

# The Effect of COVID-19 on the Early Learning Mixed Delivery System Workforce in Washington



Washington State Department of  
**CHILDREN, YOUTH & FAMILIES**

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Suggested citation: Dalve, K. & Lothian, K. (2025). The Effect of COVID-19 on the Early Learning Mixed Delivery System Workforce in Washington. Department of Children, Youth, and Families, Office of Innovation, Alignment, and Accountability. Olympia: WA. Contact oiaa@dcyf.wa.gov with questions.

# Executive Summary

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic had health, economic, and social effects on Washington state's (WA) early learning system. The early learning system includes over 20,700 early learning child care educators<sup>1</sup> who serve 550,000 children ages 0-5 and their families (Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, 2020). This landscape summary includes a literature review of national and state research. It also includes policy and procedure changes implemented by Washington State's Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF). The topics were guided by the Washington State Early Learning Coordination Plan (ELCP). ELCP goals include positive early learning experiences, a strong and supported early learning workforce, and powerful communities and a responsive early learning system.

## Key Findings

### Positive Early Learning Experiences

- **Affordability and Availability of Services**
  - Overall, licensed child care capacity, including child care centers, family child care homes, and school-aged programs, dropped 27% between February and June of 2020 (*Washington State Child Care Industry Assessment, 2020*). Reasons included economic impacts changing need for child care among families and public health concerns of spreading COVID-19. Early child care providers struggled to keep doors open during these changes. Capacity began to increase in June 2020. By December 2020, capacity was back to pre-stay-at-home order numbers (Budrevich-Ryan et al., 2023).
  - To maintain access for children and support providers, DCYF enacted changes in [Working Connections Child Care \(WCCC\) subsidy](#). These included waving co-payments for families, moving to enrollment based payments, and including school-age children in full time care ("Family Copays Waived for October, November and December 2020," 2020). Some changes were in direct response to COVID-19 while other eligibility changes were implemented during this time.
  - COVID-19 disrupted access to early learning which impacts child development (*Washington Statewide Early Learning Needs Assessment Update 2023, 2024*). COVID-19 resulted in changes in children's early learning programs and schedules. In general, children also spent less time on schooling.

### Strong and Supported Early Learning Workforce

- **Enhance retention of a strong workforce**
  - Many providers experienced workplace closures. Workplace closures often occurred at the beginning of the pandemic. In March-June 2020, that workforce number declined to 17,000 compared to an average 20,700 people in 2019 (Budrevich-Ryan et al., 2023).
  - Early learning workers described emotional, physical, and economic challenges of being essential workers in the pandemic (Quinn et al., 2022).

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<sup>1</sup> This estimate from the [Center for the Study of Child Care Employment's \(CSCCE\) 2020 report](#) uses data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Occupational Employment Statistics and includes "child care workers," "preschool teachers, excluding special education," "preschool teachers, special education," and "education administrators: preschool/child care center programs." This underestimates the total workforce by not including self-employed child care workers, such as family home providers. If the provider employs additional workers, they are likely to be included as "child care workers." In the [CSCCE 2024 report](#), Washington had an estimated 43,500 early learning workers when using data from the 2022 U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey (ACS) which additionally includes self-employed child care workers and nannies.

- Provider entry is one way to measure stability. Washington state Fair Start for Kids Act (FSKA) investments have demonstrated success in improving provider entries and entry-exit gaps. Provider entry-exit gap improvement was observed in communities with extreme child care access deserts, high concentration of children of color, high concentration of child poverty, and racial disparities in kindergarten readiness (Budrevich-Ryan et al., 2023).
- **Enhance compensation**
  - The early learning workforce is known nationally for low wages, instability, and limited employee benefits. The pandemic heightened these struggles as providers experienced a loss of income due to reduced enrollment (Lloyd et al., 2021; *Picking Up the Pieces: Building a Better Child Care System Post COVID-19*, 2020).
  - Early learning workers had self-reported poorer physical and mental health compared to the overall US population prior to the pandemic (Otten et al., 2019; Quinn et al., 2023). Surveys during the pandemic showed high proportions of early learning workers experiencing depression and anxiety symptoms and exposure to COVID-19. With limited health insurance and sick leave benefits through their employer, the pandemic highlighted the need for benefits for the early learning workforce (Quinn et al., 2022, 2023).

### **Powerful Communities and a Responsive Early Learning System**

- **Implementation of Quality Initiatives**
  - [Early Achievers](#) is Washington’s Quality Recognition and Improvement System. Data collection was paused effective March 2020 due to COVID-19 and reinstated in July 2022. Many participating state-funded sites (i.e., WCCC subsidy or Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP)) are still moving through the rating process.
- **Maximize the use of pandemic recovery resources**
  - Federal financial support included \$39 billion to support the child care industry in the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA)(Uhing, 2021). Policymakers, providers, and families expressed concern for the end of COVID-19 relief funding (Kashen et al., 2023).
  - Washington state used the ARPA federal funds to provide grant opportunities at a state-level. This included \$364 million in stabilization grants to licensed child care programs.
  - In 2021, FSKA was signed by the WA legislature investing \$1.1 billion to support early learning. FSKA included funding such as [stabilization grants](#), [early childhood equity grants](#), and [complex needs funds](#). Professional development in trauma-informed care and access to health care were also initiatives of FSKA for early learning workers. Additionally changes in subsidy policies and provider reimbursement rates were initiated to increase child care access and to stabilize the workforce.

### **Conclusion**

The COVID-19 pandemic greatly impacted Washington families, children, and early learning workers. The pandemic highlighted the existing precarious landscape of low wages, lack of benefits, and instability for the workforce. Funding in response to COVID-19, such as FSKA, showcased the importance of financial investments. Despite these challenges, the early learning system is recovering in Washington. However, continued research is needed to understand how capacity, closures, turnover, and compensation at the beginning of the pandemic are continuing to affect the early learning mixed delivery system. The following recommendations include steps taken in recent years after the COVID-19 emergency proclamation was lifted and next directions for further impact.

