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LEGISLATOR EDUCATION & ACTION PROJECT



washingtonleap.org

*A collaboration between the Association of Washington Business Institute and
Children's Campaign Fund*

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Child Care and Washington's Workforce: Building the Foundation for a Strong Economy

Too many families struggle to afford high-quality child care. At the same time, child care workers are often paid low wages, creating challenges for both families and providers and contributing to a broader system crisis. Early learning and child care are essential infrastructure that support a stable workforce and make it possible for employees to work and employers to operate. While Washington state has taken important steps to address these challenges, more progress is needed. This primer provides an overview of why child care matters for children, families, and the economy, and explains how Washington's child care system works.

\$6 Billion Employee turnover, absenteeism, and lost family income due to child care issues result in a \$6 billion reduction of the state's economy.

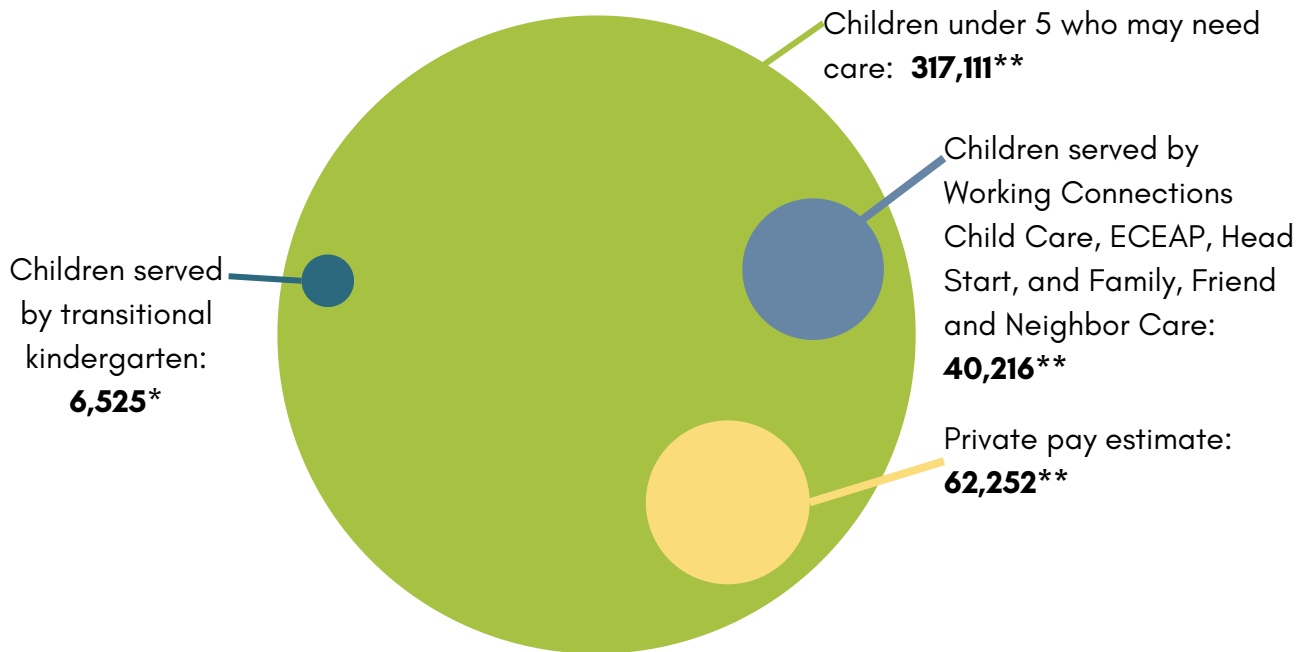
\$1928 In 2025, the median cost of care for an infant in child care in Washington state was \$1,928 per month, more than undergraduate tuition at the University of Washington.

#5 In 2025, Washington ranked the 5th most expensive state for infant child care, according to Child Care Aware of America.

Early learning policy has four pillars: Workforce, Affordable, Access, and Quality. Like a pop-up tent, policymakers should raise all four pillars at the same time.

