-level). In 2020, this supplemental document will be available for wider stakeholder review, and will be used to analyze the training, qualifications and experiences of staff in outdoor preschools participating in the pilot. A final recommendation for required qualifications and equivalencies for the various staff in outdoor preschool programs will be included in the final report to the legislature in November 2020.

¹¹ The three levels of certification for early childhood education are the initial, short and state certificate. For more information on stackable certificates in ECE, please see <https://ececareers.del.wa.gov/what-is-early-learning>

¹² https://www.dcyf.wa.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/CoreCompetencies_English.pdf

This work builds capacity and provides necessary resources for teacher training institutions across Washington State, so that proposed qualifications for the outdoor preschool workforce are achievable, should outdoor preschools continue to be licensed after the pilot project. In addition to serving the needs of the outdoor preschool pilot, establishing nature-based and nature-centered teaching competencies can be used to support high quality nature-centered education within centers and family homes.

State, National and International Partnerships

In 2019, DCYF engaged in partnerships at the state, national and international level to advance the work of the outdoor preschool pilot.

In the spring of 2019, the program specialist for the outdoor preschool pilot joined the Natural Start Alliance¹³ steering committee for national alignment of nature-based early childhood education teacher competencies and qualifications. This work continues, albeit at a slower pace than is needed, to meet the requirements of the outdoor preschool pilot to set training and qualifications requirements for outdoor preschools, and so DCYF continues to lead the way for the nation in that statewide endeavor (see Establishing Competencies and Qualifications for Nature-based Early Learning Professionals).

DCYF continues to work with the University of Washington to develop teacher training opportunities for nature-centered early childhood education, as well as to explore quality measures and outdoor preschool participation in Early Achievers. In the summer of 2019, DCYF and the University of Washington began developing an online professional development course for nature-centered early childhood education that will provide 10 STARS hours of training and be available statewide. In August 2019, the University of Washington's partnership with Queen Maud University in Norway was particularly influential. The program specialist for the outdoor preschool pilot joined a delegation from the University of Washington to begin the development of the STARS course with their expertise in teacher training¹⁴. This course will be further developed in 2020.

In October 2019, the Early Childhood Teacher Preparation Council met to learn more about nature-based teaching, inviting a pilot participant and member of the Outdoor Preschool Advisory Group to speak, and to begin discussions on how to support outdoor preschool workforce development around the state. Considerations include identifying nature-based settings for teachers to practice.

Another partnership that began in 2019 is between DCYF and the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI), as the outdoor preschool pilot program specialist joined the working group to revise the Washington State Environmental and Sustainability Literacy Plan¹⁵. To provide a basis for the K-12 standards for environmental education, DCYF is aligning the work of the outdoor preschool pilot, including efforts to build the early learning workforce capacity to support young children's knowledge of and experiences with nature in any early learning setting.

¹³ The Natural Start Alliance is the early childhood-focused part of the North American Association of Environmental Education, who holds international conferences and publishes the International Journal of Early Childhood Environmental Education, among other activities and responsibilities. <https://naturalstart.org/>

¹⁴ The delegation from UW included student researchers, UW faculty and an instructional designer from Cultivate Learning, and was made possible by a grant provided to Queen Maud University and the University of Washington by the government of Norway.

¹⁵ <https://www.k12.wa.us/student-success/resources-subject-area/environment-sustainability/environmental-and-sustainability>

“It’s been great for her. The classroom discussion and lesson plans kind of weave based on their interests and her teachers are really great about it. They’re not just sticking to something that they planned, they really follow [where] the kids really want to dive deeper, like this random type of millipede that they found. So they do that and I just, I don’t see that being the case in public school for her. So that’s kind of my concern. That was actually something when we first were deciding about this, was like “okay, she’s going to get used to this really, really awesome model and then it’s not going to be like that for her at all when she hits public school” But we don’t want to not let her have a really great opportunity because it can’t be really great all the time, you know?”– Outdoor preschool parent

Media, Publications and Presentations

In September 2019, as DCYF began issuing outdoor preschool licenses, various media outlets reported on Washington State’s leadership and progress, along with educating the wider public on nature-based early childhood education. The REI Co-Op Journal released an article¹⁶ in September 2019, about outdoor preschools mentioning the role of the pilot project in making such childcare options more affordable for families. The Seattle Times article¹⁷ in October 2019, was the first to highlight the pilot’s progress in licensing outdoor preschools with an article titled, “Learning in nature: Washington becomes first in the country to license outdoor preschools.” This publication sparked a wave of local and national interest. Subsequent publications include a reprinting of the Seattle Times article in the Bellingham Herald; an article highlighting a local participating program in The Spokesman¹⁸ (Spokane, Wash.) and the Island Sounder¹⁹ (Orcas Island, Wash.); and nationally there was a “Best States” article about Washington licensing outdoor preschools by the U.S. News & World Report.²⁰ There have also been television segments about Washington’s outdoor preschools, such as the segment created by E.W. Scripps Media²¹ for their national partner stations, and perhaps most notably, a segment on NBC’s Today Show.²²



Also in September 2019, DCYF staff presented on the outdoor preschool pilot at the National Association of Regulatory Administrators (NARA) conference. The 90-minute presentation provided an overview of Washington State’s Outdoor Preschool Pilot program and was one of the better attended sessions at NARA. The presentation broadly discussed how the pilot program came about, what regulatory framework DCYF chose and why they chose it, how outdoor preschool standards differ from indoor standards but maintain a high level of safety, and how outdoor preschool programs might expand in Washington. Since then, DCYF has

¹⁶ <https://www.rei.com/blog/news/outdoor-preschool-trends>

¹⁷ <https://www.seattletimes.com/education-lab/learning-in-nature-washington-becomes-first-in-the-country-to-license-outdoor-preschools/>

¹⁸ <https://www.spokesman.com/stories/2019/oct/11/veradale-preschool-among-small-group-participating/>

¹⁹ <https://www.islandssounder.com/life/kaleidoscope-becomes-first-in-the-country-to-license-outdoor-preschool/>

²⁰ <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/articles/2019-10-11/washington-is-the-first-state-to-license-outdoor-preschools>

²¹ <https://www.wptv.com/news/national/outdoor-preschools-a-new-education-trend-is-trading-walls-and-desks-for-trees-and-creeks>

²² <https://www.today.com/video/year-round-outdoor-preschools-launch-in-washington-73587269564>

received requests for more information from four states as they consider licensing outdoor preschools in their state. In December 2019, the program specialist for the outdoor preschool pilot also presented a webinar hosted by the Natural Start Alliance, expanding national awareness of the pilot project and its progress to the early childhood environmental education community.

Implementing Indigenous Curricula in Outdoor, Nature-Based Programs

During the development of the Outdoor Preschool Pilot Standards, the Outdoor Preschool Advisory Group held conversations about equity, inclusion and diversity, and discussed how the foundation quality standards of outdoor preschools could be used to advance social and environmental justice. Stakeholders agreed that as nature-based programs, outdoor preschools were particularly well-suited to be in partnership with local tribes and implement the Since Time Immemorial curriculum. Since 2015, lessons about tribal history and sovereignty are required to be included in all public schools (Senate Bill 5433), and the Since Time Immemorial Tribal Sovereignty Early Learning Curriculum²³ is an opportunity for children to learn about their shared history with their closest Tribal neighbors. The unique curriculum was designed by Native Early Learning educators for all early learners in Washington State, and aligns to the K-12 Since Time Immemorial: Tribal Sovereignty curriculum²⁴.



The standard for outdoor preschools to implement Since Time Immemorial, or other tribally-approved curriculum, is in addition to the center-based standards to promote the acceptance of diversity²⁵. The Outdoor Preschool Pilot Standards also include a requirement for program staff to reach out to their local tribes to identify any additional or specific curriculum they prefer. This approach was recommended by the Indian Policy for Early Learning Committee, and honors local tribal sovereignty and relationship-building.

“I mean they're still going over number comprehension and letters in the outdoor program, and my daughter, she'll come home and she'll start counting or she'll start speaking, counting in Lushootseed or singing drum songs and stuff that the elders sometimes come out and teach the kids those things as well. So not only are they just getting the basic fundamentals but they're also learning part of the culture that our family comes from, which is really awesome I think.”– Outdoor preschool parent

Outdoor preschool programs in both the implementer and observer cohorts received a training on the Since Time Immemorial (STI) early learning curriculum in March 2019, and nine of the participating programs began implementing the STI or a local indigenous curriculum in September 2019. The curriculum includes lessons on culture and community, salmon, waterways and the impacts of pollution or other human activity. Of the licensed outdoor preschools:

²³ <https://www.dcyf.wa.gov/tribal-relations/since-time-immemorial>

²⁴ www.indian-ed.org

²⁵ WAC 110-300-0160

- Squaxin Island’s Sapling and Cedars program is a tribal program and is able to provide hands-on lessons with the salmon in the creek near the outdoor classroom
- Tiny Trees has connected initially with Suquamish and Muckelshoot Tribes, and all staff have had some training in the Since Time Immemorial early learning curriculum
- Kaleidoscope Forest School implements monthly readings of “13 Moons – The 13 Lunar Phases, And How They Guide the Swinomish People,” and is seeking further connections with the Swinomish Tribe

Of particular note from the observer cohort, the teachers at the Tacoma Nature Center implemented the Since Time Immemorial Early Learning Curriculum during their three-week summer preschool session at Nurture in Nature Preschool²⁶ (see Exhibit B for the full report from Nurture In Nature):

“Summer Session, Week 1

Our first week focused on who we are and storytelling. Through sharing what is important to us we were able to gain a better sense of who we are, and we also read the book *A River Lost* to learn about people who lost something very important to them and how this affected them. Throughout our first week we explored various ways of storytelling and how we can learn from paying attention to someone else’s story.

Summer Session, Week 2

This week focused on the importance of salmon to native peoples and also to our region. We learned about the salmon life cycle through books, games and song. We also had a visit from another educator at the nature center who taught us more about salmon spawning and behaviors. *A River Lost* was revisited as we participated in a resource trading activity and we also had fun doing a salmon print on t-shirts using a rubber salmon!

Summer Session, Week 3

Our final week focused on the importance of a healthy watershed for both animals and people, and the water cycle. We discussed the components of a watershed and explored the consequences of pollution by creating a watershed model. We also used our salmon eyes to explore a watershed from a different point of view. And we investigated Snake Lake's headwaters, starting with the storm drain out on the street.”

Goals and Next Steps for 2020

In 2020, DCYF will continue licensing and monitoring outdoor preschool programs, and provide technical assistance to help program participants meet the pilot licensing standards. DCYF will continue exploring options for outdoor preschool participation in Early Achievers, and will determine the required staff qualifications for outdoor preschool staff.

Key next steps for DCYF include:

- Track enrollment of families into licensed outdoor preschool programs and support licensed outdoor preschools to participate in ECEAP, WCCC or otherwise improve access and affordability.

²⁶ This is an all outdoor session for students heading into Kindergarten in the fall. The Nurture in Nature preschool is onsite at the Tacoma Nature Center, a 72-acre wildlife preserve that consists of wetland, Douglas fir forest and meadow habitat.

- Create or support the development of trainings for outdoor preschool staff, including an outdoor preschool pre-service training.
- Convene the outdoor preschool advisory group and other stakeholders to improve the outdoor preschool licensing standards.
- Develop business models for the various types of outdoor preschool programs.
- Evaluate further health and educational outcomes for children enrolled in outdoor preschools.

The final report on findings from the pilot is due November 30, 2020.

Appendices

Appendix A

Program Name and Location	Pilot Cohort	Program Type and Model*	Number of Children served 2019 - 2020	Does the program provide independent financial assistance to families?
ACORNS NW Olympia, Wash.	Observer	Non-profit organization, operating a non-permanent, roaming program in a public park.	25	Yes. There is a sliding scale of costs to self-identified families, and scholarships provided to promote racial equity.
Fiddleheads Seattle, Wash.	Implementer – not yet licensed	UW Arboretum – affiliated program, providing a permanently located outdoor classroom program entirely outdoors.	65	Yes. Six families are receiving financial aid for the 2018-19 school year. We ask families to fill out our financial aid form and aid is awarded based on need using the same metric as the Seattle Public School system uses for free and reduced lunch.
Kaleidoscope Forest School Orcas Island, Wash.	Implementer - licensed	Non-profit organization, operating a licensed childcare center, providing permanently located outdoor classroom programs at various public and private parks.	27	Yes. Families can enroll through ECEAP and WCCC.
Little Woodland Adventures: Into the Forest Spokane, Wash.	Implementer – not yet licensed	Into the Forest childcare center, providing a non-permanent, roaming outdoor preschool program in a public park.	7	No.

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Nurture in Nature Preschool Tacoma, Wash.	Observer	Tacoma Nature Center – affiliated program, providing a permanently located outdoor classroom program entirely outdoor.	64	Yes. When fundraising efforts are successful and available.
Owl’s Hollow: Olympic Nature Experience Sequim, Wash.	Observer	Non-profit organization, providing a non-permanent, roaming outdoor preschool program in a public park.	42	Yes. Eleven families receive financial assistance, as we raise money privately through donations and foundation grants.
Polliwog Preschool: Mercer Slough EEC Bellevue, Wash.	Observer	Mercer Slough EEC – affiliated program, providing a nature-based outdoor preschool program with an indoor facility.	36	No. We strive to keep our costs low for all families, but don't currently offer any additional financial assistance. We hope to offer 1-2 full scholarship spaces next year.
Roots & Sky Nature School Seattle, Wash.	Observer	Individual currently operating Nanny in Nature, a non-permanent, roaming program in a public park.	8	No.
Sapling & Cedars: Squaxin Island CDC Shelton, Wash.	Implementer - licensed	Squaxin Island Tribal childcare center, providing an outdoor preschool program with a permanently located outdoor classroom.	24	Yes. If our families are tribal the tribe pays their tuition. Additionally, of our 24 program seats (morning and afternoon sessions), 12 are ECEAP slots.
Sequoia’s Farm and Forest School Olympia, Wash.	Implementer – not yet licensed	For-profit, 4.11 acre farm-based program with a permanently located outdoor classroom.	5	We currently do not provide financial assistance. In the future we hope to provide care for children through the State subsidy, DSHS

OUTDOOR PRESCHOOL PILOT

Montessori Forest School Snoqualmie, Wash.	Implementer – not yet licensed	LLC, providing non-permanent, roaming outdoor preschool program in public parks.	2	Not at this time. I would like to establish the company as a non-profit and also offer financial assistance going forward.
Tiny Trees Various Locations in King County, Wash.	Implementer - licensed (3) and Observer (6)	Non-profit organization, providing permanently located outdoor classroom programs at various public parks.	281	Yes. 101 families receive Financial Assistance. Of those, 40 are receiving aid through the Seattle Preschool Program. The remainder, 61 families, have self-identified as needing assistance and been granted the Financial Assistance cost for their location. This is a fixed amount that is set in conjunction with our tuition rates.
Washington Outdoor School, Roslyn and Ellensburg, Wash.	Implementer – not yet licensed (2)	Non-profit organization, providing non-permanent, roaming outdoor preschool program in public parks.	60	(not submitted)
Total	13 agencies, 22 sites	-	646	-

* Outdoor preschool programs can be offered by a variety of organizational types and in a variety of program models, while still meeting the requirements of operating an outdoor, nature based program for 50% or more of the daily program. Outdoor preschool programs may be offered by non-profit or for-profit childcare agency, or be associated with a nature center or other organization. Outdoor preschools may be offered as part of a licensed childcare center’s daily program, or they may operate entirely outdoors in a public park or on private land. Outdoor preschools may also have a permanently located outdoor classroom, or they may operate as a non-permanent, roaming or backpack program. Permanently located outdoor classrooms are outdoor areas that have been modified to support an early learning program, such as with child size furniture. Non-permanent outdoor classes, also called roaming or backpack programs because of their low impact, still have a regular meeting space and areas that are commonly used, but teachers and children bring all required resources with them as they engage with the natural environment.

Appendix B

Outdoor Preschool Pilot Participant Testimonials

ACORNS NW (various locations in Olympia, Wash. area): A Cooperative Outdoor Revolutionary Nature School Northwest (ACORNS NW) is hosting programs 100% outside year-round in all types of weather. ACORNS NW is also a non-profit program currently in the process of becoming a 501(c)(3). We serve a total of 25 children (including four children with special needs), ages two to five years old, and 24 families. We are a nature- and earth-based experiential learning program. We seek to help nurture and restore connection to the natural world through exploration, play, observation, and community. It is our hope that prioritizing a connection to nature and building a relationship in the ways we learn, grow, teach, share, and live, that we will create more inclusive and sustainable futures for all beings. ACORNS NW Forest School was co-founded in November 2015 as a homeschool enrichment program by two queer women, Heather McKenna and Kendra Obom. Our hope and vision is to create accessible nature connection programming for the Olympia and Thurston County community. For the past five years, Ms. McKenna and Obom have acted as the directors on a mostly volunteer basis with the hope of providing affordable programming and meaningful employment within their community. In 2016, we added the outdoor preschool program, which has grown into ACORNS NW most active program. The ACORNS NW community seeks cooperative and justice-based approaches to both social and environmental issues, and continues to grow its capacity to deliver alternative education and nature-based community for all ages.