## Recommendations

1. **Continue to coordinate a comprehensive workforce data collection system**
  - Support data infrastructure to better understand who is in the workforce. Continue developing dashboards to display metrics for advancing equity, recruitment and retention, education and training, and compensation and incentives.
2. **Represent complete costs to support enhanced compensation through the Cost of Quality Care model**
  - Support the shift in Washington’s rate setting model from a market rate survey to a cost of quality care model. Cost of quality care models account for salaries, benefits, retirement, paid leave, family engagement, planning release time, education materials and curriculum, and professional development supports (*The True Cost of Quality Child Care in Washington: Recommendations to Make Care More Accessible for Families and Sustainable for Providers*, 2022).
3. **Affordable, equitable, high-quality early care and education available to all**
  - Address the high cost of infant and toddler care by supporting the shift to a cost of quality care model. Expand programs such as [Early ECEAP](#), [Early Support for Infants and Toddlers \(ESIT\)](#), [Early Childhood Intervention Prevention Services \(ECLIPSE\)](#), and [Home Visiting](#).
  - Continue partnering with early learning advocates and partners to develop a responsive and inclusive, integrated pre-kindergarten (Pre-K) system. This includes partnerships with ECEAP, Head Start, Developmental Preschool, and Transition to Kindergarten (TK).
  - Consider the social-emotional, academic, and trauma-informed needs of children currently school-age. School-age children likely experienced disruption in care and had families face hardships in the years of the COVID-19 pandemic.
4. **Make universal social emotional training and resources readily and easily accessible**
  - Expand mental health supports and trauma-informed professional development. including Infant Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation (IECMHC) and the Washington Pyramid Model (*Inclusion Practices: Trauma-Informed Care and The Pyramid Model*, 2022). Resources should focus on anti-racism, flexible healing-centered practices, cultural and language relevancy.
5. **Co-design, co-develop and evaluate approaches to reduce racial disparities in early learning access to quality care and kindergarten readiness**
  - Caregivers of children furthest from opportunity have been disproportionately impacted from health, economic, and social effects of COVID-19. This includes children of color, children who are homeless, children with disabilities, children who have experienced trauma, and children from rural communities. Fill knowledge gaps by conducting qualitative surveys or focus groups. Support programs such as early learning funds for tribal children.

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic and its health, economic, and social effects impacted over 550,000 children ages 0-5, their families, and the over 20,700 early learning workers<sup>2</sup> that teach and care for them in Washington state (WA)(Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, 2020). In Washington, early learning is serviced through a mixed delivery system. This system includes licensed child care centers; licensed family homes; outdoor nature-based programs; family, friend, and neighbor caregivers; and license exempt providers. Licensed early learning sites may be funded through private pay or public sources. Publicly funded early learning sites include the Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP), Head Start, Early Childhood Special Education (IDEA Part C) services, and Transition to Kindergarten (TK), and/or accept Working Connections Child Care (WCCC) subsidy payments. This system allows for a family to select their preferred setting and type of early learning.

Predating COVID-19, there were longstanding concerns related to low wages, instability, and limited benefits for the early learning workforce both nationally and in Washington state (Lloyd et al., 2021; Otten et al., 2019; Quinn et al., 2023). COVID-19 exacerbated these concerns while also being a pivotal event in illuminating the crucial role of the early learning workforce in the economy and for the safety and education of children (*Picking Up the Pieces: Building a Better Child Care System Post COVID-19*, 2020; Weiland et al., 2021). With the widespread social and financial impacts of COVID-19, families navigated access to child care with K-12 school closures, the closure of non-essential businesses, and the continued need for essential workers to access child care (*COVID-19 Response: A Year in Review Timeline - King County, Washington*, n.d.). These changes affected families' access and choices in child care as widespread closures of early learning sites were experienced during the pandemic. These closures spurred action from federal, state, and local governments (*Picking Up the Pieces: Building a Better Child Care System Post COVID-19*, 2020; Weiland et al., 2021).

This landscape summary details the impacts of COVID-19 on the early learning workforce in Washington state and DCYF's response. Findings are organized by strategic goals of the [Washington State Early Learning Coordination Plan's \(ELCP\)](#). This includes positive early learning experiences, a strong and supported early learning workforce, and powerful communities and a responsive early learning system (*Washington State Early Learning Coordination Plan – A Shared Vision*, 2022).

## Key Findings

### Positive Early Learning Experiences

#### **Affordability and Availability of Services**

Washington was the first state with a confirmed case of COVID-19. Governor Jay Inslee declared a state of emergency on February 29, 2020 and issued a statewide stay-at-home order on March 23, 2020. On March 13, 2020, public and private K-12 schools were ordered to close until April 24. By April 6, 2020, school closures were extended to the remaining school year.

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<sup>2</sup> This estimate from the [Center for the Study of Child Care Employment's \(CSCCE\) 2020 report](#) uses data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Occupational Employment Statistics and includes "child care workers," "preschool teachers, excluding special education," "preschool teachers, special education," and "education administrators: preschool/child care center programs." This underestimates the total workforce by not including self-employed child care workers, such as family home providers. If the provider employs additional workers, they are likely to be included as "child care workers." In the [CSCCE 2024 report](#), Washington had an estimated 43,500 early learning workers when using data from the 2022 U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey (ACS) which additionally includes self-employed child care workers and nannies.