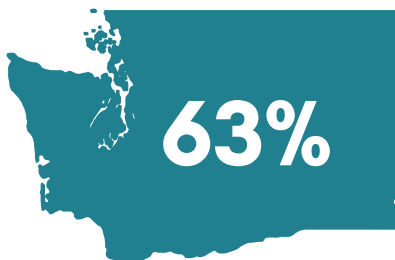


Access: How Families are Accessing Child Care Ages 0-5



In 2026, to qualify for Working Connections Child Care Subsidy for a family of four, the maximum annual family income is \$90,552. To qualify for ECEAP, the maximum income for a family of four is \$50,152.

Access by Geography and Ability:



~63% of Washington families live in a child care desert.***

Extreme Child Care Access Deserts (ECCAD) have too few licensed early learning providers for the estimated population of children. View the ECCAD map for Washington [here](#).

To support children with disabilities, the Fair Start for Kids Act created the **Child Care Complex Needs Fund**. It is intended to promote inclusive, least-restrictive environments. It also supports providers serving children with developmental delays, disabilities, behavioral needs, and/or other unique needs.

Sources:

*In 2025, the [legislature capped funding for TK programs](#) at 7,266 annual average full-time students. For more data, please [click here](#).

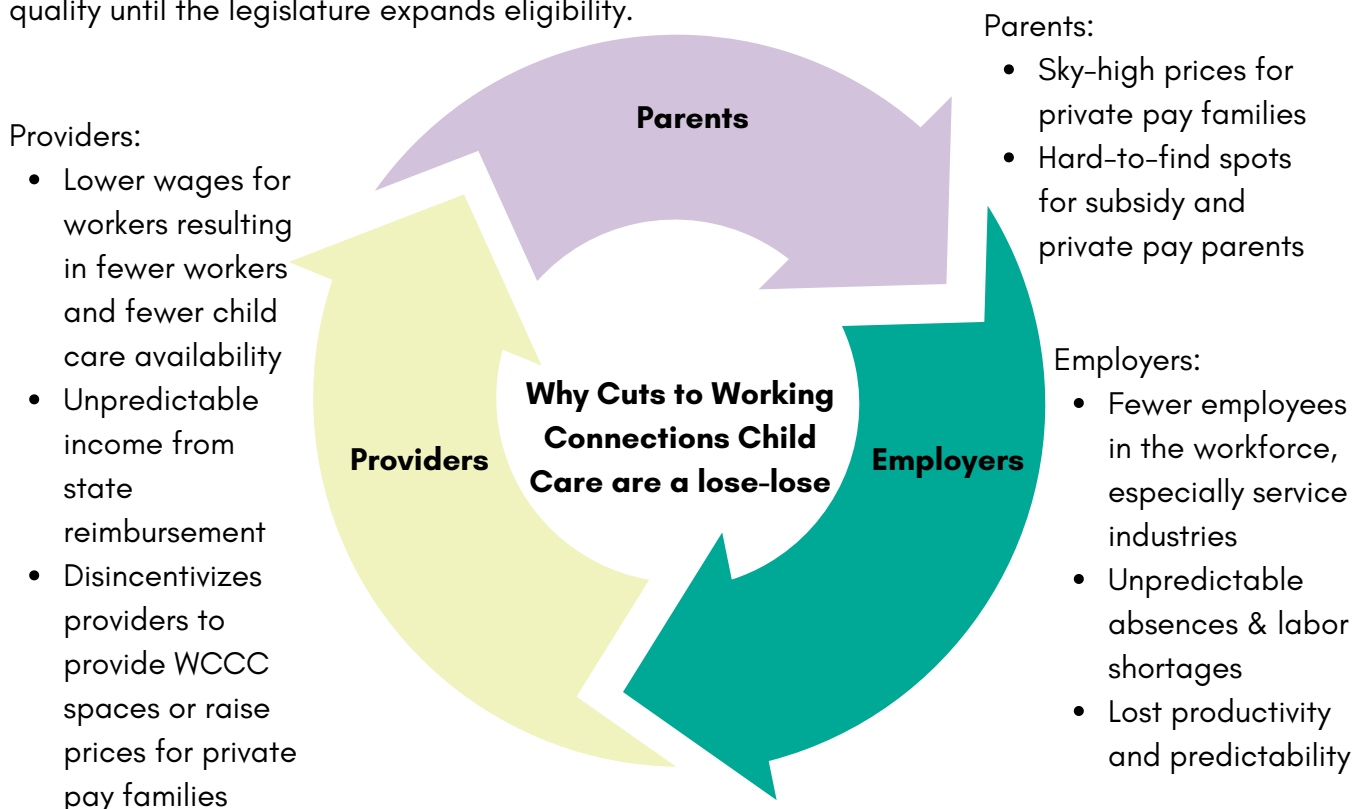
**[DCYF Early Learning Dashboard as of 9/15/2025](#) (As of 9/15/2025)