Fiddleheads Forest School (University of Washington, Seattle): Fiddleheads Forest School was established at the Washington Park Arboretum, a public park in the city of Seattle, in 2013. Fiddleheads was the first entirely outdoor preschool in Seattle and one of the first urban outdoor preschools in the country. In 2019, Fiddleheads served over 90 families of children ages 3-5 in our morning, afternoon and summer school programs, and has 133 families on our annual waitlist with children ages 3-5. Flexibility is a cornerstone of the Fiddleheads philosophy. Our program is as responsive as the environment in which we operate. Teachers take into account a variety of factors including the weather, wildlife and the children themselves when determining the direction of the day. On any given day at Fiddleheads, students spend the morning exploring and engaging with their environment in a multitude of ways that is unique to our specific space. At Fiddleheads we believe strongly in empowering students to guide their own learning process, and work to help each of them develop the tools to do just that through use of a curriculum that expressly teaches self-regulation. We have found that the forest grove classroom is uniquely suited to helping children develop these skills through exposure to gradual, contextual change. Fiddleheads pioneered the outdoor preschool approach in Seattle and continues to lead the field both regionally and nationally. Our seasonal approach arises out of the unique relationship between, children, families and the environment, and emphasizes the development of self-regulation and natural science skills. Becoming licensed would help set a standard of practice in the field and allow us to reach a greater diversity of families in and around the Seattle area.

Kaleidoscope Forest School (Orcas Island, Wash.): Kaleidoscope Forest School operates within Kaleidoscope Preschool and Child Care Center, a non-profit center on Orcas Island. Kaleidoscope partners with YMCA Camp Orkila and Moran State Park to create ecologically dynamic forest classrooms in which children can explore the natural landscapes of Orcas Island. Each Forest School day takes place entirely outdoors. The group meets at the school building and then buses over to that day's forest site with all their supplies, gear, backpacks, meals and more!

Kaleidoscope Forest School uses an emergent curriculum teaching philosophy, in which children's interests are supported through observation, documentation and response. Each week, teachers create a flexible curriculum based on the emergent interests documented and predictable seasonal trends, in order to offer optional learning activities such as nature-based crafts, exploratory walks, wood working projects and open-ended materials play.

Enrollment options include part-time (two days/week), full-time (four days/week) and one day/week, as a component to regularly enrolled preschool at Kaleidoscope Preschool and Child Care Center. By participating in the outdoor preschool pilot, Kaleidoscope Preschool and Child Care Center offers outdoor learning to 27 children for 7-28 hours each week!

Little Woodland Adventures: Into the Forest Preschool (Spokane, Wash.): Into the Forest is a licensed childcare facility that offers outdoor learning through our Little Woodland Adventures program. Into the Forest serves 30 children and 28 families. We opened our facility in hopes to create a program that blends the Reggio Approach and Waldorf Theory – focusing on a nature-infused learning environment with real life experiences. We also bring nature inside for learning. We believe children learn best through experiences of touching, moving, listening and observing – when they have control over the direction of their learning. A child's self-confidence and self-esteem are built when they can explore and make their own decisions while being supported by peers and teachers. Our classrooms resemble homelike environments and use simple and natural materials, which allow children to immerse themselves in imaginative and creative play and learning. We also offer a safe place for children to explore and problem-solve in outdoor adventures. This strengthens the connection between children and the natural world. This outdoor program offers many opportunities for unplanned learning every day, such as watching birds build a nest or a hummingbird drink nectar from a flower. We want to build a solid foundation of healthy living habits that children can take with them as they grow and learn. Right now, we are unable to have or do a lot of the things we want to do, things that we know benefit a child's learning tremendously. We are participating in the pilot project to see if we can help change the standards in this area to allow such natural learning.

Little Woodland Adventures is a fully emerged outdoor learning program, located at the Dishman Hills Conservation Area. We run Tuesday-Thursday from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. for seven children between the ages of 3-5 years. Our philosophy focuses on real life experiences that children will be able to take with them throughout their life. We teach children at their own pace and on their own terms about academic, social, emotional, environmental and survival skills. Self-confidence and self-esteem are built when they can explore and make their own decisions while being supported by peers and teachers. We also offer a safe place for children to explore and problem-solve in outdoor adventures. This strengthens the connection between children and the natural world. We are in the process of getting licensed to run a full day program for an enhanced learning experience for the children in our community!

Montessori Forest School (Snoqualmie, Wash.): Montessori Forest School is a new, private company based in Snoqualmie with classroom sites throughout King County, and currently serving two children. Montessori Forest School uses the Montessori Method and 3-year curriculum, which combines S.T.E.A.M. (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, Math) lessons with the natural world, so children can make the connection between modern day concepts and the reality of nature. We show them how to make or use today's things and understandings, and then we show them natural alternatives so they get to appreciate our planet, nature and the natural world. Things they can make themselves stimulates their imaginations and stokes the flame of ingenuity and self-esteem, while keeping a firm root on the practicalities of ecology, protecting the earth and respecting green spaces and all our environments. To provide the highest quality learning environment for our

children, our lead teachers are MACTE AMS Montessori Certified. We provide choice time to the children, presenting the Montessori materials in accordance with teacher-observed emerging teachable moments precious to each individual child. Group lessons are provided daily and include movement-encouraging songs, dance, games, forest crafts, lunch and story-time in the forest, tree climbing, health and safety. We have no-walls classroom spaces for plenty of bone-strengthening movement, set in fresh air and real sunlight so the children's teeth and bones have the chance to harness vitamins and minerals necessary to develop strength. Our outdoor mountain, river and tree views stimulate peace and calm inside the hearts of the children, help develop their eye sight and allow a sense of freedom within which to process all the information they are receiving during the lessons. We hire passionate, health-conscious, nurturing and fun teachers who represent our nature-conscious policies. We love jumping in mud puddles, seeing real elk in our parks, and climbing real trees towards independence, awareness and self-esteem.

Nurture in Nature Preschool (Tacoma, Wash.): Nurture in Nature Preschool is based at the Tacoma Nature Center, which is a facility of Metro Parks Tacoma. Our mission is to provide a high-quality early childhood environment that meets preschoolers' needs, while inspiring them to love nature. We serve 64 children ages 3-6 years during the school year in five different sections (from 64 families), and 12 pre-K students in summer school (from 12 families). With over 70 acres of natural area, several dedicated indoor and outdoor school spaces and outstanding teachers and staff, this hands-on learning program allows children to learn and grow at their own pace. We encourage their endless curiosity and plant the seeds to help them become lifelong learners. Our emergent child-inspired curriculum often follows the changing seasons. Although traditional academic skills and opportunities are part of our school, they are definitely not the focus. Our philosophy is that preschoolers grow and learn how to be part of a community through play, discovery and learning. When their brain is ready, they will naturally gravitate towards more academic pursuits.

Olympic Nature Experience (Sequim, Wash.): Olympic Nature Experience is a non-profit located in Sequim, Washington surrounded by the beautiful Olympic Peninsula. Our preschool programs run five days a week and serve 42 children, ages 3-6 years old, from 41 families. Several children have special needs such as speech impairment, giftedness or possible spectrum disorders. Our organization also runs programs for children ages 18 months to 12 years including a family play group, summer camps, after school programs and homeschool enrichment classes.

The backbone of our school's philosophy has developed from Wilderness Awareness School's nature connection model, which uses children's passions, emergent curriculum and flexible activities to educate, inspire and empower children. To ensure our children are meeting Early Learning standards and are Kindergarten Ready, we have created an in house Waldorf-inspired curriculum and an educational framework that incorporates the five standard Head Start domains. We added our own sixth domain, called Earth Wisdom which incorporates ideas of connection to place, critical thinking, community building and personal empowerment. By connecting children with their local environment, they are learning the age appropriate math, literacy and cognition skills but with an everyday context that gives the world around them greater relevance.

Polliwog Preschool: Mercer Slough Environmental Education Center (Bellevue, Wash): Polliwog Preschool is a play- and nature-based preschool at the Mercer Slough Environmental Education Center in Bellevue. Now in its ninth year, the program is a collaboration between the Pacific Science Center in Seattle and the City of Bellevue. At Polliwog, we believe that the natural world is an ideal catalyst for discovery and an amazing medium to lay a foundation for the love of learning. While we have indoor classroom space, we spend 50-90% of our day exploring the outdoors in the 320-acre wetland park. Polliwog Preschool has three part-time

classes, with 12 children age 3-5 years old in each class. We currently serve 36 total families. Last year, we were only able to offer enrollment space to about 50% of families who applied.

Polliwog Preschool uses the natural world as the guiding theme to frame our core curriculum areas of science, art, music, math, language and literacy. The program is play-based and student-driven with a combination of activity choices, discovery explorations, and specific activities that relate to each week's theme. With a 320 acre wetland as our classroom, "Polliwogs" have the opportunity to hike through the forest, dip for creatures in a pond, investigate the flow of a stream, wander through meadows and bounce on a bog. While we're not sure whether licensure is right for our program, we've enjoyed the advisory group discussions about best practices, and look forward to another year of participation in the pilot program.

Saplings & Cedars: Squaxin Island Child Development Center (Shelton, Wash.): Squaxin Island Child Development Center is a for-profit entity owned by the non-profit Squaxin Island Tribe. The center expanded their license capacity to begin offering Saplings & Cedars. We began Saplings & Cedars as our initial program for the Outdoor Preschool Pilot on October 1, 2018 with 12 children, ages 4-5. The program has been so popular that we will be adding an afternoon session in November or December. Saplings & Cedars is unique to the pilot project as it is part of an already licensed child care center through DCYF. The updated license capacity to accommodate the outdoor class is 130. The center is located on property owned by the Squaxin Island Tribe. It is located near a natural forested area with two fresh water streams with a "culturally modified tree" as the focal point of the building. The site is surrounded by tall maple, fir and cedar trees and offers ground cover similar to a rain forest. Salmon return to the two streams each year as a part of their natural life cycle.

Our program celebrates and honors what "Mother-Earth" gives us. We have our own garden beds where the children actively engage in the planting and harvesting of crops that are used in our food service program. We partner closely with the Squaxin Island Community Garden staff and Community Development staff to participate in recycling and composting. Fruit trees were donated to establish our own orchard. The pumpkins we grow are used each October for National Pumpkin Day, and apples are harvested to make cider. One of the highlights of our program is the annual Salmon Ceremony. The children are actively engaged in drumming, dancing and singing about the arrival of the first salmon. Tribal elders and leaders come and share stories about the life of the salmon and the children honor the salmon by respectfully returning part of the salmon back to the water to let other salmon know they are welcome here.

Although we use Creative Curriculum to guide our curriculum, we still practice emergent studies/curriculum to support the needs and interests of the children. There is a blend of group and individual exploration and play. Each day opens with a group safety meeting and concludes with a group hike into the forested area, before debriefing and returning to the classrooms for the afternoon, as most children are here for the entire day. It is the intent of this program to inspire exploration and making connections to the natural world.

Sequoia's Farm and Forest School (Olympia, Wash.): Sequoia's Farm and Forest School was established in September 2019 on a small 4.11 acre farm with five children attending half-day. These children are private pay and associated with Sequoia's Treehouse Children's Center. The emphasis at Sequoia's Farm and Forest School is on the physical, cognitive and social/emotional growth of children ages 4-7. Children are presented with experiences allowing them to discover and explore their world through art, science, music, dramatic play and the natural environment. Our focus is allowing children the opportunity to explore and spend time in the outdoors as much as possible through free play and structured learning activities such as gardening, cooking, canning, woodworking, raising and caring for animals, and building outdoor skills. Our goal is to promote every

child's individual development using an appropriate mix of academic and recreational activities. Not only are there over four acres of land in which to roam, grow food and raise animals (there are currently nine chickens that have been raised from chicks), there are also many different fruit trees, and plenty of berries. In addition, there is a stand of trees in which to explore and build a future tree house (and to plant more trees to create a mini-forest).

Sequoia's Treehouse Children's Center is a nature- and Reggio Emilia-inspired early learning center located in Olympia, Washington, and is approximately four minutes driving time to Sequoia's Farm and Forest School. A mini-bus was purchased for additional field trips off the farm and for transportation to and from Sequoia's Treehouse Children's Center. Sequoia's Treehouse Children's Center was established in 2015, and currently has approximately 115 children attending ages six weeks to six years. The ultimate goal at both programs is to instill a connection to the planet in children at an early age, teach the old ways and the skills that are becoming lost, including where food comes from, build an understanding of our connection to every creature and the earth and teach children about choices and the endless opportunities for growth. Our program is full of choices, open-ended materials, risk-taking, teacher-guided assistance with building empathy, mutual respect and boundaries, all while helping children believe and trust in their own capabilities.

Tiny Trees Preschool (several locations throughout King County, Wash.): Tiny Trees is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit based in Seattle with classroom sites throughout King County. Over 300 children, ages 3-5 years old, attend daily classes. Tiny Trees uses the High Scope curriculum, which incorporates evidence-based practices to provide the highest quality learning environment for our children. High Scope is a preferred curriculum of Head Start and Seattle Preschool Program facilities. Tiny Trees also makes preschool affordable by eliminating the cost of building, renovating and maintaining a child care facility. We break down the schoolhouse walls and take the classroom outdoors. This means that instead of spending a huge amount on bricks and mortar, we spend money on what matters – hiring and supporting great teachers. Tiny Trees is a scale up of an innovative, proven concept. Started in Europe, outdoor preschools have shown to be healthier, more affordable and able to reach great academic outcomes. Tiny Trees is modeled after outdoor preschools in Norway, Germany and Denmark, three countries where the weather can get really cold. Tiny Trees also helps kids enter Kindergarten ready to thrive. We help children learn to read, succeed at math and explore the wild where they receive both a world class science education and a gleefully muddy childhood – one full of play, exploration and wonder in the great outdoors. Full day classes are a must for working families. Becoming a licensed child care provider would allow Tiny Trees the ability to offer students and families a higher quality environment, improved health and safety and greater ability for low income families to work.

Washington Outdoor School (Roslyn and Ellensburg, Wash.): The Washington Outdoor School is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit that serves children from 2.5 to 6 years old in morning programs, and children in grades K-5 in after school programs. Our programs currently serve approximately 55 children from 50 families in Kittitas County during fall, winter and spring seasons, and we maintain a low student-to-teacher ratio (we also offer seven weeks of summer camp serving preschool through elementary age students). Our all-outdoor settings include forested trails – some more maintained than others (we come across fallen trees at times) – sandstone outcroppings and seasonal creeks and streams in Roslyn. In Ellensburg, Helen McCabe State Park has a large pond and is skirted by a rushing creek, which makes its way to the Yakima River through a canyon. The landscape changes quite dramatically through the seasons. Access is easy along parts of the pond trail in late fall through winter, but the difficulty increases in the spring when grasses grow taller than the children. Two Crack Oak trees in the park are favorite places for the children to climb, and we spend a lot of time in and around them throughout the year. It is not unusual for us to walk more than a mile a day in both locations and

sometimes much more than that in Roslyn. Drop off and pick up occur in local parks, Helen McCabe State Park (Ellensburg) and Centennial Park (Roslyn).

Our mission is to cultivate a child's sense of wonder and foster a sense of stewardship through immersion in the natural world. We believe that interacting with nature encourages a sense and knowledge of place, awakens curiosity and creates healthy minds and bodies. Our work is based on the core values of strong communities, equal access to outdoor adventures and stewardship of our natural world. Our approach to education is child-interest led with an emphasis on experiencing each day in the moment – noticing changes and building on previous experiences. The natural world provides our curriculum for the day. We are about exploration, play, building positive relationships with each other and the world around us, and experiencing what the natural world has to offer, which cultivates an attitude of joy and wonder within each child. We infuse experiences with relevant books, stories, songs and activities. These experiences can include journal writing, crafts and, in Roslyn, planting and tending to garden spaces. Being licensed by DCYF would validate our type of program and communicate to families that programs like the Washington Outdoor School provide viable preschool options for Kindergarten readiness. We seek to provide equal access to outdoor adventures, but many families in Kittitas County struggle to afford early learning programs for their children. As a DCYF-licensed program, families could use state subsidies toward tuition, which would allow our program to better serve our economically diverse community.

Adventures in Licensing

Benefit-Risk Assessment in Washington State's Outdoor Preschool Licensing Pilot

NARA | September 25, 2019

Aliza Yair
Debbie Groff
Tyler Farmer

www.dcyf.wa.gov



Who's in the Audience?

Licensors, Administrators, Lawyers, Others?



What's Cooking in the Mud-Kitchen?