After the stay-at-home order, there was a decline in capacity among licensed early learning providers (Budrevich-Ryan et al., 2023). Licensed providers include child care centers, family child care homes, and school-aged programs. Licensed child care capacity dropped 27% between February and June of 2020 (*Washington State Child Care Industry Assessment*, 2020). Some programs were impacted more strongly than others. Of the 6,904 licensed providers, 34% experienced a temporary closure (Budrevich-Ryan et al., 2023). Of those providers experiencing a closure (n=2,359), 46% were child care centers, 34% were family child care homes, and 21% were school age programs (Budrevich-Ryan et al., 2023). Family child care homes were less likely to experience a closure compared to child care centers and school-aged programs (Budrevich-Ryan et al., 2023). Policymakers, providers, and families were concerned that closures would be permanent, worsening existing gaps in child care access. The [Fair Start for Kids Act \(FSKA\) legislation's first evaluation report \(2023\)](#) found that temporary COVID-19 related closures did not appear to contribute to permanent license closures. Capacity began to increase in June 2020. By December 2020, capacity was back to pre-stay-at-home order numbers (Budrevich-Ryan et al., 2023). For ECEAP, Washington's state funded pre-kindergarten (Pre-K), decreases in enrollment were observed in fall of the 2020 academic year (Cummings, 2021).

Declines at the beginning of the pandemic were influenced by several factors. One factor was the health effects of COVID-19. As a public health response to prevent the spread of COVID-19, the maximum number of children per classroom was reduced (Weiland et al., 2021). In January 2020, the maximum number of toddlers per classroom was 14, and the maximum number of preschoolers was 20. In July 2020, the maximum per classroom was 9 (*Picking Up the Pieces: Building a Better Child Care System Post COVID-19*, 2020). Demand also declined as parents and caregivers were concerned about exposure to COVID-19 in early learning settings. DCYF partnered with the Department of Health (DOH) in provider webinars to share updated information with providers on group size guidelines, outdoor guidelines, social distancing, mask wearing, sanitation, and quarantining (*Early Learning and Child Care*, n.d.).

On March 25, 2020, non-essential businesses were ordered to close statewide. Essential workers included front-line medical and support staff, first responders, grocery employees, pharmacy employees, transit employees, and child care providers. The initial economic impacts of these closures changed families' need for child care. Family members may have left the workforce, started working from home, or worked less. These changes reduced the demand for out-of-home care. In Spring 2021, DCYF contracted a survey of parents and caregivers across WA and found that 35% of families reported their employment was affected by the pandemic (Budrevich-Ryan et al., 2023). Among families of children ages birth to five, 30% left their employment to care for children. This differed by household income with 35% of families with lower income ( $\leq 200\%$  U.S. federal poverty level (FPL)) leaving employment compared to 25% of families with incomes greater than 200% FPL (Budrevich-Ryan et al., 2023). For essential workers, child care availability and affordability was crucial. Regions such as King County and the City of Seattle launched emergency child care programs as a response (*Executive Constantine Transmits Emergency Legislation to Fund Child Care Services for First Responders, Others - King County, Washington*, 2020).

During the pandemic, payments in Washington's state funded subsidy program, [Working Connections Child Care \(WCCC\)](#), were changed. These changes supported maintained access for children in care and keeping providers' doors open. WCCC helps pay for child care while the parent or parents participate in work, education, or training. In October 2021, eligibility to WCCC expanded. The previous eligibility metric of maximum household income changed from 200% of the U.S. FPL to household income at or below 60% of the state Median Income (SMI) at initial application. For reapplication, 65% of SMI is the maximum household income. Families experiencing homelessness or having received child welfare services in the six months before an application were also able to access subsidy.

Copayments are paid by the family to their child care provider monthly. Copayments are based on family income and size. Copayments changed in response to COVID-19 and subsidy expansion efforts. From March-June 2020, DCYF waived family copayments. Copayments resumed in July 2020. Waiving copayments additionally occurred in October, November, and December 2020 (“Family Copays Waived for October, November and December 2020,” 2020). From January-June 2021, copays were capped at \$115. In July, August, and September 2021, copays were again waived. To stabilize centers and licensed family homes, licensed providers could claim child care subsidy payments based on enrollment rather than attendance. Enrollment based payment ended September 2020. Additionally, some requirements for subsidy eligibility were eased, such as participation in work, education, or training until July 2020.

Many programs offered modified services during the pandemic (*Washington Statewide Early Learning Needs Assessment Update 2023, 2024*). [ECEAP](#) providers used online platforms, sent learning materials home, and conducted virtual check-ins with families (*ECEAP Annual Report 2019-2021, 2023*). [Home visiting](#) is a voluntary service for expectant parents and families with infants and young children. Home visiting adapted to COVID-19 by using video and phone visits and dropping off program materials (*COVID-19 Impact on Home Visiting, 2022*). From July 2020-June 2021, 2,585 families with 2,614 children were served by Home Visiting across 28 counties (*Home Visiting Services Account Annual Report, 2021, 2022*). There were 32,245 in-person, virtual, or phone visits and 21,567 phone, email, text or other encounters (*Home Visiting Services Account Annual Report, 2021, 2022*). Four in five home visit families were able to continue daily literacy activities. Play & Learn groups also began offering virtual gatherings, home activity kits, and outdoor activities (*Washington Statewide Early Learning Needs Assessment Update 2023, 2024*). All these programs provided concrete goods to families as a key part of modified early learning services. In fiscal years 2022 and 2023, Washington state allocated \$2 million for DCYF to purchase and deliver [concrete goods](#) (*Concrete Goods as a Primary Support for Washington Families, 2023*).

COVID-19 pandemic impacted stability of care. In a national survey conducted from May-June 2020, three-quarters of 3-5 year olds’ programs were closed (Barnett et al., 2020). Even when programs remained open, half of children stopped attending or changed to a different schedule or program. Taken together, only 10% of 3-5 year olds were in the same program and schedule as before the pandemic (Barnett et al., 2020). Even years after the start of the pandemic, families experienced COVID-19 related effects on attendance. From July 2021-August 2022, 33% of children 0-4 years old in Washington were unable to attend their program in the past month due to COVID-19 (*Households with Children under Age 12 Whose Childcare Arrangements Were Disrupted Because of the Coronavirus Pandemic by Age of Children, n.d.*). For parents of K-5 children in Washington, 39% reported spending less time on schooling compared to before the pandemic (Kwakye & Kibort-Crocker, 2021).