***[Center for American Progress](#), 2018

Access: Working Connections Child Care (WCCC) & the Fair Start for Kids Act (2021)

Working Connections Child Care (“WCCC”) helps low-income families pay for child care. The “WCCC rates” are the amounts DCYF pays providers for authorized care, not the parent’s tuition rate. DCYF publishes different maximum subsidy rates for licensed centers, licensed family homes, and in-home/relative care, and those rates vary by region, age of child, and type of care. For licensed care, DCYF authorizes care units based on the family’s approved need and then pays up to the applicable subsidy rate for that provider type and region.

In 2021, the Washington State legislature passed the landmark **Fair Start for Kids Act**, which expanded access to child care for thousands of Washington families by expanding eligibility and increasing subsidies. Since 2025, early learning programs have faced significant cuts and delays. Eligibility for Working Connections Child Care was supposed to expand in 2027 to cover families making 75% state median income (SMI) and in 2029 to 85% state median income. In 2026, this was eliminated, so only families making 60% state median income will qualify until the legislature expands eligibility.






Other state or federally supported programs include ECEAP (Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program), Head Start, Transition to Kindergarten, and Family, Friend & Neighbor Care (FFN). Learn more about the types of [early learning here](#).

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Workforce: The High Costs of Operating a Child Care Facility

Low teacher to child/student ratios are the main operational expenses for any child care program, resulting in high tuition.

	Infants	1:4 for group size of 8 or under; or 1:3 for group size of 9
	Toddlers	1:7 for groups of 14 and under; 1:5 if group size is 15
	Pre-K	1:10 for a maximum group size of 20

43%

According to the 2021 Child Care Collaboration Task Force Report, the staff turnover rate was 43%.

\$19.55

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the average hourly rate for child care workers in Washington state is \$19.55/hour (2024).

"As costs like wages and healthcare rise, child care providers increasingly rely on higher tuition and consistent subsidy payments. Stable, predictable funding such as monthly rather than daily reimbursements is essential to sustain reliable, high quality care."
- Child Care Provider

Quality: Professional Development for Child Care Workers

Washington State supports child care teachers through a comprehensive training system that includes required licensing training, community based pathways like PACE, and college based Early Childhood Education certificates and degrees. This multi-pathway approach allows educators to enter and advance in the field while building the skills needed to provide high-quality early learning experiences.

Child Care
Basics (CCB)
Health &
Safety

PACE/EQEL or
ECE Stackable
Certificates

Imagine
Institute*

Associate's or
Bachelor's
Degrees

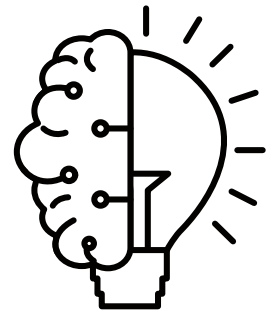
The Imagine Institute helps people open and sustain family home child care businesses through training, mentorship, and business support. Their substitute pool builds a qualified workforce, and our technical assistance on things like grant applications for program supports and facilities' funding delivered in providers' preferred language to ensure providers can access resources to serve the working families in their communities.