- Introducing “outdoor preschool”
- The benefits of nature-based programs for children
- The Outdoor Preschool Pilot in Washington State
- Outdoor preschool licensing standards
 - *Benefit-risk assessment*
- Monitoring outdoor preschools
- Implications of nature-based programs in your state/region



Introducing Outdoor Preschool to the Public

Video: Cedarsong on Nightline https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nqFwgHLK_0c



Myth-Busting

Don't go outside in the cold, you'll get sick.

Better instruction happens indoors.

Children have more injuries outside.



Benefits of Outdoor, Nature-Based Early Childhood Education



Better physical development

- Strength, eyesight, hearing, bone structure, immune system and lifelong interest in physical activities.

Better cognitive development

- Executive functioning, self-regulation, self-esteem, observation and problem-solving, abstract reasoning and focus.

Better social-emotional development

- Independence, collaboration, reduced anxiety/depression, empathy and care for nature.

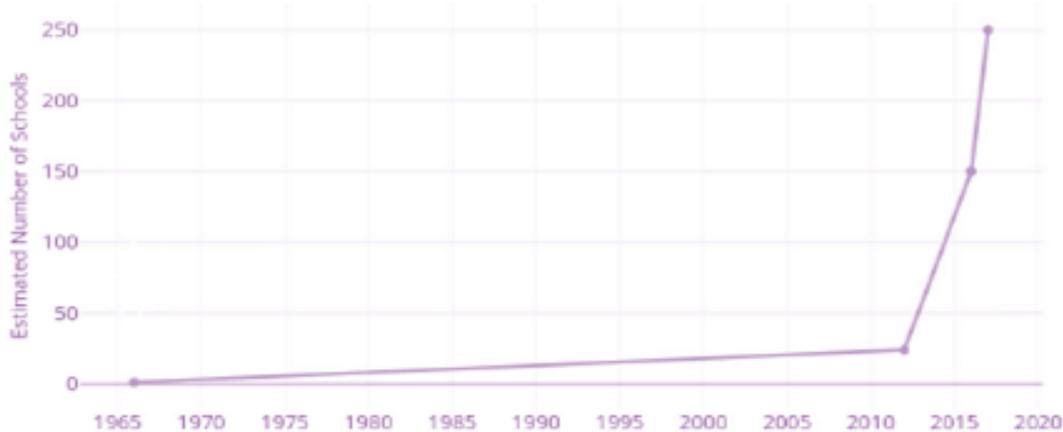
STEM learning

Educator/adult well-being



Nature-Based ECE National Context (Natural Start Alliance Survey)

Estimated number of nature-based preschools and forest kindergartens in the U.S. by year



As of 2017, at least 250 nature preschools and forest kindergartens operate in 43 states. Many are concentrated in the Pacific Northwest, California, the Upper Midwest, the Mid-Atlantic and New England. Although previous national surveys employed different methodologies, the data suggests that the number and rate of growth of nature preschools and forest kindergartens in the U.S. have greatly increased in the last five years.

Children enrolled in nature preschools or kindergarten programs by race, ethnicity or origin (some children belong to more than one category)

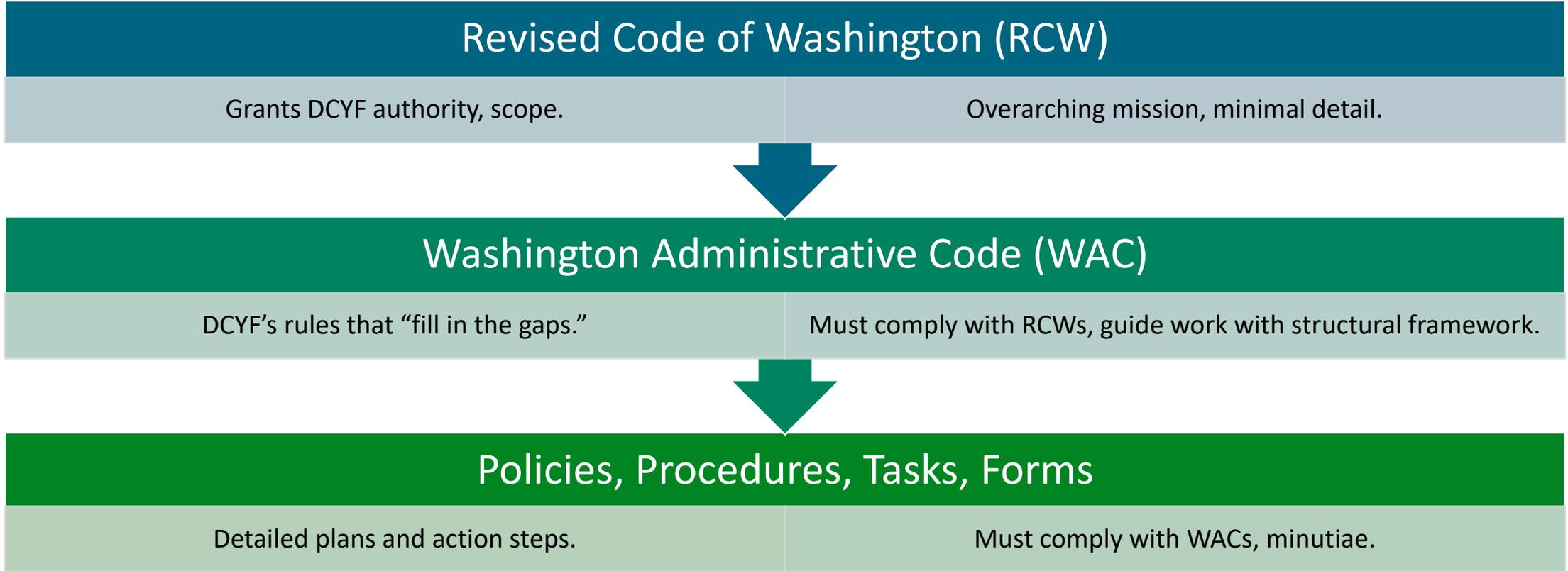
Race, Ethnicity or Origin	Average (Mean) Reported Percentage
White	83%
Hispanic, Latino or Spanish Origin	7%
Asian	6%
Black or African American	3%
Middle Eastern or North African	1%
American Indian or Alaska Native	1%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	<1%
Other Race, Ethnicity or Origin	1%

<http://naturalstart.org/bright-ideas/nature-preschools-and-kindergartens-record-numbers-us>

Child Care and Early Learning Laws and Rules



Licensing Authority



Washington State Licensing Context

- The Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) currently regulates:
 - Center-based child care
 - Family home-based child care
 - School-aged child care (before and after school)
 - License-exempt providers

- WAC Chapter 110-300 – aligned center and family home standards

Duties

RCW 43.216.020

(1) The department shall implement state early learning policy [...] The department's duties include, but are not limited to, the following:

(e) To safeguard and promote the health, safety, and well-being of children receiving child care and early learning assistance, which is paramount over the right of any person to provide such care;

(h) To standardize [...] licensing criteria, so that programs can function in an integrated fashion;



Duties, *Continued*

RCW 43.216.250

It shall be the secretary's duty with regard to licensing under this chapter:

(6) To issue, revoke, or deny licenses to agencies pursuant to this chapter.

Unlawful Care

RCW 43.216.365

Any agency operating without a license shall be guilty of a misdemeanor.

What is an Agency?

RCW 43.216.010

(1) "Agency" means any person, firm, partnership, association, corporation, or facility that provides child care and early learning services outside a child's own home and includes the following irrespective of whether there is compensation to the agency:

(a) "Child day care center" means an agency that regularly provides early childhood education and early learning services for a group of children for periods of less than twenty-four hours;

(c) "Family day care provider" means a child care provider who regularly provides early childhood education and early learning services for not more than twelve children in the provider's home in the family living quarters;



What is NOT an Agency?

RCW 43.216.010

(2) An "Agency" does not include the following:

- (a) Relatives
- (b) Legal guardians
- (c) Friends and neighbors (FFN)
- (d) Parents on cooperative basis (date night trade)
- (e) Programs under four hours ("nursery schools")
- (f) Schools
- (g) Seasonal camps
- (h) Drop-in child care when parent remains on-site
- (i) Boys and Girls clubs
- (j) Government operated (local, state, federal care)
- (k) Tribal care on tribal lands
- (l) Military care on military base
- (m) Early learning and support services programs



Child Care and Early Learning Laws and Rules *Outdoor Preschool Edition*



Washington Outdoor Preschool Pilot Bill

2017: Public advocacy for a four-year pilot to “waive or adapt” licensing requirements and explore quality improvement for outdoor, nature-based preschools (aka “outdoor preschools”).

- At the time, more than 40 outdoor preschools operating as license-exempt “nursery schools” (under four hours).
- License-exempt also means no DCYF support: not eligible to receive subsidies for low-income families; participate in the state’s QRIS; or public pre-k programs.



Duties

RCW 43.216.740

Outdoor preschool

(1) The department shall establish a pilot project to license outdoor, nature-based early learning and child care programs. The pilot project shall commence beginning August 31, 2017, and conclude June 30, 2021.

(2) The department shall adopt rules to implement the pilot project and may waive or adapt licensing requirements when necessary to allow for the operation of outdoor classrooms.

Duties, *Continued*

RCW 43.216.740

Outdoor preschool

(3) [...] the department shall explore options for developing a quality rating and improvement system for outdoor preschools.

(4) The department shall select up to ten pilot locations during the first year of the pilot project. Beginning August 31, 2018, additional outdoor, nature-based early learning and child care programs may apply to participate in the pilot project.



Who is Covered?



RCW 43.216.740

(7) For purposes of this section, "*outdoor, nature-based early learning and child care program*" means an agency-offered program operated primarily outdoors in which children are enrolled on a regular basis for three or more hours per day.



Outdoor Preschools: Who is Covered?

RCW 43.216.740

- Nature-based
- Agency-offered program
- Operated primarily outdoors
- Children enrolled on regular basis
- 3+ hours per day
- Preschool-aged children



Further Defining Outdoor Preschool in Washington

0005 (95) “Outdoor preschool”, or “outdoor, nature-based early learning and child care program” means an entity-offered program operated primarily outdoors in which children are enrolled on a regular basis for three or more hours per day. For purposes of this section, “primarily” means a participant must operate an outdoor classroom for more than fifty percent of the program hours per day. Such programs may be offered as:

- An outdoor component of a licensed early learning program; or
- A program operating entirely outdoors on private or public park land, with or without a permanently located outdoor classroom.”

0010 (1) (a) “The child care or early learning program must be provided with a philosophy, curriculum, and organizational practices that provide developmentally appropriate early childhood education and environmental education;”



Legal Structure of Pilot Program

Revised Code of Washington (RCW)

RCW 43.216.740 authorizes and funds the pilot project, requires DCYF to promulgate rules.



Washington Administrative Code (WAC)

Chapter 110-300D WAC is a set of rules used to administer the pilot project. Require each pilot participant to sign contract.



Outdoor Classroom Agreement

Contract between the program and DCYF. Requires each pilot participant to follow draft rules, our outdoor preschool pilot standards.



Outdoor Preschool Pilot Standards

“Touchstone Standards.” Draft licensing rules that allow DCYF to test rules during pilot but allows change-on-the-fly flexibility.



Social Responsibility

By licensing outdoor preschools, we can:

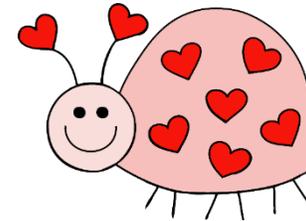
1. Increase options for all families.
2. Increase access for families that need subsidies, regulated or full-day care.
3. Promote connections to nature for more children.



Questions?



What Do We Have in Common?



Pilot Project Overview



Reporting to Legislature

Pilot Project Research Questions

Can the outdoor preschool model help expand access to early learning programs?

- Enrollment and waitlists
- Family surveys
- Cost analysis

Can the outdoor preschool model help expand access to quality early learning programs?

- Injury/illness reports
- Attendance
- Quality measures: ECERS-3, CLASS, ERS-3i

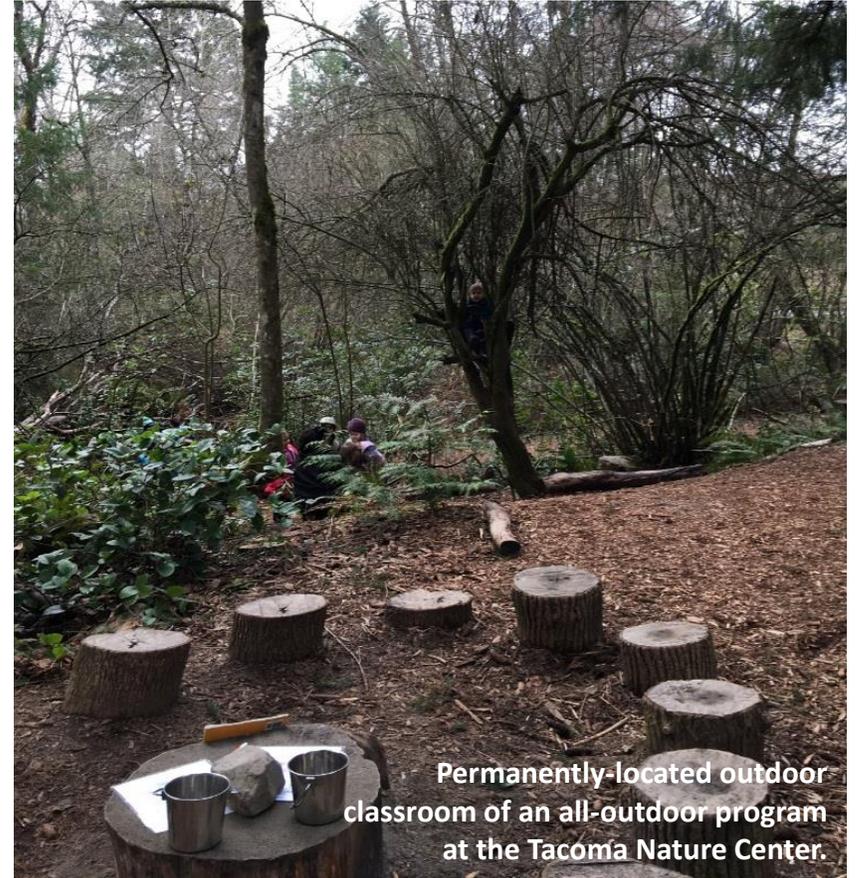
How can the outdoor preschool model participate in a state QRIS?

- Potential alternative quality measures and coaching needs



Participant Overview

- **Advisory Group**
 - Directors of current programs
 - Includes up to 10 pilot sites (implementing group) and others (observation group)
- **Program Types**
 - Nature preschools (with indoor facility)
 - May be already licensed
 - Nature center-based programs
 - All-outdoor programs
 - With or without a permanently located outdoor classroom
 - Gardens/farming included



Permanently-located outdoor classroom of an all-outdoor program at the Tacoma Nature Center.



Timeline: August 2017 – August 2021



Outdoor Preschool Licensing Standards



Outdoor Preschool Pilot Standards Development



Best Practices and Research



- Natural Start Alliance Best Practice Standards
- National Outdoor Leadership School
- Outward Bound
- USFS
- Leave-No-Trace
- Washington State Department of Health
- Washington State Department of Agriculture
- Research into “risky” play, benefits and potential injury, nature education
 - Mariana Brussoni (British Columbia)
 - Ellen Sandseter (Norway)
 - David Sobel (Antioch, NH)



Outdoor Preschool – Specialized Standards

- Professional requirements for environmental education **and** early childhood education
- Smaller group size and ratios (maximum 16, 1:6)
- Teaching focus on boundaries and self-regulation
- Benefit-risk assessment for new or changing environment/activity
- Policies and Procedures
 - Activities: tree-climbing, tool use and campfires.
 - Hygiene: toileting, hand-washing and eating.
 - Family Engagement: proper clothing, commitment to outdoors and environmental education.



Questions?



Approach to Risk, Risky Play and Protecting Children

- **Hazard** = a source of harm that is not obvious to the child, such that the potential for injury is hidden; or a source of harm that is greater than a child can manage to avoid.
- **Risk** = a situation in which a child can recognize and evaluate a challenge and decide on a course of action, although there is the potential for injury. In this context, risk can be necessary to support healthy child development.
- **Risky Play** = play that is thrilling, exciting and where there is a risk of physical injury. This includes play involving heights, speed, dangerous tools or near dangerous elements (e.g., fall into something).
- **Benefit-Risk Assessment** = a process of identifying hazards and risky play elements in early childhood outdoor play and making plans to mitigate children's risk of injury while maintaining the developmental benefits for children.



0471 Outdoor Preschool Benefit-Risk Assessments, Risk Management Policies and Waivers (1)

(1) Outdoor preschool providers must have and implement benefit-risk assessments and risk management plans, reviewed by the department, and under the following circumstances:

- (a) Selection of a site
- (b) For different seasons as conditions change
- (c) For risky play activities
- (d) To provide guidance for staffing and staff policies.