Research on the effects of COVID-19 on early learning outcomes is more limited. Nationally, 47% of kindergarten students were below grade-level in literacy in 2020-2021 compared to 28% in 2019-2020 (*COVID-19 Means More Students Not Learning to Read, 2021*). These disparities were more pronounced for Black and Hispanic children compared to White children (*COVID-19 Means More Students Not Learning to Read, 2021*). Fortunately, there is evidence that outcomes for young children are improving. In Washington, kindergarten readiness improved in the 2023-24 school year compared to 2022 and prior years. Improvements were especially seen for Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, Black/African American, and American Indian/Alaska Native students (*Washington’s Youngest Learners Show Record-High Kindergarten Readiness, 2024*). In addition to academic outcomes, behavioral development was also affected. Social-emotional well-being may have been affected by disruption in care as well as family well-

being. Many families experienced job loss, income loss, health concerns, or losing a loved one during the pandemic. These children were especially impacted (Gassman-Pines et al., 2020).

Capacity has increased since the initial onset of the pandemic. However, enrollment trends in early learning slowed following COVID-19. In 2022, 102,406 children under 5 were in private pay licensed care compared to 134,866 in 2019 (*Child Care in State Economies Report Series, Part I: Recent Trends in Paid Child Care Usage- Washington*, 2024). Kindergarten enrollment declined. In 2018-2019, 81,696 children entered kindergarten compared to 76,023 entering kindergartners in 2023-2024 (*Report Card - Washington State Report Card*, n.d.). Data from Washington's Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) showed preschool enrollment experienced a similar decline. In 2023-2024, there were a reported 25,137 preschoolers in 2023-2024 compared to 32,410 preschoolers in 2018-2019 (*Report Card - Washington State Report Card*, n.d.). Enrollment decline may be reflective of population trends. Children under 5 declined from 455,283 children in 2019 to 421,722 children in 2022 (*American Community Survey Age and Sex 1-Year Estimates*, n.d.). However, changes in care are also influenced by factors beyond population decline. Access, affordability, and family preference affect a family's decision to enroll their children in early learning programs (Banghart et al., 2024; *Washington Statewide Early Learning Needs Assessment Update 2023*, 2024). State-funded Pre-K programs have increased enrollment over time. ECEAP has experienced steady annual increases in enrollment. In 2018-2019 there were 13,491 children and 15,808 in 2022-2023 (*The National Institute for Early Education Research: The State of Preschool 2023*, 2024). TK is another state-funded Pre-K option administered by OSPI. TK began in the 2020-2021 school year enrolling 856 children and enrollment increased to 5,244 children in 2022-2023 (*The National Institute for Early Education Research: The State of Preschool 2023*, 2024).

## Strong and Supported Early Learning Workforce

### Enhance retention of a strong workforce

The early learning workforce saw a decline in numbers in March 2020. In 2019, the early learning workforce included 20,700 people. This number includes child care workers, preschool teachers, including special education, and administrators of center programs in Washington. Though, it underreports self-employed family home providers. In March-June 2020, that workforce number declined to 17,000 (Budrevich-Ryan et al., 2023). In July 2020, it was estimated that 44% of child care workers were laid off or furloughed (*Washington State Child Care Industry Assessment*, 2020). There was a concern that closures would be permanent. In one study in Washington, the majority of early learning workers reported that closures were temporary and by July 2021 nearly all reported their employers were reopened (Quinn et al., 2022).

Early learning workers described emotional, physical, and economic challenges of being essential workers in the pandemic. Workers were concerned with contracting COVID-19 and exposing their families (Quinn et al., 2022). Early learning workers described having children with more emotional needs. They also reported having less interaction with parents and with other teachers. This increased their workload despite having fewer children per classroom due to class size restrictions (Quinn et al., 2022). Among Head Start teachers nationally, 63% of teachers felt COVID-19 safety rules and regulations were stressful for staff members (Harding et al., 2024). Over half felt more stressed at work than prior to the pandemic (Harding et al., 2024). On May 26, 2020, workers in WA were instructed to update DCYF's WA Compass Provider Portal within 48 hours, reporting any changes in number of children, age group, or available capacity. The intention was to have more up-to-date information on child care access, though workers felt additional reporting burdens in an already stressful time (*Child Care Providers COVID-19 Informational Webinar Q&A*, 2020).

One of the many longstanding concerns for the early learning industry is retention and recruitment. There are fewer new child care workers entering the field while existing workers are retiring. The pandemic brought additional struggles. From June-July 2021, one-third of early learning workers in Washington were considering leaving their job or closing their family child care home business in the next year (*State Survey Data: Child Care at a Time of Progress and Peril*, 2021). One-half of providers of color were considering closing their business (*State Survey Data: Child Care at a Time of Progress and Peril*, 2021). In 2022, DCYF contracted a survey of licensed providers. This survey found that 20% of providers were unsure whether they would remain open (*Washington Statewide Early Learning Needs Assessment Update 2023, 2024*). The number of licensed providers in 2019 was 6,113 (Budrevich-Ryan et al., 2023). This number declined to 5,950 in 2020. In March 2020, a spike in license closures occurred and a decline in new licenses continued until May 2020 (Budrevich-Ryan et al., 2023). In May 2021, 45% of providers reported experiencing a COVID-19 related temporary closure (Budrevich-Ryan et al., 2023). Provider entry can be measured by new licenses. From March 2020-May 2021, provider entry was substantially less than before COVID-19 (Budrevich-Ryan et al., 2023). At the onset of COVID-19, monitoring visits were paused. On August 4, 2020, providers were informed of the Virtual Visit process. Governor Inslee issued Proclamation [20-31.11](#) on January 19, 2021 waived and suspended administrative requirements to license child care providers. From July 2021-June 2023, [Senate Bill 5151](#), suspended child care licensing fees to reduce financial burden for providers. By 2022, the number of licensed providers was similar to 2019 (Budrevich-Ryan et al., 2023).

