



EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION ACCESS AND LIVING WAGE EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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Early Learning Division | Approved for distribution by Nicole Rose, Assistant Secretary

Executive Summary

Introduction

The Department of Children, Youth, and Families' (DCYF) vision for early learning is an integrated, mixed-delivery system of affordable, high-quality early care and education for ALL of Washington's children. This system should support child outcomes, school readiness, and family well-being, regardless of identity or income. The mixed-delivery system includes options like child care, Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP), Head Start, Transition to Kindergarten, developmental preschool, school-age care, and more.

The department works to achieve that vision through the pursuit of three key strategic outcomes and priorities:

- 80 percent of Washington children ready for kindergarten
- High-quality early care and education available and affordable to all in Washington
- Eliminate racial disproportionality and advancing racial equity in early education

The Early Care and Education (ECE) Access and Living Wage Implementation Plan supports these goals and strategies, building on previous efforts, including the Early Learning Coordination Plan, the Child Care Collaborative Task Force, the [Fair Start for Kids Act \(FSKA\)](#) and ECEAP entitlement. The Proviso ([ESSB 5187 Sec. 229\(31\)](#)) directs DCYF to submit an Implementation Plan to expand access to Washington's mixed-delivery system with a family's financial contributions capped at no more than 7 percent of the family's income (an amount considered sustainable for families) and living wages and benefits provided for the child care workforce.¹

The Implementation Plan outlines a comprehensive set of policy recommendations to implement a universally accessible, publicly funded child care system in 10 years. This timeframe is scalable and has the potential to be implemented more quickly or more slowly based upon decisions by the State Legislature and responsiveness to the state's evolving fiscal environment. This plan articulates our north star, and specific strategies for reaching it, as resources become available.

Background: The State of Child Care in Washington

Expanding access to ECE opportunities for children and families and improving wages and benefits for the early care and education workforce is a critical need in Washington state. While Washington has made important progress in recent years through efforts like the FSKA, the gap between where we are today and what families and child care providers need remains substantial. Families face barriers to accessing high-quality, affordable ECE opportunities. The ECE workforce faces low wages and insufficient benefits, which contribute to their economic instability and high levels of turnover and burnout. Beyond the impacts on individual families and ECE workers, persistent child care disruptions have substantial implications for Washington's overall economy, resulting in identified direct costs of \$6.9 billion in 2023, or \$6.0 billion in lost Gross State Product.²

¹ Washington State 2023-2025 Operating Budget, Sec. 229 (31). <https://lawfilesexternal.wa.gov/biennium/2023-24/Pdf/Bills/Senate%20Passed%20Legislature/5187-S.PL.pdf?q=20230516172937>

² Eco Northwest, Child Care Aware of WA (2024). Breaking Down: The Economic Cost of Child Care Disruptions in Washington, page 10, paragraph. <https://childcareforwa.org/breaking-down-the-economic-costs-of-child-care-disruptions-in-washington/>

Developing the ECE Access and Living Wage Implementation Plan

The development of the Implementation Plan was guided by a Steering Committee which includes representation from DCYF, Child Care Aware of Washington, and Service Employees International Union (SEIU) 925, with consultation from families through community outreach. The policy recommendations included in the ECE Access and Living Wage Implementation Plan are informed by existing work in Washington state, community engagement (including families and ECE providers), and exploration of comparable efforts in other states and nationally. Community engagement approaches informing this Plan include:

- **Washington Communities for Children:** DCYF contracted with Washington Communities for Children (WCFC) to convene a series of community conversations across the state to gather information to inform the development of the ECE Access and Living Wage Implementation Plan.³
- **DCYF direct outreach:** DCYF staff have held conversations about the Implementation Plan with DCYF advisory committees as well as outreach to DCYF staff.
- **Partners:** Members of the [Child Care for WA Partner Roundtable](#) held community conversations throughout the winter and spring of 2024 to inform the development of the [Child Care for WA Policy Platform](#), which helped inform the Implementation Plan.⁴

Summary of Implementation Plan Goals and Objectives

The Implementation Plan is organized according to goals, objectives and strategies. These are summarized below. More information about proposed strategies, including implementation needs and proposed timelines, can be found in the full ECE Access and Living Wage Implementation Plan.