0471 Outdoor Preschool Benefit-Risk Assessments, Risk Management Policies and Waivers (2)

(2) Outdoor preschools must have risk management policies and procedures to address potential hazards and risks of their nature-based program, including:

- (a) Encountering pets and wildlife
- (b) Interacting with strangers
- (c) Campfire activities
- (d) Water activities or supervision near bodies of water
- (e) Using an emergency shelter
- (f) Required clothing
- (g) Using any public facilities or buildings
- (h) Climbing natural features
- (i) Foraging or Egg Collection and Consumption
- (j) Encountering poisonous species
- (k) Use of sharp tools
- (l) Missing child protocols
- (m) Toileting
- (n) Hand-washing



0471 Outdoor Preschool Benefit-Risk Assessments, Risk Management Policies and Waivers (3-6)

- (3) Parents or guardians must sign an outdoor preschool risk waiver that acknowledges and accepts the potential hazards and risks associated with the outdoor preschool program.
- (4) A copy of the signed waiver is kept with the child's records.
- (5) Staff must be trained on the applicable outdoor preschool benefit-risk assessments, and risk management policies and procedures.
- (6) Staff must consider the daily health and safety needs of children and staff.



Tree Climbing in the Squaxin Forest

Risk

Benefit



Up high, could fall

Smooth roots, could be slippery

Only room for one, could be conflict

One teacher stands nearby to assist

Discuss risk of slipping and need for turn-taking with children

Surrounded by cultural practice of cedar bark harvesting

Confidence and competence from "risky" activity of tree climbing

Familiarity with root systems and bark texture



Questions?



Risky Play – Research and Reflection



Reflect: What are the hazards and risks of your environment? (i.e. weather, wild animals)

How would you manage those challenges? (i.e. shelter, clothing, supervision)



Addressing DCYF Liability

Programmatically

- Teacher qualifications, training and experience (e.g., two years in nature-based education)
- Site-specific policies based on benefit-risk assessment
- Extreme weather emergency plans
- Requirements for campfires, water supervision, missing children protocols, etc.

Legally

- Pilot is voluntary
- Licensing mechanism: program must follow rules, contract and standards
- Risk waiver for parents to sign is required
- Land use agreement required
- Program insurance required (\$100,000 per occurrence)



Licensing and Monitoring in Practice

- Mirror child care licensing – just tweak to fit outside
 - Specialized standards (e.g. extreme weather plans, increased supervision)
 - Applications (e.g. maps and back-up staff)
 - Data collection systems (e.g. paper, Excel, attendance, filing benefit-risk assessments and policies)
 - Licensing and monitoring cycles (e.g., initial, initial to full, annual unannounced monitoring)



Licensing and Monitoring in Practice – Staffing

- Need specialized licensing staff
 - Value outdoor, nature-based play
 - Familiarity and comfort in the outdoors
 - Gives staff the ability to check that risk management plans are reasonable for the area
 - Specific gear – rain gear, boots, snow shoes, waterproof data gathering systems
 - Specific trainings – value of field time – our special “boot camp”



Pilot Licensing Process



Two licensed outdoor preschool programs

- Met all initial licensing requirements
- Licensed in early September 2019

Three applications in process

- For programs with no facility
- Initial licensing inspection in October 2019

Three programs receiving support for the application



How Would This Work for You?

Weather and environmental considerations

- Clothing, shelter, emergency preparedness?

Legal context

- Government-run program, public-private partnership?

Urban and rural area options

- Priority areas, ideal opportunities, community input?

Build off existing standards

- Camp guidelines, school-age standards, using the Washington standards?

Partners in your area

- Park directors, child care providers?



Questions | Feedback



Recommended Resources

- Last Child in the Woods - Richard Louv
- Nature Preschools and Forest Kindergartens: The Handbook for Outdoor Learning - David Sobel (Editor)
- Children and Nature Network
- Natural Start Alliance



Thank you!

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<https://www.dcyf.wa.gov/about/government-community/advisory/opp>





Nature contact and children's health: a systematic review

Amber L. Fyfe-Johnson, ND, PhD; Marnie F. Hazlehurst, MS; Greg N. Bratman, PhD; Rick Thomas, MESM, MS; Sara Park Perrins, EdM; Kimberly Garrett, MPH, Edgar Marcuse, MD, MPH, FAAP; Pooja S. Tandon, MD, MPH, FAAP



Background:

- Daily outdoor play is encouraged by the AAP; exposure to nature may offer independent benefits for children's health.
- COVID-19 related school closures and activity restrictions have highlighted inequities in opportunities for children to play outdoors.
- The lack of accessible, systematically reviewed evidence on the effects of nature contact has been a barrier to advocacy by pediatricians and the health care community.

Objective:

- To conduct a systematic review to evaluate and aggregate the evidence regarding the impacts of nature contact on children's health and well-being.

Financial disclosures: None.

Funding source: BestStart Washington

Contact information: afj@wsu.edu



Methods:

- We followed Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines for systematic reviews.
- Database search used PubMed, CINAHL, PsycInfo, ERIC, Scopus, and Web of Science through June 2018.
- Two reviewers reached consensus for review inclusion, nature exposure category, and quality assessment using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT), a reliable and valid metric.
- Strength of evidence was determined by consensus using the MMAT, number of studies, N within each study, strength of association, consistency in results, and variability in outcomes.

Results:

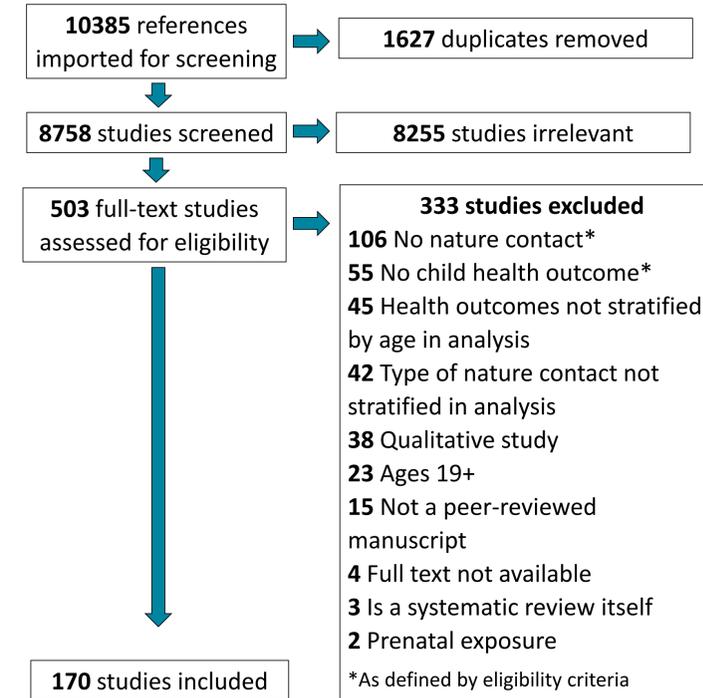
- Of the 8758 studies initially identified, 170 were included in the review.
- Most studies included were observational (n=133, 78%) and examined the presence of natural environments around residential or school locations (n=92, 54%).
- The strongest strength of evidence (moderate+) was found for physical activity and behavioral/ mental health outcomes.
- For nature exposure, the strongest strength of evidence (moderate +) was found for green space/park proximity to home and activity in greenspace.

Table. Summary of strength of evidence, stratified by health outcome.

Health outcomes	Study designs (n)				Findings	Strength of evidence ¹
	RCTs	Exp	XS	Long		
Physical activity (n=75)	1	10	58	6	All studies included physical activity or related activities (sedentary time). Objective child measures of physical activity were used in most (n=43) studies. Most studies reported positive associations (n=51), n=22 reported mixed/null associations, and n=2 reported negative associations. Studies with positive associations spanned all ages.	Moderate+
Behavioral/mental health (n=40)	2	13	15	10	Most studies (n=35) found positive associations for a range of outcomes, including attention (n=11) and depression- (n=6) related outcomes; n=5 found null or mixed results. No studies reported negative results.	Moderate+
BMI (n=27)	1	1	22	3	All studies included BMI or BMI-defined categories for adiposity status (overweight/obesity). Collectively, studies reported both positive associations (n=14) and mixed or null associations (n=11); a small number reported negative associations (n=2).	Moderate-
Cardiovascular/metabolic (n=8)	1	4	2	1	Outcomes included heart rate or heart rate variability (3), vagal tone (n=1), blood pressure (n=2), blood lipids (n=1) and HOMA-IR (n=1). Natural environments were positively associated with all outcomes, except blood lipid levels (null results).	Low+
Academic & learning (n=14)	1	6	6	1	Outcomes included tests of working memory, cognitive performance, or attention (n=6), academic performance (grades, test scores, n=4), language development (n=1), chronic absenteeism (n=1), and science knowledge (n=1). Studies found positive (n=8), mixed or nonsignificant (n=5), and negative associations (n=1).	Low+
Asthma & allergy (n=10)	0	0	9	1	Outcomes included parent-reported and physician diagnosed asthma, allergy, and related symptoms. Studies found positive (n=5), negative (n=1) and nonsignificant or mixed associations (n=4).	Low
Other health outcomes (n=19)	2	5	10	2	Outcomes were variable, with the most common being general well-being (n=5), quality of life (n=4), and diet related factors. Most studies (n=14) found beneficial associations for at least one of the outcomes examined; 5 reported null associations.	N/A

¹ Strength of evidence rated on a 7-point scale: low, low+, moderate-, moderate, moderate+, high-, high. Study design abbreviations: randomized controlled trials (RCTs); experimental study (exp); cross-sectional (XS); longitudinal (long). Note that the N's add up to more than 170 because studies were included more than once if they included health outcomes in more than one category.

Figure. PRISMA diagram



Conclusions:

- Current evidence is strongest for the associations between nature exposure and physical activity and behavioral/mental health outcomes in childhood.
- Clinicians should recommend outdoor time and nature exposure for children, especially for physical activity and behavioral/mental health.



MINOR	SERIOUS	CRITICAL
Does not require DCYF Retention	Requires an Incident/Injury Form and Appropriate Reporting Per WAC	Requires Incident/Injury Form, Critical Incident Report via WA Compass, and Appropriate Reporting Per WAC

Injury/Incident

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Abrasion ○ Bruising ○ Open wound/cut ○ Sprain/strain/twist ○ Pain/inflammation/bump ○ Dental concern ○ Nursemaid’s elbow/wrist ○ Seizures <i>(unless resulting in serious injury)</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Injury resulting in overnight hospital stay ○ Severe neck or head injury <i>(such as a confirmed concussion)</i> ○ Choking or serious unexpected breathing problems ○ Severe bleeding ○ Shock or acute confused state ○ Sudden unconsciousness ○ Chemicals in eyes, on skin, or ingested ○ Near-drowning ○ One or more broken bones ○ Severe burn requiring professional medical care 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Fatality/near-fatality ○ Poisoning ○ Overdose of a chemical substance ○ Known media attention ○ Area Administrator’s (or their designee’s) discretion
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Steps to Take

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Review I/I received from early learning program ○ Consult with supervisor if there are concerns ○ Call Intake if any child abuse/neglect allegations ○ Fill out and retain I/I if rises to Serious ○ Return I/I to early learning program if Minor only 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Notified by Intake and/or early learning program or credible media source (all serious injuries must be called into Intake) ○ Consult with supervisor ○ Receive I/I form ○ Ensure form completed in full and accurately ○ Put I/I form licensing file 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Notified by Intake and/or early learning provider or credible media source (medication/chemical overdose, poisoning, or fatality/near fatality must be called into Intake) ○ Consult with supervisor immediately ○ Supervisor complete CIR in WA Compass ○ Area Administrator - review and forward to appropriate personnel ○ Senior Child Care Administrator - review and forward
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In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Washington State's Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) is supporting early learning and child care programs in meeting the recommendations of the Department of Health (DOH), and continuing to provide high quality programs for children and families in need. The **DOH COVID-19 Guidance for Child Care** and the **DCYF COVID-19 FAQ** have the most updated information on how child care programs can create healthy and safe environments for children and communities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Taking children outside more often and creating additional space between groups of children are some of the **recommendations** made by DOH. Bringing children outdoors into authentic natural settings provides many other benefits essential to children's learning and healthy development, and this can be achieved by creating more **naturalized learning environments** or by bringing children into an outdoor, natural environment.

This resource is intended to support early learning and child care programs to bring children to an outdoor, nature-based environment, and guide their *additional* considerations when applying for an **emergency waiver**, or an emergency child care license, to provide an outdoor, nature-based emergency programming.

Please visit **this page** for more information about COVID-19 related waivers and guidance, and you may email **emergencychildcare@dcyf.wa.gov** for more information or to apply for an emergency child care license.

These considerations follow the organization of WAC 110-300, and are based on the **Outdoor Preschool Pilot Standards**. However, the waiver process is not a replacement for the outdoor preschool pilot licensing process.

Considerations for Outdoor, Nature-Based Childcare Programs

Child Outcomes

- Benefits of outdoor and nature-based play include:
 - Improved executive functioning
 - Reduced ADHD symptoms and improved focus
 - Supported risk assessment, creativity and problem solving
 - Increased physical activity and reduced obesity
 - Improved proprioception and balance
 - Improved eyesight and hearing development
 - More space for children to spread out and greater circulation of the air
- Nature has positive impacts on adults' stress levels and well-being
- For more information, please refer to:
 - **Benefits of Connecting Children with Nature** from the **Natural Learning Initiative**.
 - **Tools and Resources** from the **Children & Nature Network** and,
 - **The International Journal of Early Childhood Environmental Education** from the **Natural Start Alliance**.

The Environment

- Ensure Access
 - If using a public park, check with the park manager in ensure the intended use is permitted.
 - Create a land use agreement with the land owner, park director or manager.
 - Consider the barriers for families, such as transportation or access to the drop off area.
- Ensure Affordance and Benefits
 - Outdoor program locations should be intentionally selected based on their affordances.
 - These may include:
 - Shade and areas for comfort or quiet, such as shielded areas
 - Opportunities to explore novel areas, native plants and wildlife, and/or to deepen their connection with a consistent location
 - Sufficient space for rigorous physical activities, such as open fields or trails for hiking
 - Loose, open-ended objects, such as rocks, sticks, sand, and logs
 - Water features, such as a stream or pond
 - Access to toileting facilities
- Hazards and Risks
 - You should not select a site with major hazards. A hazard in outdoor programming is a source of harm that is not obvious to the child, such that the potential for injury is hidden; or there is a source of harm that is greater than a child can manage to avoid, and that staff cannot control.
 - Common hazards in outdoor programming include:
 - heavily traffic roads

- extreme weather conditions
 - deep and/or swift moving water
 - toxic environmental pollutants
 - dangerous or toxic plants and animals
- Risky play (aka adventure play) may be appropriate and beneficial to children's development.
- Beneficial risks can be identified and managed by the child or a group of children, while supportive adults can ensure children are safe, learning, and enjoying themselves.
- Common risky, adventure play elements in outdoor programming include
 - Balancing or climbing on logs or other natural features
 - Sliding or running down hills
 - Lifting or carrying large branches
 - Playing or running on uneven terrain
- Prepare for the shared use of public areas and facilities.
 - Have a nearby back-up location.
 - Use cones or string to mark the boundaries of your program and/or separate groups.
 - Bring supplies to sanitize public restrooms before children's use.
- Minimize your environmental impact
 - Aim for minimal impact on the environment, do not litter or allow children to damage delicate ecosystems.
 - Ask the park's director or a naturalist for advice about your particular area, if needed.
 - Habitat restoration projects do have impact, but a positive one. See if tree-planting or weeding is a possible activity.
 - For more information, please refer to: Leave No Trace <https://lnt.org/why/7-principles/>
- Weather
 - In addition to extreme temperatures, weather considerations include high winds (above 30 mph are generally considered unsafe for pre-school aged children), poor air quality, lightning storms, and hurricanes.
 - Check the weather every morning, and inform families early if there is a need to cancel the program.
- Eating and water access
 - Consider providing children with a labeled water bottle, for their use only. This aids in reducing cross-contamination, reduces the amount of dishes, and helps staff monitor children's water intake.
 - Ensure the water source being used meeting water safety requirements.
 - Consider serving food that does not need to be refrigerated, or check that your cooler and ice packs will be able to keep food sufficiently cool, according to food safety requirements.
 - Rather than serving family-style meals, consider pre-packing lunch boxes for children and using a tarp or table cloth that is easily sanitized to provide a clean surface for eating.
- Handwashing

- All programs, including outdoor programs, should be in areas that have adequate handwashing facilities on site. If a program must operate where there are not sufficient facilities, temporary handwashing stations with running water must be set up. If you need to set up a handwashing station, ensure you are bringing a water dispenser that allows for running water, liquid soap, a bucket for the waste water, individual-use towels, and a bag for used towels.
- If soap and water are not readily available, use an alcohol-based hand gel with at least 60% alcohol and preferably fragrance-free.
- Toileting
 - Public restrooms may be used, however, programs should bring supplies to sanitize surfaces before children's use.
 - Outdoor programs, in partnership with the public park or landowner, may rent and provide a portable chemical toilet, which can be locked and designated for the program's use, only.
 - Any backcountry toileting must be done according to Leave-No-Trace guidelines, principles, and/or by the permission of a park's land manager.
 - Composting toilets are also acceptable, and should meet the DOH guidelines (<https://www.doh.wa.gov/Portals/1/Documents/Pubs/337-016.pdf>)
- Sleep and Rest
 - Finding quiet and restful spaces for children is an important consideration for child development and basic needs.
 - Programs may bring sleeping pads and sleeping bags for children and may use large tents or picnic shelters, as appropriate for their location, and increasing the space between children to 6 feet when possible.
- First aid supplies
 - First-aid kits should be on-site and immediately accessible to program staff. They are often carried in the staff's backpacks. Additional supplies may include hand-warmers (not to directly touch skin) and fire-suppression blankets.
 - Locations requiring staff trained in Wilderness First Aid may pack additional items in their first aid kits.
- Storage and carrying supplies
 - Land use agreements may include storage on-site, however programs should be careful about the security of those locations.
 - Often programs will bring all of their supplies with them, and use a cart to bring all of the necessary supplies with them. When transporting supplies, one staff person should have both hands free.
 - For adults, backpacks with hip-bands are the most supportive when carrying heavy loads
 - Children should only wear child-sized bags, preferably with a buckle across the chest, if they will be going on long walks with their own bags.