Research conducted from 2020 to current day has emphasized the effects of COVID-19 on the workforce. However, there is evidence that trends before COVID-19 showed a decline in child care centers and family homes (*Picking Up the Pieces: Building a Better Child Care System Post COVID-19*, 2020). Washington ELCP recommends several strategies to create and retain a strong workforce. These strategies include forming pathways into the profession and providing professional development. Additionally, career advancement should value experience, diversity, and community needs (*Washington State Early Learning Coordination Plan – A Shared Vision*, 2022). FSKA investments were found to have significantly improved provider entries and entry-exit gaps. In 2022, new provider entries were higher. New family child care home providers were especially higher (Budrevich-Ryan et al., 2023). Provider entries were also observed in communities with extreme child care access deserts, high concentration of children or color, high concentration of child poverty, and racial disparities in K-readiness (Budrevich-Ryan et al., 2023).

Innovative licensing options may encourage new providers to enter the field. [House Bill 2619](#) was proposed in the 2020 session (before the pandemic) to increase access in rural areas. These changes included paying providers a subsidy rate equal to or higher than provider's private pay. It also created a [dual license pilot project for foster care and child care](#). Additionally, [a list of innovations](#) was provided to the legislature. These innovations were influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic, such as an emergency licensing program and virtual monitoring (*Child Care and Early Learning-Licensing Innovation and Program Updates*, 2020). Family home child care in multifamily buildings and detached, accessory dwellings units were also proposed to increase child care access during the pandemic and beyond (*Child Care and Early Learning-Licensing Innovation and Program Updates*, 2020). Outdoor nature-based programs were another proposed option. In 2017, [Senate Bill 5357](#) established a pilot project to assess safety and effectiveness of outdoor early learning child care programs. After an evaluation of thirteen programs from 2018-2020, DCYF recommended licensing outdoor nature-based programs. In 2021, WA became first state to permanently license outdoor nature-based programs through [Senate Bill 5151](#) (Yair et al., n.d.). Licensing allows for full-day programs, acceptance of subsidy, and participation in ECEAP. This, in turn, expands access to families of different socioeconomic backgrounds. Outdoor programs have learning and health benefits for children. There was initial concern of closures of outdoor programs

(Collins et al., 2020). Over time COVID-19 was better understood, including the reduced risk of transmission outdoors. Outdoor nature-based programs continued to be a setting of interest for families as part of the mixed delivery system.

### **Enhance compensation**

The early learning workforce has a long history of low wages, instability, and limited employee benefits (Lloyd et al., 2021; Otten et al., 2019; *Picking Up the Pieces: Building a Better Child Care System Post COVID-19*, 2020; Quinn et al., 2023). In Washington, in 2019, nearly 18% of early learning provider household incomes were less than the federal poverty threshold (Gould et al., 2020). The pandemic heightened these struggles as providers experienced a loss of income due to reduced enrollment, as well as added expenses such as cleaning supplies (*Washington State Child Care Industry Assessment*, 2020). For some businesses, despite the decrease in enrollment, similar or increased staffing was needed to meet the small group size mandated to reduce the spread of COVID-19 (*Picking Up the Pieces: Building a Better Child Care System Post COVID-19*, 2020).

According to Washington's Child Market Rate surveys, average monthly salaries were similar for full-time licensed care center workers comparing 2018 and 2021 (*2018 Child Care Market Rate Survey Final Report*, 2018; Berkson, 2021). Licensed family child care home workers have a greater range in monthly wages compared to licensed care center workers. Licensed family child care home staff wages were reported to be higher in the 2021 Child Market Rate Survey compared to 2018. However, 62% of early learning workers reported that paying for basic needs during the pandemic was more difficult (Quinn et al., 2022). This may reflect the increased cost of goods and inflation during the pandemic. It may also be that income loss occurred during the initial start of the pandemic in 2020 and stabilized by 2021. In one study, two-thirds of early learning workers had a workplace experience a temporary or permanent closure (Quinn et al., 2022). One participant from Quinn et al (2022) described that although the amount of pay was the same there were more responsibilities, work, and stress compared to before COVID-19 (Quinn et al., 2022).

In addition to pay, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the need for benefits for the early learning workforce. Benefits include health insurance and sick leave. Early learning workers had self-reported poorer physical and mental health compared to the overall US population prior to the pandemic (Otten et al., 2019; Quinn et al., 2023). One study during the pandemic in Washington found 43% of early learning workers reported depressive symptoms (Quinn et al., 2023). Among Head Start teachers nationally, half of teachers reported depressive symptoms in Fall 2021, and 29% reported anxiety symptoms (Harding et al., 2024). In Spring 2022, there was a decrease in reported symptoms with 29% reporting depressive symptoms and 19% reporting anxiety symptoms (Harding et al., 2024). A survey of center-based early learning workers in WA from March 2021 asked about COVID-19 exposure and employer health benefits. In this survey, 40% of workers were highly concerned with contracting COVID-19 at work, 70% reported that a child or adult at their center tested positive for COVID-19, and 7% reported that they had tested positive for COVID-19. In this same survey, 10% of early childhood workers did not have health insurance, 51% were covered through a source other than their employment, and 39% had coverage through their employer (Quinn et al., 2022). With limited benefits, early learning workers may be unable to receive treatment for physical and mental health symptoms. Additionally, they may be unable to take time off to rest, quarantine, and prevent the spread of COVID-19. One in five workers did not have paid sick leave and 30% did not have paid vacation (Quinn et al., 2022). In 2021, FSKA included an initiative to increase health insurance eligibility through the Washington Health Benefit Exchange (Budrevich-Ryan et al., 2023). Almost 60% of early learning workers surveyed reported accessing public benefits programs for their household in the first year of the pandemic (Quinn et al., 2022). These included benefits such as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Special

Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), Medicaid, free or reduced-price school lunch, food pantry, or unemployment insurance. Half of early learning child care workers in another survey were concerned that increases in compensation might prevent them from being eligible for such programs (*State Survey Data: Child Care at a Time of Progress and Peril*, 2021). Several state policies implemented during the pandemic may be beneficial to early learning child care workers and their families such as [Paid Family and Medical Leave](#) in 2020 and the [Working Families Tax Credit](#) in 2022.