Creating Child Care Environments for Children's Brightest Future

High quality early learning settings are where children's foundational skills are first developed. While industries increasingly demand advanced technical abilities, including AI literacy, digital fluency, and problem solving, these competencies are built on core developmental skills formed in early childhood.

Quality child care and early learning settings: where children develop:

- Critical thinking and problem-solving through play-based learning and exploration
- Collaboration and communication through social interaction and guided activities
- Creativity and innovation through open-ended learning experiences
- Executive function skills (focus, memory, self-regulation), which are essential for learning complex subjects like math, coding, and AI
- Adaptability and resilience, which are critical in a fast-changing workforce



90% The brain science is clear that children are born learning. 90% of a child's brain develops before age 5. The social and emotional skills developed in child care are critical building blocks for success in life.

Early Achievers is Washington state's quality recognition and improvement system, known as the Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS). It helps early learning programs create safe, supportive, and healthy environments for children. Early Achievers also trains and coaches providers and gives mental health and financial health support. Early Achievers Grants are student financial aid programs to help employed child care providers and early learning educators complete certificates and associate degrees in early childhood education.

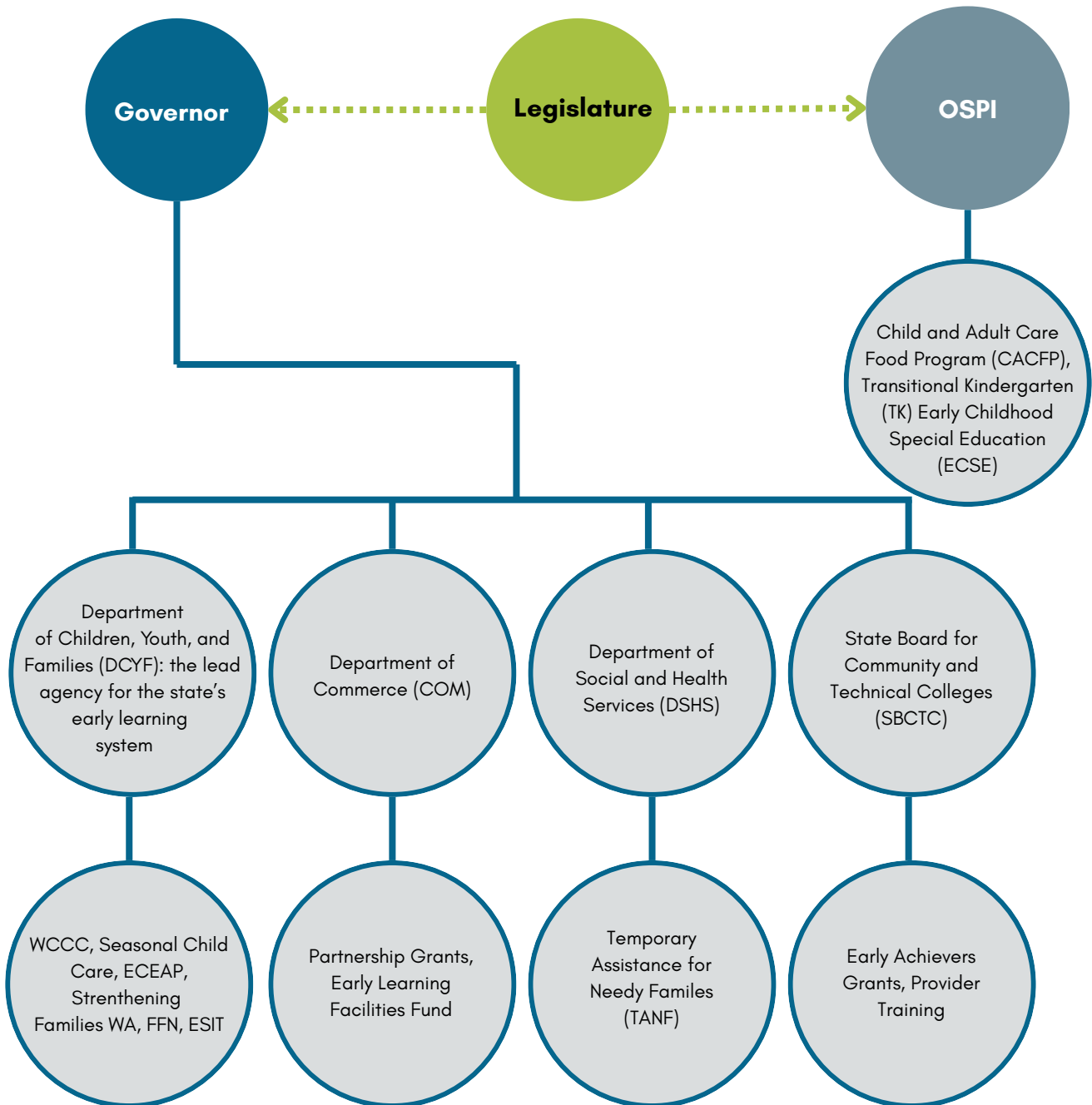
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Washington State Government Oversight: Governance and Funding