Program Administration and Oversight

- Insurance
 - Programs should ensure that their use of an outdoor, nature-based location is covered by their insurance policy.
- Parent Handbooks
 - Parents should be notified of policies and procedures that will be used in an outdoor, nature-based environment.
- Child Records
 - Programs should bring essential child information, such as emergency contact and medication authorizations on any outdoor, nature-based location.
- Emergency Preparedness
 - Provide staff and families a means to contact the facility for updates and concerns. Assure that families have provided current emergency contact information.
 - Programs should identify an emergency shelter location close to the outdoor program location to respond to a variety of emergency situations (lockdown, extreme weather, dangerous wildlife siting, etc.)
 - Programs must ensure they have access to the emergency shelter during program hours.
 - Programs must ensure a supply of extra food and clothing is kept or available at this location.

Interactions and Curriculum

- Teaching children about the pandemic
 - It is important to teach children about following health and hygiene guidelines in the nature-based setting.
 - Natural resources used by children may be collected new each day, and children should be encouraged to use and keep resources separated (e.g. making your own nest or habitat).
- Setting boundaries
 - It is important to teach children about the boundaries for play in an outdoor area “beyond the fence”. Programs may use ribbons or cones to support children in remembering the boundary.
- Freeze and return
 - Staff may establish a call, like a bird noise, that signals to children the need to freeze or return in response to a perceived danger or when going too far away from the group.
- Outdoor, Nature-based Education
 - There are many benefits and opportunities to outdoor, nature-based education. The Natural Start Alliance states “In a nature-based early education program, nature is a setting for the program and an object of study. In addition, the care and protection of nature and the environment are regarded as a key outcome of the program, along with healthy child development. Some describe these nature-based early education programs as learning in nature, about nature, and for nature.”

- Since outdoor, nature-based programs provide less man-made materials (like puzzles, books, toys, etc.) it is important that staff understand how to support children's learning with the opportunities and affordances provided by nature.
 - For more information, please refer to:
 - **The Nature-Based Professional Practice Guidebook**
 - Head Start Nature-Based Learning and Development
<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/learning-environments/article/nature-based-learning-development>
- Supervision Outdoors and During Risky Play
 - Staff must actively supervise children at all times, and should visually account for all children regularly.
 - Supervising children while climbing a natural feature (like a log, tree or boulder) may require a teacher to be in arm's reach of the child's midriff as they start to climb a few feet off the ground, effectively acting as a barrier and being able to provide support as needed.
 - Children should not be allowed to climb a feature that has an obvious hazard in the fall zone, such as sharp tree stumps or rocks, until those objects have been removed.
 - Children should not be picked up and placed into trees or on top of boulders. Instead, staff should encourage children to accept their current levels of ability as they work towards goals.
 - Campfire activities, if allowed on the property, must follow all US Forest Service guidelines for fire safety (<https://smokeybear.com/en/prevention-how-tos/campfire-safety>), and should remain small and manageable. Children should remain at least three feet away from the fire and if a child is supporting a staff member to build or tend the fire, there should be 1:1 support and supervision.
 - **Outdoor Preschool Pilot Standard 0351** is a good resource for campfire safety considerations.
- Walkie-Talkies and Phones
 - Program staff should have a way to communicate with one another, as well as with program leadership, at any time.
 - Program staff must have a way to call emergency services (like poison control or 911) if needed.

Professional Development, Training, and Requirements of Staff

- Prepare staff for outdoor safety.
 - Be aware of the hazards and risks of an outdoor location prior to bringing children there.
 - Visit the location and create safety plans to manage any hazards (see Hazards and Risks below for more information).
 - If the program is operating more than thirty minutes from emergency medical care, consider requiring a current Wilderness First Aid and CPR certificate for at least one staff member.

- Clearly establish who is responsible for bringing sufficient water, food, clothing, hygiene and sanitary supplies.
- Develop plans to have coverage for additional staff to work in the event of increased staff absences. If you need a substitute, The Imagine Institute oversees the **Early Care and Education Substitute Pool**.
- Prepare staff for outdoor, nature-based education.
 - Outdoor and environmental education training or experience for lead teachers is preferred.
 - Information about parks or natural areas can often be found on the State's Parks website <https://parks.state.wa.us/281/Find-a-Park> or if visiting a city or county park, please visit the relevant website to find out more.
 - Create shared expectations about routines, policies and procedures.
 - **Outdoor Preschool Pilot Standard** 0471 has a list of outdoor, nature-based activities that may require a policy or procedure, which should be based on the benefit-risk assessment of the activity and the location.
 - Staff should have or be supplied with the clothing and gear appropriate for the weather.
- Staffing, ratios and supervision
 - The staff-to-child ratios for outdoor, nature-based programming should depend on children's age and developmental levels, as well as the hazards and risks in the location.
 - A 2:12, or 3:18 ratio of staff to children is generally considered best practice for preschool age children (2.5 – 6 years old).
 - Programs operating within ¼ mile of a body of water and/or with water play in shallow water should have staff who can swim and life-saving equipment appropriate to the body of water.
 - If activities will occur in a body of water that is more than 24 inches deep at the lowest point, a lifeguard (or staff with a lifeguard certificate) must be present, along with appropriate life-saving equipment.

Family Engagement

- Communicate with families about health and safety in the outdoors
 - Communicate in advance with families about the positive impacts of nature, the health and safety precautions being taken in the outdoor program.
 - Use these conversations to learn about families' experiences and concerns about being outdoors, and create culturally responsive practices.
- Ensure children are dressed for the weather
 - Children must be dressed appropriately for the weather and activities.
 - Have extra clothing available in case families forget or can't afford the appropriate clothing.
 - REI has a great resource **here** for understanding the safest way to dress.
- Communicate with families about your location
 - Families may need to arrange alternative drop-off or pick-up times, and should know where you plan to be in advance.



Reduce risk
of disease
and improve
health during
COVID-19—
and beyond

Considerations for Child Care Guidance¹

GET OUTSIDE!

This document offers considerations to agencies, including state, county, and municipal regulators, and quality improvement assessors, offering guidance for the operation of child care centers during COVID-19, with a focus on keeping children healthy by encouraging and supporting increased time outside.

Risk of spreading COVID-19 may be reduced if children and adults spend more time outside. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) has issued guidance encouraging time outdoors to mitigate transmission of the virus in child care settings. Studies suggest that exposure to sunlight rapidly deactivates the virus in the air and on surfaces. Open-air spaces are less likely to concentrate the virus than confined indoor spaces and outdoor moving air disperses the virus, lowering the risk of transmission.

Decades of research also show that spending time outside in nature supports healthy child development by increasing physical activity, supporting healthy eating through hands-on gardening, reducing stress, and enhancing social-emotional development. For evidence supporting enhanced outdoor spaces at child care centers, see [Benefits of Engaging Children with Nature](#) and this [Research Brief](#).

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the potential health benefits of regular time outside, particularly as child care centers seek to reduce disease transmission and keep businesses viable. Considerations are based on a review of COVID-related guidance for child care from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), AAP guidance for child care and preschools, a review of state COVID-19 guidance from 18 states, and interviews with selected child care regulators, advocates, and public health experts. These suggestions may support the development of more explicit guidance for using outdoor spaces at child care centers as an immediate means of mitigating COVID-19 transmission and in recognition of the long-term benefits of spending time outdoors.

Encourage Child Care Providers to Spend Time Outdoors

To date, state child care guidance related to COVID-19 has mainly focused on health and safety issues related to indoor spaces of child care facilities. While this is critical, current evidence suggests that increasing child care time outside is a viable strategy to reduce the risk of virus transmission. AAP's COVID-19-related guidance notes "indoor spaces are more risky than outdoor spaces," and outdoors "can and should be used to increase the space ... for each child." AAP's advice for preschools goes even farther, describing outdoors as a high priority strategy because it is hard to perfectly execute mask wearing and social distancing with younger age groups. Further, CDC's COVID-19 guidance for children states that "indoor spaces are more risky than outdoor spaces, where it might be harder to keep children apart and there is less ventilation."

Based on prevailing public health guidance, some states are currently encouraging more time outdoors during COVID-19, including [Oregon](#), [Washington](#), [New Mexico](#), [Kansas](#), [California](#), and [Colorado](#). Supportive guidance from state regulatory agencies is a crucial tool to help child care providers feel confident in moving activities substantially outdoors during the pandemic. Therefore, regulators may consider incorporating language in official guidance documents to codify the importance of the outdoors as a COVID-19 mitigation strategy. Guidance may be as direct as "Increase time spent outdoors," as in Colorado, or include stronger encouragement such as that provided by Kansas to "consider moving the majority of indoor learning activities outdoors." Creating

¹ This document is produced by the National Wildlife Federation's Early Childhood Health Outdoors (ECHO) program and North Carolina State University's Natural Learning Initiative (NLI). It is one of two, targeting child care providers and regulators respectively, addressing COVID-19 transmission reduction in child care facilities by increasing time outside. A third document presents the case for outside time as a broad strategy for reducing risk of COVID-19 spread for children and accompanying adults.

online, state-sanctioned resources specifically focused on outdoor use can further justify children being outside for a substantial portion of the day. This may be as simple as a declaration of the positive health impacts of increasing time outside or as complete as Washington's [6-page guidance document](#) for temporary outside programs authorized during the pandemic.

As regulators develop guidance to support time outdoors as a transmission reduction strategy in child care, the CDC, AAP, state health agencies, and other prominent public health institutions can play a pivotal role in explicitly supporting more time outdoors as a COVID-19 transmission reduction strategy.

Facilitate the Healthy Use of Child Care Outdoor Settings

The following suggestions may aid child care regulatory agencies in providing guidance that supports outdoor play and learning while reducing health risks. By considering the suggestions below, regulators may facilitate more practical, frequent, and comfortable outdoor activities at child care centers, while continuing to follow prevailing COVID-19 public health recommendations.

Mask use. The use of masks/face coverings should follow local and state guidance and regulations. For child care providers, there is general consensus about the importance of using masks, which may be reflected in [state policy guidance](#). Currently, there is no consensus from public health officials on guidance for mask use in young children (birth to 8), with the exception of clear consensus to *NOT use face coverings on babies and children under age two*

because of the danger of suffocation. While the CDC encourages the use of masks on younger children "[when feasible](#)," they also [recognize](#) that "younger children (e.g., preschool or early elementary aged) may be unable to wear a mask properly, particularly for an extended period." State child care regulators and providers would benefit from more clarity from public health experts on mask-wearing for children age two and up, in this case in relation to the use of outdoor settings where open air and UV rays from [sunlight](#) may reduce risk of COVID-19 transmission. In the meantime, regulators may refer to the best state and national public health guidance on mask use, while encouraging compatible strategies to reduce COVID-19 transmission described in this resource.

Create groupings or "cohorts." Both AAP and CDC suggest establishing stable groups of children and adult(s), called cohorts, as a strategy to reduce the risk of community spread originating from child care facilities. As AAP comments, "The best strategy is keeping smaller class ratios and cohort grouping throughout the day." The CDC recommends: "If possible, child care classes should include the same group each day, and the same child care providers should remain with the same group each day." While there is not consensus on the need for physical distancing of individual children within cohorts, child care regulators can at least encourage the use of a cohort approach to prevent mixing between established groups while adhering to local or state guidelines for physical distancing, masks, and sanitation.

Regulators may recommend a variety of strategies that encourage providers to utilize the outdoors and maintain



Linear pollinator garden of perennial flowering plants offers endless fascination and motivation to learn for young children.—NLI

separation *between cohorts*. One strategy is to encourage providers to maintain physical separation of 6 feet between cohorts when outside, as is recommended in [Washington State](#). If there is adequate space in outdoor settings, encourage providers to subdivide space to include several ‘learning settings’ where multiple cohorts may spend time outside simultaneously while maintaining physical distance. These learning settings, which could each serve a distinct cohort at a particular time, can include lawns, outdoor classrooms, sand play, water play, vegetable gardens, or many other [activity setting ideas](#). To facilitate cohort separation and create distinct settings, outdoor space may be subdivided through physical or visual partitions (e.g., transparent shower curtains, fabric, snow fencing). Colored T-shirts or existing classroom names could further help children distinguish groups and help providers prevent cohort mixing.

Managing children’s movement outdoors. To facilitate cohort separation, regulators can encourage providers to establish easy-to-follow routes using physical or visual partitions (e.g., cones, flagging) to define movement between learning settings along designated pathways that are wide enough for groups to move quickly, in one direction. Adjustments to physical outdoor space may be complemented by establishing processes and timing for entering and exiting buildings and traveling between settings, thereby allowing providers to spend more time outside safely while minimizing risk of cohort mixing. By further subdividing the outdoor space with staggered timing, the CDC recommendation for “[staggering playground times](#)” can be followed while still encouraging more frequent use of the outdoors.

Handwashing stations. The CDC stresses the importance of handwashing with soap and potable running water, and recommends soap and water over the use of hand sanitizer. Regulators can encourage providers to set up outdoor handwashing stations including a large water dispenser (5- or 10-gallon) with soap and paper towels located nearby, with regular handwashing routines (e.g., when moving between learning settings). Hand hygiene advice is available from the [CDC](#).

Outdoor sanitation and disinfection. The CDC’s child care guidance for materials that may be used in outdoor settings states: “Routinely clean, sanitize, and disinfect surfaces and objects that are frequently touched, especially toys and games” and “Toys that cannot be cleaned and sanitized should not be used.” However, there is still an open question about the use of natural materials such as logs, sticks, sand, and rocks that may be of lower risk. For example, to avoid confusion about sand play, the CDC accepts the presence of sand and requires washing hands after use but not disinfection of sand. Neither does the [CDC](#) recommend disinfection of wooden surfaces (play structures, benches, tables) or



Open area with mud kitchen, gathering place, and rain barrel/plant care center accommodates independent groups of active children.—NLI

groundcovers (mulch, sand). Natural materials may be of lesser concern for virus transmission overall, but additional guidance from public health experts regarding expectations on the cleaning of natural play materials is needed.

For outdoor play equipment, the CDC indicates that [outdoor play areas](#) generally require routine cleaning, but do *not* require disinfection. Cleaning efforts should be focused on plastic or metal high-touch surfaces where hands frequently make direct contact, like grab bars and railings. The CDC recognizes that it is not practical to encourage or require disinfection of entire playground structures or sidewalks.

Encourage Outdoor Enhancements

If existing child care outdoor spaces are to be used for a longer portion of the day, they need to be healthy, comfortable, and engaging. To achieve this, regulatory agencies can encourage creative use of outdoor space that reduces health risks and encourages more time spent outside.

Low-cost enhancements for healthy play and learning.

Outdoor spaces need to provide a variety of opportunities for play and learning to keep children (and providers) creatively engaged outside day after day. State child care agencies may collaborate to develop or share resources that encourage short-term, low-cost, seasonally-meaningful outdoor enhancements that increase the diversity of play and learning opportunities, while also clarifying risks that need to be managed. [ECHO](#) and [NLI](#) have a variety of resources available to stimulate creative use of outdoor spaces and foster spontaneous, imaginative play and learning activities, making time outside more rich and inviting.