## Powerful Communities and a Responsive Early Learning System

### Implementation of quality initiatives

[Early Achievers](#) is Washington's Quality Recognition and Improvement System. Families can look up early learning provider's level to better understand the quality of the program. In 2020, the Early Achievers program began a redesign process with Cultivate Learning at the University of Washington. Cultivate Learning conducted interviews, discussion groups, and surveys with child care providers, Early Achievers coaches, and families (*Washington Statewide Early Learning Needs Assessment Update 2023, 2024*). The pandemic motivated the use of technology for engaging providers and measuring quality improvement. The redesign included virtual quality recognition and enhanced coaching supports. Multiple pathways were also designated to maintain and advance Early Achievers levels. The redesign process also focused on racial equity. In state fiscal year 2022, Early Achievers provided 3,641 coaching hours to 1,765 child care providers. Technical assistance was also provided to 1,696 Early Achievers participants and rating readiness consultation to 735 providers (*Washington Statewide Early Learning Needs Assessment Update 2023, 2024*).

Data collection for Early Achievers was paused in March 2020 due to COVID-19. These holds were in effect until July 2022. Providers have 30 days to meet timeline requirements. However, administrative delays have resulted in a backlog of providers waiting to be rated. According to the [Early Achievers Data Dashboard](#), as of August 30, 2024, 41% of participating state-funded sites (i.e., subsidy or ECEAP) were not yet rated (*Early Achievers Data Dashboard*, n.d.). In 2024, DCYF continues to support participating sites in successfully navigating the reinstated rating process.

### Maximize the use of pandemic recovery resources

Federal financial support included \$39 billion to support the child care industry in the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA)(Uhing, 2021). The CARES Act additionally included \$3.5 billion through the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) and \$750 million to support Head Start programs. Child care programs were also eligible to receive Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) loans. In a survey of providers in Connecticut, the majority of child care providers were aware of government programs (Gustafson et al., 2020). Licensed child care centers were more likely to be aware and to apply compared to licensed exempt programs and licensed family home centers. Among providers that did not apply for assistance, the most common reasons for not applying were being uncomfortable taking on a loan, not knowing about programs, or feeling overwhelmed by the process (Gustafson et al., 2020). Over half of the sample reported that they would be interested in help navigating benefits systems.

Nationwide, policymakers, providers, and families expressed concern about the end of COVID-19 relief funding. In September 2023, \$25 billion in ARPA federal stabilization funding expired. It was estimated that funding expiration will result in the loss of 232,000 child care jobs nationally (Kashen et al., 2023). In a national survey just one month after financial relief ended, 29% of families reported increased tuition (*Going Over the Child Care Cliff*, 2023). Black families (38%) and Latino families (34%) were more likely to report increased tuition compared to White families (24%). Over a third (35%) of providers reported increasing tuition and 28% reported reducing wages for staff (*Going Over the Child Care Cliff*, 2023).

The Washington ELCP recommends maximizing the use of pandemic recovery resources. These resources provide support in communities to meet critical needs of families and providers (*Washington State Early Learning Coordination Plan – A Shared Vision*, 2022). Washington state used the ARPA federal funds to provide grant opportunities at a state-level. This included \$364 million in stabilization grants to licensed child care programs. In 2021, FSKA was signed by the WA legislature. FSKA invested \$1.1 billion to support early learning and child care access and to stabilize the workforce (Budrevich-Ryan et al., 2023). FSKA provided funding through [stabilization grants](#), [early childhood equity grants](#), [complex needs funds](#), changes in subsidy policies, professional development for child care providers in trauma-informed care, and access to health care for child care workers. Evaluation of FSKA found positive effects of these investments. Compared to other states, Washington state’s investments may reduce the impact of the child care cliff resulting from the expiration of federal funding (“Washington May Avoid Child Care Cliff, but Many Providers Are Still Struggling,” 2023).

Between May 2020 and October 2021, there were four grant application cycles for providers (*Early Learning and Child Care*, n.d.). In May 2020, \$29 million in federal funding was available to open licensed providers currently serving children. Funding amount was based on licensed capacity. In October 2020, DCYF released a [Fall COVID-19 grant](#). Providers who did not receive the previous grant were able to receive similar funding. For providers that received the prior grant, difference payments were available. In April 2021, a Spring child care COVID-19 grant was available to all eligible providers. Amounts were based on licensed capacity. Several incentives were also provided to family, friend, neighbor (FFN) caregivers who received subsidy. From October 2021 to September 2022, 5,375 licensed providers and 1,477 license-exempt family, friend, and neighbor providers applied for the [Child Care Stabilization Grant](#) and 6,852 applications were approved. This stabilized access for a licensed capacity of over 180,000 children. Among approved applications, 47% were licensed family homes, 23% were child care centers, 22% were family, friend, neighbor, 8% were school-age programs, and 0.2% were outdoor preschool programs. In Washington, DCYF provided outreach and technical assistance on how to prepare and access the application in English, Spanish, and Somali. Technical assistance was available individually and in small groups over the phone, virtually, and in-person. Therefore, WA providers may have been more aware and empowered to apply for grant funding, in contrast to findings in Connecticut.