.....> Funding Flow

— Governance Flow





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Frequently Asked Questions

What is the difference between WCCC, ECEAP, and TK?

Working Connections Child Care (WCCC) is our state subsidy program for ages 0-12; to qualify, families must make below 65% SMI. ECEAP is our state's preschool program that includes wraparound supports; the maximum income to qualify is 36% SMI. Transition to Kindergarten (TK) is for four year olds have been identified through a screening process to be in need of additional preparation to be successful kindergarten students in the following school year. For more information, please see this [explainer](#) from Child Care Aware of Washington, also available at washingtonleap.org.

Why do families above subsidy eligibility still struggle?

Subsidy eligibility caps at 65% of state median income (SMI), meaning that many middle-income families do not qualify. Example: 65% of SMI is \$90,552/year for a family of 4. Often, parents will choose to work fewer hours so their income remains under the level to qualify for the subsidy because they cannot afford to pay for care otherwise.

How is child care an economic issue, not just a family one?

The lack of child care affects every corner of our economy. From employers losing employees due to turnover, families needing to pay for child care rather than spending at local businesses, child care is essential economic infrastructure.

What questions should lawmakers be asking as they approach child care policy?

Are we treating childcare as a program or as infrastructure? What happens to providers when funding fluctuates year to year? Are reimbursement rates aligned with actual cost of care in different regions? If not, how far off are they? If we expand eligibility, do we have the workforce and provider capacity to meet expanded demand?

How did our state cut funding for early care and education in the last few sessions?

Recent changes from 2025 and 2026 include:

- Eliminating expansion of WCCC
- Establishing the Pre-K Promise Account, a new investment funded by the Ballmer Group to add 10,000 ECEAP slots over the next 10 years
- Changing WCCC Reimbursements to providers based on attendance of children
- Eliminating a rate enhancement for center providers in Eastern WA
- Cutting TK funding

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About the Partners

The Association of Washington Business Institute (the oldest and largest statewide business association's 501(c)(3) not-for-profit arm), and the Children's Campaign Fund (an organization dedicated to transforming the lives of children, youth, and families through advocacy) have joined forces in the Legislator Education and Action Project (LEAP). Our goal is to provide comprehensive information and resources about early learning and child care in Washington state. LEAP will fill a gap in knowledge among newly elected legislators and other members interested in understanding more about this critical public policy issue as we work together to address the challenges facing child care and early learning in our state.

Children's Campaign Fund

The Children's Campaign Fund is the advocacy arm of the Children's Campaign Fund Network. Our Network of organizations envisions a world where all children, youth, and families in Washington state can access the resources they need to thrive. While our Network engages on a range of issues, early care and education is our top priority.



Association of Washington Business Institute

The AWB Institute supports Washington employers as they build a thriving and resilient economy. AWBi provides information and creates programs to bolster a world-class workforce and maximize productivity so our state can succeed.