When state child care agencies consider whether to deter or prohibit the use of certain types of outdoor settings in areas with high community COVID-19 transmission, they may first consider whether there are strategies to manage or repurpose these features and minimize risks

while still providing opportunities for play and learning. For example, if playground equipment use is prohibited, repurposing surrounding use zones for other purposes may be considered rather than entirely closing off areas. If prohibitions are made, they should be specific to avoid generalizations that may limit safe outdoor activity. For example, while additional research is needed regarding the transmission of the virus through water, the CDC has recommended that all activities involving standing water be eliminated at child care centers. Unfortunately, that has led some centers to eliminate all water play, including sprinklers and ‘mud kitchens.’ More specific guidance on water play would be beneficial, especially during hot summer months.

Shade/rain cover. Sunlight can play an important role in rapidly deactivating the virus that causes COVID-19—both in the air and on surfaces. Managing spaces to encourage sunlight and reduce disease viability, especially in high-touch surfaces, may be an effective strategy. However, regulators and providers are aware that over-exposure to UV light is a health risk, so shade is a critical consideration. State regulators not already requiring a percentage of outdoor areas to be covered by tree canopy or shade structures may consider these requirements to facilitate more time outdoors. Cost-effective, temporary shade structures may include tents, sails, umbrellas, and pergolas, with trees serving as a preferred long-term solution. The use of covered outdoor areas with open sides for ventilation might be specifically encouraged when existing child care facilities do not have the ability to open windows, providing an additional option for children to be brought outdoors in inclement weather.

Programming for healthy play and learning. Providers may need programming support as the amount of time spent outdoors with children increases and some may be unfamiliar with ways to manage outdoor spaces and program activities to encourage children’s play and learning. State child care agencies could work in collaboration with community colleges and nonprofit organizations to incentivize providers to take online training [courses](#) and [webinars](#) in early childhood outdoor play and learning. State regulators and early childhood organizations may support and advertise opportunities through existing channels.

Explore Expansion Beyond Licensed Outdoor Areas

If child care facilities seek additional outdoor space to safely and comfortably accommodate multiple cohorts of children, regulators can work with providers and across sectors to enable child care activities outdoors beyond the traditional licensed space during the pandemic using the following strategies.

Repurposed contiguous space. If supported by state regulatory agencies, providers may think creatively about

areas adjacent to licensed outdoor spaces, which may be enclosed and repurposed temporarily. Examples include areas in front of centers, adjacent wooded spaces or fields, and, possibly as a last resort, a fenced-off section of the parking area. Any such plan, even just beyond the licensed boundary, may be considered a “field trip” requiring parental permission. State regulators may also encourage development of experimental, COVID-responsive play areas emphasizing nature play. For example, Washington State is issuing emergency waivers to child care licensing requirements for “[outdoor nature-based emergency programming](#)” created as a response to COVID-19.

Innovative ideas for urban locations. Where outdoor space is really tight, child care agencies and providers may consider working with municipal agencies to repurpose and manage street infrastructure adjacent to or in the vicinity of child care facilities as a strategy to create additional outdoor space. Solutions include play streets ([more than a 100-year history in U.S. cities](#)), [parklets](#), and many innovations described in [Designing Streets for Kids](#), 2020 ([free download](#)).

Walking field trips. Building on longstanding field trip traditions, regulators may work across sectors to further enable outdoor activities beyond the licensed space, as feasible and with child safety as the priority. While regulators may consider canceling or prohibiting field trips that mix cohorts or involve assisted transportation (e.g., vehicles or ‘buggies’), guidance may explicitly encourage pedestrian excursions in the vicinity of child care facilities limited to a single cohort. Trips may include regular visits to an open space near the child care facility, or visits to uncrowded parks, greenways, community gardens, or cemeteries. Children may be taken on exploratory neighborhood ‘safaris’ within residential and commercial areas with proper regulatory guidance.

Promote Outdoor Strategies for Kids and Providers

Child care agencies that issue COVID-19 guidance for providers may play a critical role in promoting more time outside as a strategy to reduce the risk of COVID-19, while supporting healthy child development. Use this document to inform guidance for providers. We invite you to share your progress with us (echo@nwf.org and on the [NLI Get Outside! Blog](#)).

Disclaimer: The Natural Learning Initiative (NLI), NC State University, the National Wildlife Federation, their partners, and supporting entities assume no responsibility for consequences arising from physical interventions using information contained in this document. Under no circumstances will liability be assumed for any loss or damage, including without limitation, indirect or consequential, incurred during installation, management, and use of such interventions. Highly recommended is adherence to relevant local, state, and national regulatory requirements concerning but not limited to health and safety, accessibility, licensing, and program regulation.



Nature-Based Competencies for Early Care and Education Professionals

A Supplement to the Washington State Core Competencies for Early Care and Education Professionals



Washington State Department of
CHILDREN, YOUTH & FAMILIES



Washington State Department of
CHILDREN, YOUTH & FAMILIES

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Background

In 2009, the Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF, formerly the Washington State Department of Early Learning), established the [Washington State Core Competencies for Early Care and Education Professionals](#), which defines what professionals need to know and be able to do to provide quality care for young children (0-8 years of age).

The core competencies are important because they:

- Define what early care and education professionals need to know and be able to do to provide quality care and education for children.
- Serve as the foundation for decisions and practices carried out by professionals in all early care and education settings.
- Establish a set of standards for early care and education settings that support the professionalism of the field.
- Are an integral part of a comprehensive professional development system.

In 2017, following the development of these sets of core competencies, the Washington State legislature required DCYF to establish a four-year pilot project to license “outdoor, nature-based early learning and child care programs,” otherwise known as “outdoor preschools.”

Outdoor preschools are defined in the pilot project as a program operated primarily outdoors in a natural area, in which children are enrolled on a regular basis for three or more hours per day. Such programs may be offered as an outdoor, nature-based classroom for an otherwise licensed early learning program; or as a program operating entirely outdoors on private or public park land.

Outdoor preschools must have an educational philosophy and organizational and teaching practices that support nature-based early learning, which is sometimes also called early childhood environmental education or outdoor education.

DCYF recognizes that staff from outdoor preschools need specialized competencies – a particular set of knowledge, skills and attitudes – in order to be successful in caring for children in the outdoors and providing a nature-based education. Outdoor preschool staff must consider and plan for utilizing the natural environment in the curriculum, limit the impact of the program on the natural environment, and manage any risks associated with outdoor activities (including being prepared for the weather and the presence of various plants and animals).

DCYF also recognizes that regardless of the program type or setting, all children can benefit from nature-centered and nature-based learning experiences. By interacting with nature, children can develop a sense of belonging and connection to the natural world; children can explore and understand the relationships within their ecological community; and children’s learning and development in all curriculum areas can be improved with experiences with nature.

Introduction

The Nature-Based Competencies for Early Care and Education Professionals: A Supplement is intended to support early care and education professionals to incorporate nature and natural elements into their practice in both indoor and outdoor early learning environments, as well as in outdoor preschools.

In 2019, a working group of stakeholders, tribal partners, and experts in nature-based and nature-centered early childhood education was established to develop this document, as part of the outdoor preschool pilot's requirement by the state legislature to "further investigate the benefits of outdoor, nature-based classrooms for Washington's children and families."

Working group members for this project included:

- Faculty from universities and colleges in WA
- Members of the WA Early Childhood Teacher Preparation Council
- Leaders and staff of independent environmental education teacher-training institutions
- Directors and staff of outdoor preschools
- Experts in child development
- Outdoor and environmental education experts from K-12
- Various DCYF staff
- Tribal representatives with an expertise in early learning

This document is intended to supplement the [Washington State Core Competencies for Early Care and Education Professionals](#) and will be used to:

- Establish professional competencies for professionals in outdoor, nature-based and nature-centered early childhood education.
- Build Washington's capacity to provide teacher training opportunities for nature-centered and nature-based early childhood education.
- Determine training and education requirements for nature-based early learning professionals.

Nature-Based and Nature-Centered Competencies

The Nature-Based Competencies for Early Care and Education Professionals, as a supplemental document, describes only additional competencies that are suitable for nature-based and nature-centered education and care. These competencies are organized in the same framework and categories as the [Washington State Core Competencies for Early Care and Education Professionals](#). Please consider both documents together to understand the full range of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that professionals need.

In each content area, you will see **nature-based competencies** in bold font, while general or nature-centered competencies will be in plain font.

Nature-based competencies are especially for professionals providing education and care in a **nature-based setting**, such as for outdoor preschool programs. However, any professional leading an experience in nature, such as on a field trip or in a naturalized playground, will benefit from training and professional development in these competencies.

Nature-centered competencies, on the other hand, are applicable to professionals providing early education and care in any setting, and which provide to children the benefits of integrating nature into the early learning and care program.

Racial Equity

Overarching all of the goals for children, youth and families set by DCYF, is the goal to eliminate disparities so that race and family income are no longer predictors of child/youth well-being. Program leaders and professionals should seek to understand and address the root causes and underlying drivers of racial inequities, so that each and every child, young person, and family can thrive. The [DCYF Racial Equity Framework](#) provides the DCYF community and partners with guiding principles, shared language, and these four actions to take to eliminate racial disparities:

- Increase community voice and influence for those furthest from opportunity.
- Inform practice with diverse measures and diverse stories.
- Make decisions that genuinely meet the requirements of communities of color.
- Design and implement systems that respond to children's diverse situations.

These actions can be applied to many practices put in place by early learning and care programs, including those that operate with a nature-centered or nature-based approach. Professionals should apply the framework for racial equity and social justice throughout their practice.

Within the ***Nature-Based Competencies for Early Care and Education Professionals*** there are competencies to support racial equity and social justice that are specific to nature-centered or nature-based programming. These practices support professionals to learn about and understand children and families' perspectives and practices related to nature and being outdoors, as well as the environmental concerns of the community at large. Based on these practices, as well as through the broader social justice and anti-racist efforts of an early learning program, the practices included in this supplement *should* be adapted to provide culturally responsive and culturally affirming experiences that are relevant to the demographic(s) of the program.

Honoring Indigenous Sovereignty

The Nature-Based Competencies for Early Care and Education Professionals includes competencies to honor indigenous sovereignty, and supports professionals throughout Washington in fostering relationships with local tribes and to implement tribally approved curriculum.

The indigenous people of Washington have thrived as communities full of wealth, strength and healthy flourishing families, in unison with the surrounding land, since time immemorial. Today many indigenous communities struggle from the generational trauma they have endured as the assimilative tactics of the federal government; these include colonization, genocide, the removal from ancestral lands, boarding schools, and continued oppression of indigenous rights. It is important for non-Native citizens to understand and acknowledge this challenging history and its impact. This history provides nature-based professionals with an empathetic responsibility and opportunity to honor indigenous sovereignty and actively support Native peoples as part of their efforts for racial and social justice.

Each tribe in Washington is a sovereign nation, with a unique history, culture, and system of governance and all of the federally recognized tribes have a government-to-government relationship with the state¹. Non-Native Washington professionals should research their local tribes and in making this effort can create better relationships with their neighbors. By creating and fostering relationships with tribal communities, non-Native professionals can also avoid participating in cultural appropriation or

¹ For more information on treaties with tribes in Washington State, please visit <http://www.washingtonhistory.org/education/curriculum/treatytrail/readings/> and <https://nwtreatytribes.org/treaties/>

stereotyping, and can tailor their practices and curriculum to honor the unique culture, heritage, language and tribal protocols in a respectful way.

The *Since Time Immemorial* Curriculum is a unique curriculum designed by Native educators for our early learners to experience concepts related to tribal sovereignty and local tribal history, and has been approved by the Tribal Congress on Education. The lessons and resources of the *Since Time Immemorial* curriculum are place-based and inclusive of nature-centered themes for children's learning, and therefore are particularly relevant to the nature-based program's curriculum. The curriculum is a framework, however, so whenever possible the curriculum should be implemented with tribal input. Tribes may even have their own specific curriculum for non-Native educators, such as the Spokane Tribal Lifeways Curriculum. This is why competencies included in this document rely on the acknowledgment of the tribe on whose ancestral lands the program is based and building relationships from that acknowledgement. By doing so, children can learn the unique history of the indigenous peoples from where they live, creating an even deeper sense of connection with the Nature around them.

Goals for Children's Learning and Development

Nature-based and nature-centered education can have many benefits for young children's learning and development. A 2019 meta-analysis of hundreds of studies into the cause-and-effect relationship between experiences with nature and learning outcomes provides us with "converging evidence [that] strongly suggests that experiences of nature boost academic learning, personal development, and environmental stewardship."²

With regard to early learning specifically, outdoor, nature-based play has been shown to provide physical, cognitive, social and emotional benefits for children:³

- **Physical Benefits.** Outdoor play provides more vigorous, varied, and sustained play; improves gross and fine motor development, including bone health, balance, coordination, endurance, spatial awareness, core strength, and posture; strengthens immune systems; and promotes lifelong engagement in physical activity.
- **Cognitive Benefits.** Outdoor, nature-based play supports improved executive functioning and self-regulation abilities; increases observation and problem-solving skills; increases attention and focus; and challenging play supports children's resilience, independence, and self-confidence.
- **Social and Emotional Benefits.** Nature-based play provides a calm and sensory-rich environment that reduces stress, anxiety, and depression; and can support children's development of empathy for the natural world.

Additionally, nature-based and nature-centered education can promote children's ecological identity and nature-connectedness quite significantly. As the field of nature-based early learning grows, DCYF provides the following working definition and description for this distinct goal:

Ecological identity and nature-connectedness (working definition): Children develop a sense of belonging and connection to the natural world as they explore and understand the interdependent relationships within their ecological community. Consistent with Bronfenbrenner's ecological development theory, Nature is included in the systems of

² Kuo M, Barnes M and Jordan C (2019) Do Experiences With Nature Promote Learning? Converging Evidence of a Cause-and-Effect Relationship. *Frontiers in Psychology* 10:305. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00305.
<https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00305/full>

³ Cultivate Learning's *Nurturing Early Learning: Research to Support Young Children's Learning in the Outdoors*.

environmental interactions that shape and are shaped by human development. Through these interactions, a child can become connected to nature both physically and through the guided development of a positive emotional (and/or spiritual) relationship with nature. Nature-connectedness can be most generally described as a positive human-nature relationship, which can influence the attitudes and actions of a person towards nature.⁴ In forming an ecological identity, there can grow a sense of kinship with nature, and children begin to see themselves as a part of nature⁵.

Closely related to ideas of nature-connectedness and ecological identity are the goals of early childhood environmental education and supporting children's environmental literacy. From the North American Association of Environmental Education, Early Childhood Environmental Education Guidelines for Excellence:

“Research has shown that most attitudes are formed very early in life, and this is why it is so important for environmental education to begin in early childhood... Personal perceptions, attitudes, and connections with nature are the key goals at this stage, and facilitating positive experiences varies from child to child... Children are developing a relationship with the natural world. They are learning how to gently hold a worm, examine it, and then return it to its habitat. They are learning to appreciate all kinds of weather. They are learning how to explore and use tools of exploration such as magnifying glasses and popsicle sticks. Children are watching plants and animals change through their life cycles, and learning respect for the natural world and living things.

Children who respect the environment feel an emotional attachment to the natural world, and deeply understand the link between themselves and nature, will become environmentally literate citizens. The task of environmental education for young children is to forge the bond between children and nature.”

The Nature-Based Competencies for Early Care and Education Professionals were developed to support professionals in providing these benefits to children through their practices.

Benefits for Adults and Communities

It is worth noting that nature-based and nature-centered experiences also have an impact on the mental and physical wellbeing of adults, including professionals working with young children. Impacts of engaging in nature-based or nature-centered activities for adults include reduced stress, a positive mood, and even stronger feelings of unity with neighbors⁶. Nature is even being prescribed by doctors to help with hypertension, anxiety, and obesity⁷, and a 2019 study of 20,000 people found that “people who spent two hours a week in green spaces — local parks or other natural environments, either all at

⁴ Barrable, A. (2019) The Case for Nature Connectedness as a Distinct Goal of Early Childhood Education. *The International Journal of Early Childhood Environmental Education*, 6(2), p. 59 ISSN: 2331-0464 (online)

⁵ Wilson, R. (2019) What is Nature? *The International Journal of Early Childhood Environmental Education*, 7(1), p.26 ISSN: 2331-0464 (online)

⁶ <https://www.takingcharge.csh.umn.edu/how-does-nature-impact-our-wellbeing#:~:text=Being%20in%20nature%2C%20or%20even,the%20production%20of%20stress%20hormones.>

⁷ <https://parkrxamerica.org/resources.php>

once or spaced over several visits — were substantially more likely to report good health and psychological well-being than those who don't.”⁸

“Communities thrive when the people within them have opportunities for meaningful experiences outdoors, whether at a nearby park, a garden or on the shores of an ocean. Getting outside connects us to ourselves, to each other and to the world around us, reminding us that we are part of a much bigger story. Building these connections increases people’s quality of life, health and social wellbeing, which are benefits everyone deserves. We have a shared responsibility to open the doors to all people, regardless of where they live or their backgrounds, and ensuring their experiences outdoors are positive and rewarding. The more people who connect in this way with nature, the more our communities are strengthened and the more we all benefit” – rethinkoutside.org

Core Competency Organization

The areas of competency correspond with standard curricular areas in early care and education, and address development and learning across multiple domains of professionals, mirroring the organization of the [Washington State Core Competencies for Early Care and Education Professionals](#).