Other grant opportunities were also utilized by providers during the pandemic. The [Department of Commerce’s Early Learning Facilities \(ELF\) grant program](#) started in 2017 with [House Bill 1777](#). ELF grants assist providers with expanding, remodeling, purchasing, or constructing early learning facilities. ECEAP and WCCC subsidy providers are eligible to apply for ELF grants. Previously, providers needed to increase size to apply. However, to maintain operations during COVID-19, providers did not need to increase their number of spaces (“Grants Available For Minor Upgrades To Licensed Child Care Facilities,” 2022). In April 2022, ELF grants funded 69 early learning facilities across 22 counties (“Early Learning Facilities Grant Update,” 2022). DCYF established a new Pre-Licensing Unit under DCYF Child Care Licensing. This unit provided technical assistance to ELF grant recipients. This unit also supports providers navigating the licensing process. The demand for this opportunity continues to be greater than the available funding (*Washington Statewide Early Learning Needs Assessment Update 2023*, 2024). Additional funding programs include the Washington Early Learning Loan (WELL) Fund which started in January 2020. WELL provides capital for low-cost, flexible lending, grants, and technical assistance to early learning providers (*WELL Fund Annual Report: Outcomes and Impact*, 2021). WELL is a public-private funding partnership among the Washington State Department of Commerce, King County, the Ballmer Group, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Seattle Foundation and other private capital. The WELL fund is administered by Enterprise, Craft3, and Washington Community Reinvestment Association. The WELL fund has a goal of advancing racial equity through funding BIPOC-led organizations. In 2022, the WELL

fund created a Sharia-compliant loan product creating a funding stream for Muslim-faith providers with Craft3.

## Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic greatly impacted Washington families, children, and early learning workers. The pandemic highlighted the existing precarious landscape of low wages, lack of benefits, and instability for the early learning workforce. Funding in response to COVID-19 showcased the importance of financial investments for the workforce to continue caring for children. Funding streams such as Washington's Fair Start for Kids Act (FSKA) demonstrate the outcomes possible through stabilizing the workforce and supporting child care access.

Much of the research related to early learning and COVID-19 occurred earlier in the pandemic. Early in the pandemic, there were large initial declines in child care capacity and access with temporary closures of child care providers and centers. The good news for Washington is these declines do not seem to be permanent, and the early learning system is recovering. However continued research is needed to understand how capacity, closures, turnover, and compensation at the beginning of the pandemic are continuing to affect the workforce and early learning mixed delivery system. This will be important to ensure a second child care cliff is avoided when funding streams in response to the COVID-19 pandemic expire.

This summary additionally finds there is limited research on long-term impacts of COVID-19 on early learning and school readiness outcomes for children birth-8 years old. The effect of the pandemic on this cohort of children may only be observed over time. Disruption in early learning may impact both social and academic achievement. This could be compounded for children who not only experienced gaps in child care but also had families experience economic distress and health concerns including loss of loved ones due to COVID-19. For current kindergarten-aged children impacted by COVID-19 in their B-5 years, readiness scores are increasing, demonstrating renewed strength in the mixed delivery early learning system since the beginning of the pandemic. Despite the challenges and stressors, early learning child care workers are proud of being part of the essential early learning workforce and making a difference in children's lives (Harding et al., 2024; Quinn et al., 2022).

## Recommendations

The governor's emergency proclamation was lifted in October 2022 ("State's COVID Emergency Order Ends next Week," 2022). Though the effects of COVID-19 have lessened since its onset, COVID-19 continues to be a part of the lives of Washingtonians. These effects are direct through health and indirect such as technology, the workplace, and economy. DCYF has invested in several promising policies and initiatives to improve child care access and to recruit and retain qualified, diverse early learning educators (Adams et al., 2021). These recommendations detail the steps taken in recent years and next directions for further impact.

### **Continue to coordinate a comprehensive workforce data collection system**

A recommended initial step is to better understand who is in the workforce. By supporting data infrastructure, changes in the workforce can be observed over time. OIAA has developed a database of workforce information. The database integrates fields from multiple administrative database and displays metrics in a dashboard. The dashboard includes information for advancing equity, recruitment and retention, education and training, and compensation and incentives. This project also highlights ongoing need for improved data collection. One example is systematically recording exit dates to better understand retention. The [Child Care Stabilization Grant Awards](#) dashboard provides information on

where DCYF's Child Care Stabilization Grants recipients are located. This data can be used to investigate how investments supported stability and diversity of the workforce. Additionally, OIAA produces dashboards for [child care and early learning need and supply](#), [subsidy uptake](#), [Early Achievers Data](#), and [ECEAP and Head Start Uptake](#). Further data collection and deployment of dashboards supports the ELCP goal of implementing a coordinated, comprehensive data collection system.

### **Represent complete costs to support enhanced compensation through the cost of quality care model**

A cost of quality care model would better capture the true cost of early learning with an appropriately compensated workforce. The current economic model for the early learning system in Washington is based on the market rate, which sets WCCC subsidy rates. This approach is based on what families can afford. Therefore, providers incur operating costs and reduce their own salaries to meet the cost of care (Capito & Workman, 2022; *The True Cost of Quality Child Care in Washington: Recommendations to Make Care More Accessible for Families and Sustainable for Providers*, 2022). Washington is currently developing a cost of quality care model to set the most effective rates (*The True Cost of Quality Child Care in Washington: Recommendations to Make Care More Accessible for Families and Sustainable for Providers*, 2022). The cost of quality care model considers eight factors that drive the cost of early learning. These factors are salaries, benefits, retirement, paid leave, family engagement, planning release time, education materials and curriculum, and professional development supports. Health insurance, including coverage for mental health services, paid time off, and economic stability supports positive provider mental health and reduces stress (*The Early Childhood Care and Education Workforce*, 2012). This, in turn, promotes positive caregiver interactions improving child well-being and development. FSKA stipulates the development of an estimate model and to increase subsidy rates to meet this cost. Rates should reflect cost of living, area median income, zip code, and rurality/urbanicity. Additionally, the rate model is specified to have an option for nonstandard child care hours. Nonstandard hour child care was a challenge for essential workers during the pandemic. Since COVID-19, several other changes have been made to the WCCC subsidy program. In 2023, [Senate Bill 5225](#) increased WCCC subsidy rates to the 85<sup>th</sup> percentile of the state market rate survey. Eligibility was expanded to include families participating in specialty courts and removed immigration status eligibility. Additionally, this bill specifically includes child care workers access to WCCC. These changes expand access and better align with child care costs.