³ <https://www.washingtoncfc.org/>.

⁴ <https://childcareforwa.org/partners/> and <https://childcareforwa.org/policy-resources/policy-platform/>, respectively.

GOALS	OBJECTIVES
GOAL 1 Families have access to affordable, high quality ECE that meets their needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a child care guarantee for all families who need and choose to access care. • Reduce barriers and promote equitable access for families. • Increase access to before/after school, summer, and evening/weekend care. • Support inclusion of children with special needs.
GOAL 2 A thriving ECE Workforce	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child care providers receive living wages and benefits honoring the essential work they do. • Support child care providers to meet requirements and deliver the high-quality care families need. • Increase relational health and infant and early childhood mental health supports for children and providers in diverse settings.
GOAL 3 Leverage data and align systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure access to high quality data to guide decisions and increase accountability. • Enable integrated and inclusive classrooms. • Pair new resources with accountability to support high quality, social equity, anti-judgmental implementation of programs and resources.
GOAL 4 Adequate facilities for expansion of the ECE system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maximize investments in the Early Learning Facilities (ELF) program. • Explore and implement new approaches to meet the long-term facilities needs to scale access for children and families.

Strategies for each objective:

- **What** can we do
- **Why** it is important
- **How** it can be implemented

Cost Modeling

Cost modeling was conducted to estimate the resources needed to reach full implementation of the child care guarantee with living wages and benefits for the ECE workforce in 10 years with expansion beginning in 2029, based on the outcomes of the 2025 legislative session. Modeling and analysis were conducted by Eco Northwest. Implementing the recommendations of the Early Care and Education Access and Living Wage Plan has significant costs and will require additional investment. Cost modeling and related estimates were not available at the time of the publication of the report. Cost modeling is available upon request.

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Conclusion

The ECE Access and Living Wage Implementation Plan charts a clear, phased path toward building a more accessible, equitable, and sustainable early care and education system over the next 10 years. It builds upon the strong foundation of efforts to date and reflects the priorities and perspectives of communities across the state. Both the timing and scale of the strategies outlined in the Plan can be adjusted to reflect our state's evolving fiscal context. Many of the strategies included in the Implementation Plan require a discovery or mapping period as a first step, these are areas where progress can be made in the early years of implementation despite current challenges in the fiscal environment.

By focusing on access and affordability for families, living wages and benefits for ECE workers, strategic program alignment and use of data, and expanded facilities, the plan addresses long-standing systemic issues related to limited access to high-quality child care in Washington.

Success will require dedicated capacity within DCYF to drive the work forward and measure progress, continued collaboration with communities and partners, and sustained commitment from the State Legislature.

For questions regarding the ECE Access and Living Wage Implementation Plan, please contact DCYF's Government Affairs team at dcyf.govaffairs@dcyf.wa.gov.

Acknowledgements

The Early Care and Education (ECE) Access and Living Wage Implementation Plan was developed in partnership with the ECE Access and Living Wage Steering Committee which, as directed by the proviso, includes representation from DCYF, Child Care Aware of Washington, and SEIU 925. We would like to thank everyone for their knowledge and expertise in developing this plan.

Steering Committee Members

- Nicole Rose, DCYF
- Diana Stokes, DCYF
- Matt Judge, DCYF
- Melissa Cheesman, DCYF
- Courtney Parker, DCYF
- Erin Haick, SEIU 925
- Deeann Puffert, Child Care Aware of Washington
- Genevieve Stokes, Child Care Aware of Washington

Input guiding development of the report was provided by:

- Communities across the state provided input via statewide community engagement conducted by Washington Communities for Children (WCFC)
- The Early Learning Advisory Council (ELAC)
- The Provider Supports Subcommittee of ELAC
- The Indian Policy Early Learning Committee (IPEL)
- The Child Care for Washington Partner Roundtable
- DCYF staff

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