Each content area describes the knowledge and skills professionals need to work with children birth through 8 and their families in nature-based and nature-centered early childhood education. Professionals increase their knowledge and skills in the content areas through ongoing training/education.

Content Areas

- I. **Child Growth and Development:** understand how children acquire language and creative expression and develop physically, cognitively and socially.
- II. **Curriculum and Learning Environment:** establish an environment that provides learning experiences to meet children’s needs, abilities and interests.
- III. **Ongoing Measurement of Child Progress:** observe and assess what children know and can do in order to plan and provide curriculum that meets their developmental and learning needs.
- IV. **Families and Community Partnerships:** develop strong relationships with families and work collaboratively with agencies/ organizations to meet children’s needs and to encourage the community’s involvement with early care and education.
- V. **Health, Safety and Nutrition:** establish and maintain an environment that ensures children’s safety, health and nourishment.
- VI. **Interactions:** establish supportive relationships with children and guide them as individuals and as part of a group.
- VII. **Program Planning and Development:** establish, implement, evaluate and analyze an early care and education setting.
- VIII. **Professional Development and Leadership:** serve children and families in a professional manner and participate in the community as a representative of early care and education.

⁸ <https://e360.yale.edu/features/ecopsychology-how-immersion-in-nature-benefits-your-health>

A New Content Area Sub-Category

This document includes nature-based and nature-centered competencies for professionals in the standard curricular areas in early care and education, and also describes a *new* content area sub-category for Content Area II. Curriculum and Learning Environment, as follows:

- a. Creating the Learning Environment and General Curriculum
- b. Promoting Physical Development
- c. Promoting Cognitive Development
- d. Promoting Language and Communication Development
- e. Promoting Social/Emotional Development; and
- f. Promoting Creative Expression
- g. *Promoting Ecological Identity and Nature Connectedness**

*Promoting ecological identity and nature-connectedness in children is considered a distinct goal for children's learning and development for nature-based and nature-centered education, and as beneficial to all young children. By interacting with nature, children can develop a sense of belonging and connection to the natural world as they explore and understand the relationships within their ecological community. See the *Goals for Children's Learning and Development* section below for more information.

Levels

The core competencies are a framework of the knowledge and skills for the five levels of professional preparation; however, they are not exhaustive. Some competencies reflected in the content areas require caregivers and teachers to perform specific actions, while others suggest areas for continued growth and knowledge. Caregivers and teachers may find that satisfying some competencies requires further training/education.

The levels of competency start with the basic skills necessary to enter the field and go to an advanced level of academic preparation and varied experience. Caregivers/teachers progress from one level to another through a combination of formal and/or informal study and reflection on practice. Caregivers and teachers may have skills at varying levels in different areas depending on role, setting and experience. The five levels are cumulative. For example, a caregiver/teacher working at Level 3 has knowledge and skills to meet the competencies at Level 1, 2, and 3. At all levels, caregivers/teachers who care for and educate young children continue their participation in professional development activities and increase their knowledge and skills within each of the content areas. Caregivers and teachers who reach Level 5 are encouraged to continue their professional development and growth.

- **Level 1** sets the foundation for early care and education and includes the basic knowledge and skills expected of a professional new to the early care and education field, or a professional who has been in the field but has had little opportunity for specialized mentoring, training or education.
- **Level 2** includes level 1 plus the knowledge and skills comparable to a Child Development Associate credential, a certificate in child development, or training/education.
- **Level 3** includes levels 1 and 2 plus knowledge and skills commensurate with an associate's degree in early childhood education or child development.
- **Level 4** includes levels 1, 2, and 3 plus knowledge and skills commensurate with a bachelor's degree in early childhood education or child development.
- **Level 5** includes levels 1, 2, 3, and 4 plus knowledge and skills commensurate with an advanced degree in early childhood education or child development.

Acknowledgements

TBD

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Content Area I: Child Growth and Development

Level 1

- a. Recognizes that child/human development is interconnected with nature and other living beings.
- b. Recognizes that children learn and develop through active play, and the importance of outdoor activity.
- c. Recognizes that children are active learners and learn through all of their senses

Level 2

- a. Articulates the health benefits of outdoor, nature-based learning.

Level 3

- a. Explains the process of children's learning through zones of proximal development.

Content Area II: Curriculum and Learning Environment

Creating the Learning Environment and General Curriculum

Level 1

- a. Recognizes nature as a teacher.
- b. Incorporates loose parts, including natural materials, into indoor and outdoor play areas.
- c. **Provides all children with opportunities for play and exploration in nature-rich outdoor spaces every day.**

Level 2

- a. Identifies nature-centered or nature-based curricula and resources, as appropriate for their setting.

Level 3

- a. Partners with local tribe(s) where possible to support indigenous curriculum priorities, and/or implements the Since Time Immemorial curriculum appropriate for children's ages and developmental levels.
- b. Creates outdoor play and learning areas that are appropriate and inviting for local species and ecosystems.
- c. Understand different types of play and how each one fosters core skills for STEAM and environment and sustainability education, such as creativity, collaboration, communication, and critical thinking skills.
- d. **Uses knowledge of local natural environment throughout the seasons, and local flora and fauna, to support all children's engagement in daily activities and learning opportunities.**

Level 4

- a. Evaluates various nature-centered or nature-based curricula options for their suitability to the developmental stages and interests of children in their particular setting.
- b. Connects curriculum to the environmental and sustainability education standards, and the next generation science standards for WA, as developmentally appropriate.
- c. Incorporates design features that support children's outdoor play, including connectivity, change, chance, variation, and "outdoor rooms", to support a range of activities and noise levels.
- d. Designs nature-rich indoor and outdoor learning environments.

Promoting Physical Development

Level 1

- a. Recognizes that children learn and make sense of their world through all of their senses.
- b. **Recognizes that children's engagement in risky and challenging play supports the development of physical abilities, when the risk is appropriate to children's developmental levels.**

Level 2

- a. Offers opportunities for children learn and make sense of their world through all of their senses.
- b. Recognizes that experiences (outdoors and) in the natural world are necessary for all children's healthy development.

- c. **Recognizes that being outside in natural surroundings improves children’s physical and cognitive development, such as sight, hearing, balance, and executive functioning.**
- d. **Allows children to engage in risky and challenging play, appropriate to children's developmental levels, and provides close supervision and support as needed.**

Level 3

- a. Supports children to notice and seek out the natural phenomenon that improve child development, such as looking far away, listening to sounds from far away, walking on and touching various textures, and being near green plants and water features.
- b. **Provides opportunities for all children to engage in risky and challenging play, making adaptations for each child based on their individual abilities and needs.**

Level 4

- a. Enhances understanding of the physical world through activities and tools to heighten observations through their senses (i.e.: cupping ears, binoculars, etc.)
- b. **Encourages and extends children’s risky and challenging play opportunities by evaluating children's developmental progress and making plans with children on how to advance.**

Promoting Cognitive Development

Level 1

- a. Encourages hands-on explorations of the natural world or natural materials, when it is safe to do so.
- b. Provides hands-on and multisensory learning opportunities with natural materials for children.
- c. Encourages children to use all their senses.
- d. **Utilizes print resources, such as field guides, to increase children's exposure to print and the use of print in nature-based settings.**

Level 2

- a. Recognizes the benefits of risky play for children's cognitive development.
- b. Utilizes nature-rich indoor and outdoor learning materials.

Level 3

- a. Provides (physical and conceptual) tools and materials for children to investigate the outdoor/natural environments, including gathering, recording, and communicating information.
- b. Guides children to assess risks before engaging in risky play activities.
- c. **Supports children in observing qualities (e.g. shape, color, texture), patterns, phenomena, life cycles, similarities and differences, cause and effect, and changes over time in natural environments.**
- d. **Provides opportunities for choice and child-led activities during outdoor, nature play and follows children’s lead and curiosity.**

Level 4

- a. Supports children to understand the interconnected and interdependent relationships between living organisms and their interactions with the natural world.
- b. Identifies and describes scientific thinking and engineering processes in nature.
- c. Builds connections between nature and math, science, literacy, social studies, and arts learning activities.

Level 5

- a. Guides discovery and uses phenomena in the natural world to support children's scientific thinking and engineering processes.

Promoting Language and Communication Development

Level 1

- a. Provides vocabulary to children when describing what they see, smell, hear, taste, touch, and feel.

Level 3

- a. Supports children in recording and reflecting on their outdoor/nature play experiences using a variety of materials and formats.
- b. Utilizes stories rich with vocabulary and imagery relevant to the surrounding environment.**

Promoting Social/Emotional Development

Level 1

- a. Understands that nature and natural materials can have a calming effect on human physiology.
- b. Understands the role of empathy and compassion for nature in building young children's connection with nature.
- c. Models empathy and compassion for nature, including the local fauna, flora, and delicate ecosystems.
- d. Understands the importance of children developing a sense of place and belonging in their local communities and environment.

Level 2

- a. Guides children in self-regulation techniques that are supported by nature, such as grounding and conscious breathing, focusing attention on the sights and sounds of nature and the outdoors, giving energy into a strong tree or boulder, and how to find space for comfort and privacy without separating from the group.
- b. Supports children to feel safe in nature by emphasizing and explaining the boundaries of play, and engaging children in assessing risky elements of the environment.**

Level 3

- a. Articulates the role of empathy and compassion for nature, including the local fauna, flora, and ecosystems, in building young children's connection with nature.
- b. Supports children in developing a sense of place and belonging in their local communities and environment.
- c. Supports cooperation, collaboration, and shared decision-making with and among children

Level 4

- a. Models and encourages respectful, reciprocal, and sustainable interactions with nature, including the local fauna, flora, and delicate ecosystems.

Promoting Creative Expression

Level 1

- a. Provides reusable or compostable, non-toxic art materials.

- b. **Encourages children to be creative in natural environments and with found natural materials.**

Level 2

- a. Supports children's imaginative responses to experiences in and about the natural world.

Level 3

- a. Guides children to build connections between creative expression and other forms of nature-centered learning (e.g. explorations of nature, outdoor play, mathematic and scientific investigations).

Promoting Ecological Identity/Nature-Connectedness

Level 1

- a. Recognizes and understands environmental practices such as reducing waste, recycling, and composting.
- b. Understands how to identify flora and fauna.
- c. Demonstrates empathy and care of other living beings and ecosystems.
- d. Recognizes that we are on ancestral tribal land(s).
- e. Recognizes that children's emotional connections with the earth are supported by frequent positive experiences in their local natural environment, or with living organisms.
- f. Notices and points out to children living organisms in urban areas or indoors.
- g. **Provides ample time and space for child-guided play and exploration in natural environments.**

Level 2

- a. Models, through self and parallel talk, curiosity and positive feelings about the natural world.
- b. Models environmental caretaking and sustainability practices, including being careful around fragile ecosystems and reducing waste, recycling, and composting.
- c. Identifies and names the local flora, fauna, and ecosystems with children, guiding children to identify the features of flora and fauna they encounter.
- d. Guides children in gardening activities.
- e. Understand the basic principles of botany, such as how plants grow and how they create and store energy.
- f. Understands basic principles of the water cycle.
- g. Recognizes whose ancestral tribal land(s) the program is located on.
- h. Acknowledges whose ancestral tribal land(s) the program is located on with children and families.
- i. Reinforce children's emotional connections to nature, through recollection and discussion of children's experiences with nature.
- j. Models appropriate handling of living things.
- k. Helps children build understandings of the needs of plants, animals, and other inhabitants of the natural world and make connections between these needs and children's own needs.
- l. Creates opportunities for children to care for living things, land, and ecosystems and build a sense of responsibility for their actions, for example gardening or habitat protection.
- m. **Engages children in varied natural environments.**
- n. **Provides frequent positive experiences for children in their local natural environment, including the green spaces of urban areas.**

Level 3

- a. Explains the importance and impact of environmental caretaking and sustainability practices, including being careful around fragile ecosystems and reducing waste, recycling, and composting.
- b. Describes and demonstrates mindfulness practices, including stillness, active listening, and conscious breathing.
- c. Describes to children the traditional and current use of local flora and fauna by humans.
- d. Understand the basic principles of ecology, such as the role of various plants and animals in the food cycle, or symbiotic/predatory/parasitic relationships.
- e. Understands how human activities impact the local watershed.
- f. Identifies appropriate and authentic examples of other cultures' relationships to nature, and incorporates into the curriculum in a respectful and sensitive manner.
- g. Builds and models a relationship with nature, based on giving and receiving.
- h. Encourage children's sustained attention and observation of natural phenomenon.
- i. Facilitates conversations about the interdependence and connectedness of the natural world, including human beings.

Level 4

- a. Recognizes the ecological, social, and economic systems that create human impact (i.e. resource use) on the natural environment, and our civic and sustainability responsibilities.
- b. Nurtures the spiritual dimensions of children's developing ecological identities.
- c. Sustains the ecological perspectives and practices that are valued by children and their families, communities, and cultures.
- d. **Guides children to practice appropriate foraging and gathering techniques, including when not to take.**

Level 5

- a. Articulates practices that decolonize early education and land use.
- b. Engages with research and theory regarding children's development of ecological identities and ecological literacy.
- c. Communicates effectively with stakeholders about children's development of a positive ecological identity and nature-connectedness, drawing upon insights from research and practice.

Content Area III: Ongoing Measurement of Child Progress

Level 1

- a. Listens to children's verbal and non-verbal communication regarding their own goals for play and learning.

Level 2

- a. Uses authentic observation to assess children's progress of understanding of natural phenomena.

Level 3

- a. Engages children reflecting on their own learning, development, and progress towards their own goals.
- b. Checks for children's ability to identify local flora and fauna.

Level 4

- a. Analyzes and applies children's verbal and non-verbal communication to create learning and exploration opportunities in the natural world.

Content Area IV: Family and Community Partnerships

Relationships with Families

Level 1

- a. Explains to families the importance of being prepared for outdoor play every day.
- b. Increases understanding of the history and cultural norms of the families and communities the program is trying to engage with.

Level 2

- a. Communicates effectively with families to arrive at shared expectations for children's daily outdoor activities.
- b. **Demonstrates willingness to understand the cultures and social considerations of families as it relates to being outdoors and relating to nature.**

Level 3

- a. Communicates with families to learn about their perspectives and practices related to nature and being outdoors.
- b. Communicates with families about opportunities to be involved in STEAM and environmental and sustainability projects in the community.
- c. **Understand the history, false narratives, and stereotypes that have all played a part in the exclusion of people of color from outdoor, wild spaces.**
- d. **Adopts an alternative way to name, recognize, comprehend and change the narratives that communities of color don't engage in the outdoors.**

Level 4

- a. Communicates effectively with families about the research into nature and children's development.
- b. **Engage in culturally sustaining practices with families, honoring elders and facilitate spaces to sustain others' cultures as it relates to nature and being outdoors.**
- e. Before engaging with communities of color either through community programming efforts or recruitment of families of color, create a long-term plan to build stronger connections with communities of color.
- f. Empowers children and families to see the modern world, engage in conversations about it, and utilize STEAM related skills and knowledge to improve it.

Use of Community Resources

Level 1

- a. Identify the cultural history of the land you are on.

Level 2

- a. Identify and connect with your local Native American tribe(s) to create opportunities to incorporate awareness of the indigenous culture through stories, songs, or languages from the land you are on, if appropriate.
- b. Identify experts and resources for nature-centered education such as naturalists, gardeners, horticulturalists, environmental educators, wilderness skills or bush craft educators, park

- rangers, geologists, ethnobotanists, permaculturalists, and/or get in touch with your local zoo, museum, conservation district office, gardening center, community garden, or educational farm.
- c. Identify information to colleagues and families about the land and going into nature.

Level 3

- a. Respectfully invites and supports community members to share their ecological perspectives and practices with the children.
- b. Actively searches for opportunities to be involved in STEAM and environmental and sustainability projects in the community.

Level 4

- a. Identify and provide information to colleagues and families about service projects or direct actions that take care of the environment.
- b. Engages with the local Native American tribe(s) to establish a respectful relationship and support indigenous priorities, as appropriate to the goals of early childhood education.

Level 5

- a. Builds long-term, equitable, collaborative partnerships with members of children's communities and invites them to share their ecological expertise by co-designing learning experiences.
- b. **Engage children and families in service projects or direct actions that take care of the environment, such as habitat restoration or clean-ups.**

Content Area V: Health, Safety and Nutrition

Knowledge of Regulations

Level 1

- a. Identifies environmental risks and follows risk management procedures that are based on a program's benefit-risk assessments.
- b. Demonstrates knowledge of Leave No Trace principles and any guidelines on land use from the land manager.
- c. Understands and implements all supervision regulations for nature-based activities with high risk of injury, such as campfires, water activities, and climbing natural features.