### **Affordable, equitable, high-quality early care and education available to all**

The COVID-19 pandemic showcased the existing resources and needs of Washington's children and their families. For infants and toddlers, there are limited options for affordable, high-quality care (*Washington State Early Learning Coordination Plan – A Shared Vision*, 2022). During the pandemic, Perinatal Support WA's peer support line had an increased call volume from parents seeking support (*Perinatal Support Washington Parent Newsletter*, 2021). DCYF programs provided crucial resources during the pandemic. These programs include [Early ECEAP](#), [Early Support for Infants and Toddlers \(ESIT\)](#), [Early Childhood Intervention Prevention Services \(ECLIPSE\)](#), and [Home Visiting](#). While the pandemic brought unique challenges, parents of infants and young children continue to experience high cost for care. In 2022, Child Care Aware released an affordability analysis. Washington was ranked 12th least affordable for center-based infant care and 6th least affordable for family child care of an infant (*Price of Care: 2022 Child Care Affordability Analysis*, 2022). In July 2022, DCYF began authorizing an infant rate enhancement for subsidy and Early ECEAP contractors (*Infant Child Care Subsidy Rate Incentive*, 2022). Such steps will better address the cost to families and compensation for the workforce.

Statewide Pre-K impacts access to quality care for three to five-year-old children. Statewide Pre-K has implications for workforce recruitment. DCYF is partnering with early learning advocates and partners from ECEAP, Head Start, Developmental Preschool, and TK to develop a responsive and inclusive,

integrated Pre-K system (*Integrated Pre-K*, n.d.). In 2022-2023 in Washington, only 8% of three-year-olds and 16% of four-year-olds were enrolled in state-funded Pre-K (*The National Institute for Early Education Research: The State of Preschool 2023*, 2024). One option to increase access is to include family child care home sites in state-funded Pre-K. Many states are exploring this option to maintain family choice while increasing enrollment (Weisenfeld & Harmeyer, 2024). Washington is well-positioned to integrate family child care homes. ECEAP currently funds family child care homes. There is also a state workgroup to examine needs of smaller providers implementing ECEAP (Weisenfeld & Harmeyer, 2024). There are potential challenges of an integrated Pre-K. For example, there can be funding and standards differences between settings. In New Mexico, pay parity is provided to community-based or Tribal Pre-K educators to ensure compensation is comparable to Pre-K teachers in the public schools (Weisenfeld & Harmeyer, 2024). Many state programs have waived education and training requirements to meet the demand for Pre-K teachers. Requirements should be considered to maintain quality programs while creating opportunities for the current experienced workforce (*The National Institute for Early Education Research: The State of Preschool 2023*, 2024).

The COVID-19 pandemic also highlighted the role of the early learning workforce in providing care to school-age children. With K-12 school closures, many families needed new or additional care options for their school-age children. During the pandemic, school-age providers were eligible for several pandemic funding resources. These included the April 2021 [Spring child care COVID-19 grant](#) and the [Child Care Stabilization Grant](#). Over one-third of families access subsidy for care of school-age children. Children currently school-age are likely to have experienced disruption in care. Their families may have faced hardships at pivotal times of their development during COVID-19. Therefore, social-emotional, academic, and trauma-informed supports and collaboration with OSPI may be beneficial.

### **Make universal social emotional training and resources readily and easily accessible**

DCYF should continue expanding trauma-informed professional development. Washington uses the Pyramid Model framework for promoting social and emotional development. The pillars of the Pyramid Model are inclusive differentiated learning, trauma-informed care, and anti-racist, anti-bias principles. (*Inclusion Practices: Trauma-Informed Care and The Pyramid Model*, 2022). Through FSKA, providers were compensated for completing trauma-informed training. DCYF awarded a total of \$2.1 million to 3,077 eligible participants (Budrevich-Ryan et al., 2023). The average award was \$717 per recipient. Infant Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation (IECMHC) is another resource. IECMHC connects mental health consultants with child care providers. IECMHC enhances providers' capacity to support children's development (*Washington Statewide Early Learning Needs Assessment Update 2023*, 2024). In 2023, Holding Hope IECHMC consulted with 328 child care providers. Additionally, IECHMC conducted group trainings with 308 providers (*Washington Statewide Early Learning Needs Assessment Update 2023*, 2024). Training and resources should focus on anti-racism, flexible healing-centered practices, cultural and language relevancy (*Washington State Early Learning Coordination Plan – A Shared Vision*, 2022).

### **Co-design, co-develop and evaluate approaches to reduce racial disparities in early learning access to quality care and kindergarten readiness**

Overall, there was a paucity of information that focused on caregivers of children furthest from opportunity. DCYF's goal is to reduce disparities in access and quality of early learning and programs for children of color, children who are homeless, children with disabilities, children who have experienced trauma, and children from rural communities. Caregivers and children may have been disproportionately impacted by health, economic, and social effects of COVID-19 (Duong et al., 2023; *Inequities Exposed: How COVID-19 Widened Racial Inequities in Education, Health, and the Workforce: Testimony before the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Education and Labor*, 2020; Lopez et al., 2021). The ELCP

recommends ensuring cultural practices, norms, and home languages are integrated in early learning programs. Support and investments of programs such as [early learning funds for tribal children](#) align with this goal. Future research should explore the impacts of expanding trauma-informed professional development on child outcomes, including expulsions. Research such as qualitative surveys or focus groups may provide opportunities to fill knowledge gaps of the experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond among caregivers of children furthest from opportunity.

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