Level 2

- a. Understands a program's benefit-risk assessments and risk management plans.

Level 3

- a. Engages in benefit-risk assessment for locations and activities in outdoor, nature-based setting.
- b. Informs others of risk management procedures and can coordinate response to unexpected risk with others.
- c. Explains how humans do impact the environment and minimizes the impact of children's outdoor play on ecological systems.

Level 4

- a. Articulates benefit-risk assessment for locations and activities in outdoor, nature-based setting, and evaluates continuing needs for improvement.
- b. Works in partnership with the land manager to plan strategies to mitigate potential impact of the program on the land, including an assessment of the impact of practices on program quality.

Level 5

- a. Develops a plan for training and trains staff on the implementation of benefit-risk assessments and risk management procedures.
- b. Anticipates risk, develops risk management plans, and ensures others are able to implement risk management practices.
- c. Apply theory and ethics of being in right relationship with the land, minimizing impact on the land so as to not cause undue harm, such as avoiding an area where the grass is worn so that you allow it to grow back.

Environmental Safety

Level 1

- a. Can identify locally harmful plants and animals.
- b. Understands the basic principles of outdoor safety, such as those described by the USFS <https://www.fs.usda.gov/main/r8/recreation/safety-ethics>.
- c. Identifies environmental hazards and keeps children separated from these dangers.
- d. Demonstrates awareness of the environment is prepared to be outside per program requirements.
- e. Places self in proximity to children in risky play situations.

Level 2

- a. Can identify dangerous plants, animals, fungi, or toxic substances and teaches children to avoid them.
- b. Removes or otherwise mitigates hazardous elements in the outdoor classroom environment and risky play activity areas.
- c. Optimizes position of self and other staff to provide active supervision of all children, and ensure staff are able to support and respond appropriately during risky play activities.
- d. Limits the amount of risky play activities occurring at one time.

Level 3

- a. Ability to adapt as needed based on daily weather and physical and emotional needs of staff and children.
- b. Knowledge of botany and plant identification is sufficient to support safe foraging.
- c. Engages in safe foraging practices with children.
- d. Identifies potential sources of injury during risky play activities, mitigates these risks through teaching practices, and helps others do so, too.
- e. Creates risk management plans and procedures to mitigate potential harm to children engaging in risky play activities.
- f. Reflects daily on the weather and physical and emotional needs of staff and children, to adapt the curriculum and risk management plans, as needed.

Level 4

- a. Assists in self-assessment of program policies and procedures for risk management.
- b. Co-constructs boundaries (and guidelines) for nature-based play with children, supporting children to share responsibility for individual and group safety and well-being.
- c. Recognizes and makes decisions to manage the impact of children's outdoor play and exploration on ecological systems.

Level 5

- a. Appreciates the importance of challenging play experiences for all children and the need to evaluate both benefits and risks when designing learning experiences for children.

Responding to Health Needs of Children

Level 1

- a. Guide children to check in with their bodily comfort and needs, just as feeling hot or cold, hunger, and bathroom needs.
- b. Demonstrates excitement about being outside in all types of (safe) weather conditions.
- c. Ensures children are dressed appropriately for the weather.
- d. Ensures there is communication access to emergency medical services when taking children into backcountry environments, and has Wilderness First Aid training if emergency medical services are more than 30 minutes away.

Level 2

- a. Recognizes indicators of children's physical needs during outdoor play, including temperature regulation, hunger, and fatigue.

- b. Supports children in monitoring their own physical needs and enacting strategies to address these needs (e.g. staying active in colder temperatures).
- c. Demonstrates knowledge of serious health concerns that could arise during outdoor play (e.g. hypothermia, heatstroke), how to minimize the possibility of these conditions arising, and how to handle the conditions if they do arise.

Nutrition

Level 1

- a. Harvests food safely and appropriately, based on sufficient knowledge or under direct supervision of an expert.

Level 2

- a. Engages children in caring for plants or animals at the early learning program or school so that children learn where food comes from.

Level 3

- a. Plans activities about where food comes from, benefits of natural v. processed foods, and trying new foods.
- b. Plans for and grows food with children.

Level 4

- a. Coordinates food activities with natural seasonal availability of plants.

Content Area VI: Interactions

Providing Individual Guidance

Level 1

- a. **Recognize when children should be given an opportunity to try challenging or new tasks, before providing assistance.**

Level 2

- a. Recognize when children need big activity to get their energy out as an emotional self-regulation technique.
- b. **Demonstrates awareness of the barriers to participation in nature-based, outdoor environments for children of different developmental stages and abilities.**
- c. **Uses strategies to assist children in learning how to assess risk, capabilities, and comfort level to plan for and try new activities in an outdoor setting.**

Level 3

- a. Engage in culturally sustaining pedagogy, supporting language use and cultural practices with regards to nature and the land.

Level 4

- a. **Identifies barriers to participation in nature-based, outdoor environments for children of different developmental stages and abilities.**

Enhancing Group Experiences

Level 2

- a. **Uses visual aids and discussion to reinforce expectations for interactions with the environment, flora and fauna.**
- b. **Uses visual aids and discussion to reinforce expectations for travel from space to space.**

Level 3

- a. **Creates and maintains group expectations for interactions with the natural environment, flora, and fauna.**
- b. **Creates and maintains group expectations for travel from space to space.**
- c. **Creates and maintains boundaries for nature-based play using visual aids and discussion with children.**

Level 4

- a. **Demonstrates flexibility in adjusting rules and expectations depending on unforeseen changes in the environment.**

Content Area VII: Program Planning and Development

Program Planning and Evaluation

Level 2

- a. Uses the cycles of nature and what happens in the natural environment as the basis of planning curricular activities.

Level 3

- a. Facilitates emergent curriculum and child-led interests.
- b. Supports children to meet their own goals for play and learning by facilitating or providing activities and learning opportunities.
- c. **Have and maintain a positive working relationship with the land manager in an outdoor program.**
- d. **Understands how children’s experiences in and relationships with natural environments support a wide range of learning and developmental goals.**

Level 5

- a. Advances program practices and ensure processes are in place that engage in culturally responsive and sustaining practices with families, such as honoring elders, facilitating spaces and time within a program to sustain cultures, and ensuring program staff have resources and support.

Content Area VIII: Professional Development and Leadership

Displaying Professionalism in Practice

Level 2

- a. Articulates the 7 Leave No Trace principles for safe and prepared nature-based experience, and adheres to Leave No Trace ethics and codes of conduct while outdoors.
- b. Evaluates own mental, emotional, and physical wellbeing, and seeks self-care opportunities, or social or professional support.
- c. Guides others in adhering to leave no trace practices specific to the area where the program is located.

Ongoing Professional Growth

Level 1

- a. Fosters own sense of wonder, awe, and enjoyment of the natural world.
- b. Reflects on own experiences and beliefs about nature.

Level 2

- a. Engages in learning about nature alongside children and families.

Level 3

- a. Continuously seeks knowledge and application of sustainability and stewardship practices.
- b. Continually deepens understanding of local places, including flora, fauna, geology, communities, histories, and environmental issues.

Level 4

- a. Engages in regular reflection and dialogue about environmental learning goals, formative assessment of children's progress, and ways to support these learning goals.
- b. Engages in reflective practice to intentionally and respectfully plan and deliver culturally sustaining interactions.

Leadership and Advocacy

Level 1

- a. Recognizes that human life depends on a healthy environment.
- b. Recognizes potential program impacts on the environment.

Level 2

- a. Reduces carbon footprint of the program whenever possible, such as by reducing heat settings when children and staff are not present, using reduced energy light-bulbs, and turning off lights and computers when not in use.
- b. Provide information to colleagues and families about the land and going into nature.

Level 3

- a. Reduces waste, reuses materials, fixes broken items, and recycles whenever possible, engaging families and community partners in these efforts.

- b. Manages the outdoor space to improve ecological sustainability, such as by using non-toxic pest management techniques, and cultivating native plants to support local insects and microbiome.**

Level 4

- a. Monitors and evaluates the impact of the program on the land and environment.**

Level 5

- a. Advocates for children's equitable access to outdoor, natural environments.
- b. Engages colleagues and families in reflection and direct actions to address environmental impacts and injustices, including the intersections of the environment, racism and settler-colonialism.

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Glossary

(under development)

STEAM

Early childhood environmental education

Ecological identity

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References

TBD

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Impact of Public Investment in Early Learning Facilities on the Child Care Business Model in King County

The cost of operating a quality child care business in King County does not currently equal the amount families are able to pay (either personally or using subsidy), creating a child care crisis. Public funding for early learning facilities could reduce facilities costs for child care programs, relieving some of the following challenges:

- cost of care for families
- scarcity of child care slots for infants and toddlers
- scarcity of child care slots for children using Working Connections Child Care (WCCC) subsidy
- scarcity of child care slots in certain areas known as Child Care Deserts (See [Early Learning Facilities Development Proposal](#))
- low child care staff compensation
- other costs associated with quality child care, as required by Early Achievers

In order to serve children using WCCC subsidy, while maintaining quality, child care providers are forced to make tough decisions just to financially break even. They can either reduce costs or generate revenue.

<u>Cost reduction options</u>		Resulting impact on community
Reduce Employee Wages/Benefits	Early learning professionals tend to earn lower wages than kindergarten teachers, yet the positions require a similar level of education.	Lowering employee wages decreases the quality of a child care program and creates retention challenges.
Reduce Infant and Toddler slots	Licensing standards set specific limits on the ratio of staff to children based on age—the younger the children, the higher the required staff ratio, and the higher the cost.	Lowering staff ratios limits the number of slots available for infants and toddlers due to fiscal considerations (see budget below).
Reduce Facilities Costs through PSTAA	Public funding directed at facilities costs could save child care businesses up to 20% of their overall annual expenses.	Facilities cost alleviation could allow child care programs to improve quality by investing more in personnel, and/or to improve access by increasing slots for infants/toddlers and for children using subsidy.
<u>Revenue generating options</u>		Resulting impact on community
Reduce the number of slots for children using WCCC Subsidy	Child care providers lose income when they accept children using WCCC subsidies to pay for care, as they are reimbursed between 50-75% of their tuition rate.	Fewer child care slots for children using subsidy decreases access to care for low-income families , keeping most in the cycle of poverty.
Raise tuition rates	The market rate for an infant slot in Seattle is currently between \$1800 - \$3,000/month. Especially for	Raising child care rates sends our community further down a critical spiral, leading to job loss and career/economic regression for parents, settling for low-quality care, or potentially even

	families with more than one child, the cost* of child care far outweighs the burden of rent.	homelessness in the worst cases. Raising rates also exacerbates the inequity of our current crisis , widening income-based opportunity and learning gaps.
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**Many low-income families in King County are ineligible for financial support but are unable to pay market rate tuition. Only families under 200% of the Federal Poverty Level qualify for WCCC. A family of four must earn less than \$49,200 to qualify for WCCC, but a family of four making \$72,000 in King County is considered low-income by the federal housing administration. A family of four would need to make significantly more than \$72,000 annually to shoulder the financial burden of \$4,000/month to send two young children to child care.*

BUILDING A SUSTAINABLE BUDGET

Starting and maintaining a child care business requires three different stages of budgeting. Public funding toward early learning facilities, particularly in the form of grants or in case of county direct ownership, favorable lease terms, would be a significant support for providers during the pre-opening stage and first year of their business, removing significant barriers to offering more early learning services.

Expense Areas	Functions	% Total Expenses
Child care and teaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff compensation & benefits • Equipment/food • Taxes 	50-60%
Occupancy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rent/mortgage • Custodial services • Building maintenance • Capital investments 	15-20%
Administrative Infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Billing/Accounting • Office supplies • Phone 	12-20%
Other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Health • Transportation • Social Services 	5-20%

Budget Considerations		
Pre-Opening Budget	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capital costs of acquiring and preparing the facility • Permanent equipment and initial supplies for classrooms • Kitchen and office supplies • Salary costs for staff needed prior to opening 	
First-Year Budget	Similar to the ongoing operating budget below, with adjustments because the center is likely to operate at 50% to 60% capacity for the first six months while enrollment fills up.	
Ongoing Operating Budget	Income	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child Care Subsidies • Family fees, determined by considering: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Cost per child to provide high-quality care ○ Affordability threshold in the community ○ Competitors’ rates in at nearby programs ○ Other revenue streams: USDA, grants, etc. • Fundraising: Only possible for programs with not-for-profit status.
	Expenses:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Child care and teaching ▪ Occupancy- PSTAA funds could be leveraged and targeted to allow for a less-than-market-rate occupancy costs ▪ Administrative infrastructure ▪ Other

SCENARIOS FOR KING COUNTY

Based on an actual cost scenario for a child care center in its second year of operation in Seattle, Table 1.1 shows a child care program expenses based on a 5-classroom site. Table 1.2 below compares revenue when the program offers 50% of its slots to children using subsidy versus accepting only families who pay full market tuition rate. With no other outside factors, the business accepting half low-income families will operate in the red.



The last table (Table 1.3) offers an example based in a direct ownership model, where King County would own a space and offer below-market occupancy costs (one of three recommended models for financing early learning facilities). In this example, the program accepts 50% children using WCCC subsidy **and** has below market rate rent/mortgage costs via a PSTAA facility.

Table 1.1

Child care program expenses				
	Preschool	Toddler	Infant	Total
# Classrooms	3	1	1	5
# Children	57	13	8	78
Child Care and Teaching				
Lead Teacher, \$20/hr (4.5)	124,800	62,400	62,400	249,600
Assistant Teacher, \$18/hr (6)	224,400	74,800	74,800	374,000
Director, \$27/hr (1)	28,000	14,000	14,000	56,000
Total Staff Compensation	377,500	151,300	151,300	680,160
Benefits	75,440	30,260	34,260	135,960
Program Expenses	54,000	18,000	18,000	90,000
Occupancy				
Rent/Mortgage	156,000	52,000	52,000	260,000
Utilities, Custodial	24,000	8,000	8,000	40,000
Admin	61,832	23,363	23,363	108,557
Total Operating Expenses	748,856	282,947	383,947	1,314,769

Table 1.2

Revenue	50% Private Pay / 50% Subsidy				All Private Pay			
	Preschool	Toddler	Infant	Total	Preschool	Toddler	Infant	Total
Estimated Revenue (50% subsidy + 50% market rate)	742,824	238,290	169,728	1,150,842	868,680	308,880	224,640	1,402,200
Monthly Full Fee Tuition					\$1,270	\$1,980	\$2,340	
Monthly State Subsidy Tuition	\$931	\$1,364	\$1,260					
Net Income	-6,032	-44,657	-113,219	-163,907	119,824	25,933	-58,307	87,451**

**These funds could be used to pay employees an additional \$2-\$3/hour to result in a balanced budget.

Table 1.3

With PSTAA facility offering below-market occupancy	50% Private Pay / 50% Subsidy			
	Preschool	Toddler	Infant	Total
# Classrooms	3	1	1	5
# Children	57	13	8	78
Child Care and Teaching				
Lead Teacher, \$20/hr. (4.5)	124,800	62,400	83,200	270,400
Assistant Teacher, \$18/hr. (6)	224,400	74,800	74,800	374,000
Director, \$27/hr. (1)	28,000	14,000	14,000	56,000
Total Staff Compensation	377,200	151,200	172,000	700,400
Benefits	75,440	30,240	34,400	140,080
Program Expenses	72,000	24,000	24,000	120,000
Occupancy				
Rent/Mortgage	80,000	25,000	25,000	130,000
*Utilities	24,000	8,000	8,000	40,000
Admin	54,812	21,023	21,023	96,857
Total Operating Expenses	663,836	254,607	254,607	1,173,049
Estimated Revenue (50% subsidy + 50% market rate)	742,824	238,290	169,728	1,150,842
Net Income	78,988	-16,317	-84,879	-22,207

As is evident in the first scenario, there are strong financial disincentives to serving infants in the child care market, which contributes to a lack of available, affordable, high-quality infant care in King County.

Also evident is the impossibility for a program to serve a majority of children using Working Connections Child Care Subsidy, without supporting factors such as grants or PSTAA funds, while maintaining quality staff and care. In order to serve low-income children, almost all child care providers also need to serve private-pay children to balance out their income. Even in the scenario above where a site has below-market occupancy costs are covered through PSTAA funds, it is still not possible for this program to break even while serving 50% of children using WCCC subsidies.



Given the high cost of living in King County compared to the rest of the state, there are many low-income children who are ineligible for the state subsidy who would benefit from child care programs with subsidized costs and a lower regional cost of care.

Addressing these challenges is complex and necessary if we want to have a King County where all children have the opportunity to access high-quality early learning.

A stakeholder group should be convened to inform the implementation criteria for a PSTAA Early Learning Facilities Fund to ensure King County is removing barriers and maximizing the number of low-income children who will benefit from this investment.